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Decolonizing gender and religion in the context of Lebanese development organizations

A critical exploration of the approaches of ABAAD and Helem in decolonizing gender and religion in Lebanon's development landscape

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the decolonization of gender and religion within the unique context of Lebanon. Employing a case study methodology, the study focuses on the transformative efforts of two prominent organizations, ABAAD and Helem, which respectively challenge patriarchal norms and heteronormativity entrenched within religious and societal structures. The research critically examines the historical and contemporary intersections of colonial legacies, religion, and gendered norms that have contributed to systems of oppression. ABAAD's advocacy for women's empowerment and dismantling of discriminatory legal frameworks and Helem's commitment to challenging heteronormativity within patriarchy provide a lens through which to analyze the complex interplay between gender, religion, and societal norms. Applying an intersectional perspective, the study underscores the role of localized initiatives in driving broader societal change. The narratives of resistance and collaboration emerging from the experiences of ABAAD and Helem illuminate the potential for dismantling oppressive systems through grassroots efforts. However, the challenges faced by these organizations also reveal the complexities of navigating religious, cultural, and political dynamics in pursuit of decolonization. ABAAD and Helem offer valuable insights for addressing the entanglement of gender, religion, and their coloniality across diverse contexts. Ultimately, this thesis underscores the ongoing nature of the decolonization process and the need for sustained engagement and dialogue.

**Keywords:** Coloniality, Gender, Religion, Patriarchy, ABAAD, Helem

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## **List of Abbreviations**

<b>AFE</b>	Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality
<b>FBO</b>	Faith Based Organization
<b>GAD</b>	Gender And Development
<b>GBV</b>	Gender Based Violence
<b>HTP</b>	Harmful Traditional Practice
<b>LGBT+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual-Transgender +
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>WAD</b>	Women and Development
<b>WID</b>	Women in Development

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
List of Abbreviations.....	3
Introduction .....	5
Methods and Methodology.....	8
1. Conceptual framework .....	11
1.1 Sketching the scope .....	11
1.2 Coloniality and decoloniality.....	14
1.3 (De)coloniality and religion.....	15
1.4 (De)coloniality and gender .....	18
1.5 Gender and Religion in the field of development.....	20
2. Religion, gender, and coloniality in the Lebanese context .....	24
2.1 History of Lebanon, situating Lebanon in the Middle-East .....	24
2.2 Decolonizing religion and gender in the Lebanese context.....	27
3. Challenging patriarchy: ABAAD.....	33
3.1 Background.....	33
3.2 ABAAD's positioning regarding gender and religion.....	34
3.3 Challenging patriarchy in practical terms.....	37
4. Challenging heteronormativity: Helem .....	41
4.1 Background.....	41
4.2 Helem's positioning regarding gender and religion .....	42
4.3 Challenging heteronormativity in practical terms .....	45
Conclusion.....	49
Literature cited .....	51

## **Introduction**

In January 2016, a Lebanese court ruling at the Court of Appeals in Beirut confirmed the right of a transgender man to change his official papers (Safdar, Al Jazeera, 2016). It was a landmark ruling and celebrated by Helem, a LGBT+ organization in Lebanon, as a leap towards gender equality (Safdar 2016). However, transgender individuals still face many legal challenges are criminalized since the Lebanese law depends on a two-tier system in which the first ruling relating to Personal Status Laws is done by religious courts which legitimize their ruling on articles in the Lebanese penal code that criminalizes, among others, transgender individuals (HiL Rule of Law Lebanon 2012). One and a half year later, in August 2017, the Lebanese parliament repealed a law that allowed a man accused or convicted of rape to avoid sentencing by marrying his victim. The decision to repeal this law – Article 522 of the Lebanese penal code, followed lobbying from several civil society organisations (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). This campaign was launched in early 2016 by the Lebanese organisation ABAAD (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). What these two court rulings have in common is that both of them challenge patriarchal structures in Lebanese society and both rulings relate to gender equality. Both Helem and ABAAD work for the improvement of gender equality but their approaches towards gender equality differ in their explanations of gender, being either nonbinary or binary. Their work therefore may lead to contradicting views on gender equality in society, since both organizations' aims are to increase awareness on gender equality. Furthermore, relating to the court rulings, lobbying involving Personal Status Laws in Lebanon requires engagement with state legislature, public opinion, and, in a country like Lebanon, religion. Religion does not only play a role in people's attitudes and beliefs, but has a dominant say in personal status matters (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018; UN Democracy Fund 2021).

In the first half of 2017, I worked on an international research project with the working title: "How to engage religious leaders in challenging harmful traditional practices (HTPs)." My contribution to the research project was, among others, a case study on ABAAD, a Lebanese NGO, promoting gender equality in the Middle East (Bartelink et al. 2017). It was this project that got me interested in the nexus of gender and religion in the Lebanese context. After the project I decided to write my thesis on these matters and I planned a visit to Lebanon in 2018 to learn more about it, contacting multiple development organizations that navigate their aims to improve gender equality in the context of Lebanon.

After conducting several interviews with people from various organizations some

differences in approaches towards improving gender equality triggered the idea of looking more at the coloniality of gender within the Lebanese context. This was to find out what the underlying reasoning is for approaches that are based on either challenging the inequality of women in the patriarchal system of oppression or challenging heteronormativity within the patriarchal system of oppression. Further, coloniality builds upon the work of Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo, and can best be described as the persistent categorical and discriminatory discourse that is reflected in the social and economic systems and structures of the modern and postcolonial societies (Lugones 2007). The aims of coloniality are to create understanding of ‘other’ knowledges and ways of life than the colonial/western way and seeking ways to implement them (Lugones 2007).

Therefore, the coloniality of gender involves exposing the underlying power structures that form gender in postcolonial societies (Lugones 2013). Since the patriarchal system of oppression, and, within this system, heteronormativity, structure gender norms, it was necessary to look at the role of religion as well since it is often mentioned as legitimizing these patriarchal structures (Icaza and Vazquez 2016). An analysis of the coloniality of religion therefore was inherent to understanding the coloniality of gender in the Lebanese context. Even more so, since, in the context of Lebanon, religion, as mentioned, plays a pivotal role in personal status matters and, therewith, in upholding patriarchal norms (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018)

The research process embarked upon led to a thesis in which the challenging of patriarchal structures is discussed from two angles. The first one is the approach by ABAAD, promoting gender equality from a binary perspective and challenging patriarchy by the improvement of the position of women. The second one is the approach by Helem, an LGBT+ organization that seeks to challenge patriarchy through challenging heteronormativity.

This thesis furthermore seeks to contribute to the academic debates in the field of development from a decolonial perspective. This is done by generating an understanding of the difficulties that arise around the concept of gender within the field of development and by looking at the role of colonial structures of oppression, religion, and the results of colonialism in restructuring religious influence, which help to create and uphold these difficulties.

The aim of this thesis is thus to explore what the Lebanese organizations ABAAD and Helem have to offer to decolonize the understanding and practice of gender and religion in the field of international development. The first objective of this thesis is therefore to look at the underlying concepts and conceptual debates that come with these concepts. Coloniality, coloniality of religion, and coloniality of gender will be discussed as well as gender and

religion in the field of development. The second chapter will address gender and religion in the Lebanese context, preceded by a general overview of the state's political system and the role religion plays therein. Subsequently, the third chapter addresses ABAAD's approaches to challenging patriarchy by looking at its background, its positioning and approaches to gender and religion, and, finally, their challenging of patriarchy in practical terms. The fourth chapter addresses Helem's approaches to challenging heteronormativity, using the same structure as the previous chapter.



## **Methods and Methodology**

As discussed in the introduction, the decision was made to enlarge the study with another organization, and, instead of focussing on one case, making it a multiple case study, adding different ways of navigating through the field of international development while engaging with gender and religion. In line with Baxter and Jack (2008) and Stake (1995) the transition from a single case study to a multiple case study research was made, in order to understand the differences and similarities between the cases. It also provided the opportunity to analyse the data both within each case and across the cases (Yin 2003). Another advantage with the choice for a multiple case study research was that they might help creating a more convincing theory, due to the empirical basis of the research. It, thus, allowed to explore the research question from a wider angle (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007), with the danger to spread out the time more over the differing cases and therewith maybe losing some depth on the issues being dealt with (Dyer and Wilkins 1991). However, according to Eisenhardt (1991) the amount of information and the amount of case studies used, depend upon how much new information the cases bring and how much is already known. This has been a major reason for the addition of another case, in order to challenge to coloniality of gender in a broader sense.

Furthermore, adding a second case study could also diminish the chances of the dangers of subjectivism. This multiple case study research did actually falsify some preconceived notions on the issues to be discussed, in line with Flyvberg's explanation of the case study approach (2011). Of course, it is hard to find a precise solution or answer to the research question presented based on two contextual cases in Lebanon, therewith leaving room for further research.

The overarching methodological framework is based in case study research, using a multi-methods approach. The analysis in this thesis is based primarily on a qualitative content analysis of four semi-structured interviews, two for ABAAD, and two for Helem. Three of these interviews were conducted in the summer of 2018, and one in the summer of 2017. Initially, two other organizations were approached and consented to participate in the project, with one interview per organization. The reasons not to include these organizations in the study after all are relating to the decrease of focus. By narrowing down on ABAAD and Helem, a deeper understanding of the content has been achieved.

Furthermore, the interviews were augmented by participant observations, public documentation of the organizations, completed with literature review, and document analysis and interviews that were already held during the previous research project (Bartelink, Le

Roux, Levinga, 2017). In order to get a notion of the literature that is around on the issues to be discussed, snowballing technique was used as well as the bibliography of the 2017' research.

By snowballing on the used sources, more sources came up. In other words, the process of searching for sources was non-exclusive and open-ended, meaning that all leads to gain more information and material on this specific research subject were followed. Saturation was achieved only after checking whether all themes that were relevant to the research questions were discussed from all angles.

The interviews and other data were subjected to content analysis in order to find patterns in how concepts were communicated, understand the intentions of the individuals working for the organizations participating in this research, reveal differences in communication within and throughout the organizations and analyse the consequences of the communicated content. The analysis of the interviews was done by coding the text into different categories in order to be able to compare the content of the interviews (Atkinson 2002). The identified themes were patriarchy, heteronormativity, religion, general information on the organization, and strategies by the organization to challenge the colonial structures of either patriarchy or heteronormativity. In some cases, themes overlapped.

Regarding ethical considerations, I find it important to mention that, throughout this study I try to be constantly conscious of the power structures that exist within and between object/subject relationships. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, from the University of Waikato, New Zealand, the word 'research' is probably one of the dirtiest words for many of those who have been affected by colonialism and its legacies (Smith 1999). Moreover, using someone else's words to describe a situation is a delicate matter, especially when these words, in some cases, were also already written down by other researchers. In an effort to stay as true as possible to the meaning of the interviewees, this study makes use of direct quotes. Moreover, the interviews were only conducted after the signing of consent forms. Furthermore, the participants' names are anonymized, except for the name of one of the participants from Helem, who explicitly asked not to be anonymized.

As was written in the introduction, the writing of this thesis also affected me as a person, not per se as a researcher, enormously. In a research project like the one I engaged in, although it is applicable to every researcher I would argue, one never asks or formulates research questions in a vacuum. We are all members of interpretive communities that involve established disciplines with relatively defined and stable areas of interest, theory, and research methods and techniques (Stratford and Bradshaw 2021). These interpretive communities

influence our, and therefore my, choice of topic and approach to, and conduct of study as Livingstone described (2005). We also fold our own values and beliefs into research, and they can influence both what we study and how we interpret our research (Flowerdew and Martin 2005). In that sense I am following a more post-structuralist approach, keen to confront universalism, positivist notions of objectivity and therewith criticizing masculinist and Eurocentric concepts of universal knowledge (Mohanty 1991). This resulted in embracing theories such as those of coloniality of power and gender and taking a more Foucauldian approach to the analysis of discourse.

## 1. Conceptual framework

The first chapter of this thesis aims to provide an overview of the concepts and backgrounds related to the discourses of (de)coloniality, gender, religion, and the field of international development. Since this thesis aims to explore what Lebanese development organizations have to offer to decolonize gender and religion, this first chapter will foremost deal with conceptual difficulties and the difficulties intersectional approaches, such as is aimed at in this study, encounters.

### *1.1 Sketching the scope*

Logically, this conceptual framework will commence with an investigation of (de)coloniality, since these concepts offer a better understanding of an intersectional approach later on in the chapter. Coloniality, a concept that exposes the practices and legacies of European colonialism in social orders and forms of knowledge, and its relation to religion, gender and the international field of development will therefore be introduced first. Secondly, the exploration of the intersections of religion and coloniality, followed by gender and coloniality will take place. Subsequently, these intersections will be looked at in relation to development, from a decolonizing perspective.

Before elaborating on the historical and social backgrounds and the aforementioned intersections, it is important to create some conceptual clarity already regarding the concepts of religion, gender, development, and intersectionality from a critical perspective. Starting with the latter, philosopher Baukje Prins described intersectionality as follows:

‘Intersectionality emphasizes that the complexity of processes of individual identification and social inequality cannot be captured by arithmetical frameworks. Categories like gender, ethnicity, religion and class co-construct each other, and they do so in myriad ways, dependent on social, historical and symbolic factors’ (Prins 2006).

The theory was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Professor of Law at UCLA and Columbia Law School. Crenshaw is a leading authority in the area of Civil Rights, Black feminist legal theory, critical race theory, and race, racism and the law (Crenshaw 1991). There are debates on whether systemic or constructionist approaches to intersectionality differ. The latter approach emphasizes agency of the individual more, whereas the former approach is more static when it comes to power structures. In this study there will be reflections on these differing approaches of intersectionality when discussing the intersections of coloniality, religion, gender, and the study of development as well as development organizations (Atewologun 2018).

Another concept that needs to be explained in more detail is the term religion and more specifically the differences between religion and faith since these terms will both be used during this thesis, although not in the same context. Being aware of the fact that, when discussing religion and faith, many scholars found that it is nearly impossible to come with a definition of religion or faith that is clear and universal, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make any engagements with religion and faith in law or policy due to the ambiguity that surrounds the concepts of religion and faith, according to both Cavanaugh (2011) and Tarusarira (2020). Besides these difficulties, the words religion and faith are often used interchangeably, although referring to different agencies. The discussion on whether to use the term religion, or the term faith, became more insistent due to the different use of the terms in the different structures and discourses, being systemic or constructionist, surrounding either (de)coloniality or the field of development. Within the field of development, the concept of Faith Based Organizations (hereafter called FBO's) is more prevalent than, for example, Religious Based Organizations or Religious Development (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013). A FBO is an organization whose values are based on faith and/or beliefs, which has a mission based on social values of the particular faith, and which most often draws its activists (leaders, staff, volunteers) from a particular faith group. The faith to which the organization is referring to does not have to be academically classified as religion. The term "faith-based organization" is more inclusive than the term "religious organization" as it refers also to the non-congregation faith beliefs (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013).

Continuing on the term faith, one can say that it is, as already mentioned, nearly impossible to define, due to the fact that it means something different to each individual. Faith is understood to be intensely personal and often seen as extremely private (Newman 2004). "The term 'faith' ranges in meaning from a general religious attitude on the one hand to personal acceptance of a specific set of beliefs on the other hand" (Hellwig 1990). Yet faith is still superimposed on the lives of people (Newman 2004), and, although most often seen in a religious context, faith remains an "extraordinarily important construct" transcending the concept of religion, in that it can be applied far beyond the reach of religions (Lee 1990).

In his introduction, Fowler, an American Professor in Theology from Emory University discusses how "faith is so fundamental that none of us can live well for very long without it, so universal that when we move beneath the symbols, rituals and ethical patterns that express it, faith is recognizably the same phenomenon in Christians, Marxists, Hindus and Dinka, yet it is so infinitely varied that each person's faith is unique (Lee 1990).

Defining religion, is, as said, often held to be difficult as well. Many attempts have

been made to pinpoint a definition. An adequate definition, according to Leanne Newman (2004) from Baylor University, Texas, lies in the understanding that "religions are systems or structures consisting of specific kinds of beliefs and practices: beliefs and practices that are related to superhuman beings." And, in social sciences, religion is often defined as a "stable cluster of values, norms, statuses, roles, and groups developed around a basic social need" (Newman 2004). The social need to make a distinction between sacred and profane is at the core of all religions. Thus, Religion is a set of beliefs and practices that revere a god or a center of power and value. Persons do things, such as attend worship services or pray, to show reverence and worship. In short, it is a state of doing (Newman 2004). The relevance of this state of doing will be elaborated on in detail in the section on (de)coloniality and religion, exactly because of this forementioned approach.

However, the above stresses the importance of creating an understanding that faith and religion are not the same and should be applied in different contexts. It also stresses the need for conceptual debates on whether the use of either religion or faith is justified in certain contexts. In contrast to an approach in which these concepts are interchangeably used, following a model based on the works of Newman (2004), religion is a function of faith. In other words, faith is the guiding principle by which individuals are religious or spiritual (attempting to live a life guided by the spirit of ones faith, engaging in meditation, praying, or in general make conscious decisions regarding their actions based on how ones senses the spirit of ones faith is leading them). Religion and spirituality are therefore functions of faith. Faith, in this approach is a way of knowing. Religion and spirituality are ways of doing and being (Newman, 2004).

Regarding this thesis, the concepts of faith and religion are both used. This is because the majority of existing literature in the field of development studies refers to faith and faith-based organizations, although, according to the abovementioned definitions, the concept of religion might in some cases be more appropriate. The majority of existing literature in the field of decolonial studies makes more use of the concept of religion. Whether the use of religion or faith is more appropriate is a conceptual debate that stretches far beyond the reach of this thesis. In order to stay closer to the literature and to avoid new debates on whether the uses of the concepts in this thesis are correct and justified, this thesis refers to faith when articles specifically mention faith. However, considering the above given definitions of faith and religion, overall, the concept of religion is more appropriate in the context of this thesis.

Furthermore, the term gender is as elusive as the terms faith and religion, albeit without discussion on two differing terms that are too often used interchangeably. However,

fathoming the term gender makes place for a discussion on the use of the term gender and its different explanations in itself. Often, gender is a binary categorization, based on the existing sexes and their respective cultural roles in society (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018).

However, as one of the goals of this thesis is to point out that coloniality plays a role in our understanding of gender, as well as religion, it is also important to note that, in order to embark on a decolonizing mission regarding gender and religion, the concepts of gender and religion themselves are also a product of European colonialism. In the sections below, in order to create clarity and understanding on the debates on the concepts, the use of the concepts, and the intersections of the different concepts being used in this thesis, will therefore be central.

### *1.2 Coloniality and decoloniality*

When writing on coloniality, and more specifically on the intersection of coloniality and religion, this thesis draws mostly on the work of one of this thesis' supervisors, Dr. Tarusarira. The intersection of coloniality and gender will be largely based on the works and efforts of María Lugones' and Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vasquez. Both the intersections of coloniality and religion and coloniality and gender will be elaborated on after introducing and explaining the concepts of coloniality and decoloniality properly.

As explained in the introduction of this chapter, coloniality must be understood as "Europe's hegemony over the new model of global power wherein all forms of the control of the subjectivity, culture and knowledge (as well as the production of knowledge) are concentrated" (Quijano and Ennis 2000).

Tarusarira (2020) states the following: "The historical period of colonialism is over, but its consequences remain a crucial part of global politics." The power systems established and ingrained through colonization and its subsequent undoing through decolonization persist to this day. It is these power structures that are referred to as "coloniality" (Tarusarira 2020). In the same way that coloniality goes beyond the actual historical events of colonialism, decoloniality emerges as the idea that takes center stage when confronting and advocating for alternatives to the power dynamics that can be labeled as coloniality. According to Tarusarira (2020), "Coloniality is thus different from colonialism, in that it refers to the specific ideological frameworks through which colonial relations were generated and justified. In that sense, while colonialism is over, coloniality is not." Decoloniality differs from decolonization in a similar way as coloniality differs from colonialism. Decolonization refers to the process

of independence of former colonies, while decoloniality concerns challenging and dismantling the ideological frameworks that justify and maintain colonial power relations (Maldonado Torres 2016; Tarusarira 2020).

Annibal Quijano, one of the first scholars that engaged with the concepts of coloniality, through his work on ‘The Coloniality of Power’ points out that coloniality is inexplicably bound to modernity. We cannot think of modernity without acknowledging coloniality, since doing so would let us overlook foundational inequalities that are part of the modern world today (Donahue and Kalyan 2015). This perception pervades in global political relations as well, in the sense that modern (Western) civilization understands itself as the most developed, superior civilization. The oppression that results from this ‘coloniality of power, is largely embodied in the notion of ‘modernity’, and therefore also prevalent in the idea of ‘development,’ since modernization, the becoming of modern, is based on the paradigmatic belief that development would and should take the form of a unilinear path toward a commonly accepted and desired future (Rakodi 2015; Tarusarira 2020).

In order to challenge structures of international institutions, among which are organizations in the field of international development, decoloniality requires taking knowledge, spiritualities and insights from marginalized people seriously, besides recognizing and therewith problematizing the unconscious colonial assumptions which form the foundation of these organizations’ policies (Tarusarira 2020). In the sections hereafter the coloniality and decoloniality with regard to religion as well as gender will be elaborated on. In the sections below, the concepts coloniality and decoloniality, as counterparts of each other, will be referred to as (de)coloniality. When this is done, it stresses the relationship between the structures that uphold and should be dismantled following the logic of the above-mentioned approaches. The different systems of oppression that constitute coloniality in relation to religion on one hand and in relation to gender on the other; as well as the meanings it has for these systems of oppression in relation to decoloniality, will be elaborated on in the sections below.

### *1.3 (De)coloniality and religion*

As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, regarding the context of (de)coloniality, the word religion is most often used. However, it is also important to note that religion is often defined and applied, reflecting the assumptions and interests of those doing the defining (Tarusarira 2020). By using the term religion in relation to (de)coloniality, it should not be forgotten that the idea of religion as something that can be clearly identified and separated



from other institutions and realms of human activity is also intrinsically linked to colonial practices, since the modern understanding of religion is a historical construct that was established in the global north (or often referred to as the West) this study aims to, although using the concept of religion regarding the context of (de)coloniality, critically reflect on it (Tarusarira 2020).

Decolonizing religion cannot be done without having an understanding of its place regarding the modern state's sovereign power, in which secularism can be identified as the vehicle to reorganize religious life (Asad 2006; Tarusarira 2020). According to Talal Asad, the state does this by creating an understanding of religion, what it is or ought to be, assigning its proper content and legitimizing to the state's fitting forms of thought, moralities, and behaviour, while marginalizing other forms of thought, moralities, and behaviour (Asad 2006; Tarusarira 2020).

During the development of what came to be known as the modern nation state and the development of colonialism, secularism gained the authority to govern national and global public affairs. The religious and political realms were respectively divided into ecclesiastical authority and civil government, in which secularism controlled the latter. This is an important idea that reverberates throughout this thesis, especially when it comes to the organization of gender through religion. In particular because, along with religion, gender and sexuality also came to be considered as matters of the private sphere (Mahmood 2012; Scott 2018). Therefore, specifically in the case of the colonized societies of the Middle East, and therewith Lebanon, religious governance of private and family matters increased as a result of secularization (Mahmood 2012, 2013). Chapter two will further elaborate on this, since the Lebanese case complicates these notions even further and this chapter serves to introduce and discuss used concepts and ideas.

Regarding the modern nation state, ways of thinking on secular and religious affairs further became orientalized, with the Christian nations, and their secular civil governments, on one hand and the "uncivilized" and "primitive" peoples of Africa and the Ottoman lands on the other (Tarusarira 2020). It is this division into the public and the private spheres that, albeit a division, also intertwined Christianity and secular state sovereignty (Mavelli 2012; Tarusarira 2020). Consequently, Christianity was transformed into an expression of Europe's superiority and civilization and continues to operate as such (Beaman 2012; Tarusarira 2020). It made Christianity a "good" religion because it does hardly challenge the liberal and secular principles on which the modern nation state is built (Tarusarira 2020). By contrast, the practices and knowledges of colonized peoples were rewritten not as expressions of false

religious reasoning, but as an expression of their essential, and irrational, supposed sub-humanity (Tarusarira 2020). Consequently, as Tarusarira writes, “Secularism traveled beyond Western contexts with the spread of Christianity, the expansion of European colonialism, global expansion of capitalism and the European system of states and modern science. It was transported to the colonies —the frontier zones or zones of contact between intrusive and indigenous people—during the time of the empire.”

Furthermore, the study of religion in the colonized lands was aimed at reducing complexity and gaining control over knowledge. This enabled the colonial powers to introduce governing systems, dividing again religion and the public domain, along lines of difference they created themselves (Meyer 2018; Tarusarira 2020). Whether scholars engaged in these practices deliberately or whether it was based on ignorance is contested. However, it must be remembered that the descriptions and depictions of religion that were created through these reasonings, is not an objective truth (Tarusarira 2020). The characterizations that were ascribed to the non-Western “religious” practices, whether it was seen as fetishism, totemism, magic, superstition, remained largely unchallenged because to do so would undermine the goals of former colonial powers. These negative and unfounded characterizations of “religion” continue to prevail in many former colonized lands, among which the Ottoman lands in the Middle East.

These orientaling structures that are still present and continue to influence Western thoughts on former colonized lands and their application of “religion,” also works the other way around. Fundamental ideas regarding sexuality that are prevalent in most of today’s Shi’a communities in Lebanon, can be reactions to the Western divisions of the public and private domains, and Western conceptualizations of sexualities (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018). This means that knowledge production and development of norms and values often continues to be based on unfounded claims about religion, and the more than hundreds of years of influence on these religions by colonial structures (Tarusarira 2020). It is therefore important, when talking about decolonizing civil and religious domains in these colonized lands, it is not only about retrieving and reconstructing the history of the former colonies and, for example, their interpretation of religious values, but, also, that the way these colonized lands, their political system, religion, and the divisive structures between the political system and the religious domain, are constituted and still operate today (Tarusarira 2020).

#### *1.4 (De)coloniality and gender*

This section will be largely based on the ideas of the major scholar on this topic, being María Lugones, as well as two researchers from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, trying to connect the dots between (de)coloniality and gender on one hand and developmentalism on the other. Lugones provides for an approach to begin thinking about heterosexism as a key part of how gender fuses with race in colonial oppressing power structures. According to Lugones, Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created vastly different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. It introduced, most importantly, gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of reproduction, of cosmologies, or religion, and ways of knowing (Lugones 2007).

It is necessary, according to Lugones, to historicize gender, because, without this history, the debate on gender is centered on the analysis of patriarchy, and patriarchal gender constitution, being binary, hierarchical, and resting on male supremacy without a clear understanding of the structures that, described in the section above on (de)coloniality and religion, entail secularism, but also capitalism, heterosexuality and racial classification. Heterosexualist and heteronormative patriarchy can only be understood in relation to the birth of a global, colonial, and secular system of capitalism, with a centrality of the coloniality of power to this system (Lugones 2007).

In her efforts to fathom gender, Lugones (2007; 2013) finds that gender is often considered to be ahistorical, that it is seen as an inherent element of the human condition across times and spaces. This peril of ahistoricity was, amongst others, voiced by Mohanty in 1991, stressing the unseen and undertheorized in the production of feminist knowledge, namely the reality of non-white and non-western woman. However, in Oyewumi's ethnographic research on the Yoruba in 1997, called "The invention of Women," she manages to display ways of relating to the body that exceeds the category of gender. Oyewumi writes the following: "Gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization by the West." It is therefore that Oyewumi concludes that assuming Yoruba society included gender as an organizing principle, is another case of "Western dominance in the documentation and interpretation of the world, one that is facilitated by the West's global dominance," and that "researchers always find gender when they look for it." Oyewumi understands gender as an organizing tool of domination, introduced by the West, that designates two binarily opposed and hierarchical social categories. Oyewumi allows herself and her readers to consider the following: "if gender is socially constructed, then, at some

point in time, there was no gender at all.” This then follows into a reasoning entailing that certain practices, ways of being and ways of feeling were not gendered at all (Lugones 2007).

The above ascribes Lugones’ notion that, as the global and modern world system was constituted, through colonization, gender differentials were introduced where there were none. Besides the above-mentioned example on the Yoruba people, a similar argumentation can be found when trying to understand the relation of some Native American tribes to gender. And although gender might have been an existing structuring logic in some of these tribes, it very much differs from the Eurocentered notion of gender. Paula Gunn Allen, in her work on Native Americans in 1992, argued that many Native American tribes were matriarchal, they recognized more than two genders, recognized third gendering and homosexuality positively, and understood gender in egalitarian terms rather than in the terms of subordination that their colonizers imposed on them. Besides that, Gunn Allen’s work enables one to understand that the scope of gender differentials can be encompassing and do not have to rest on biological factors (Allen 1992).

Important categories that need to be addressed in relation to gender and to the scope of this thesis are patriarchy and heteronormativity. Icaza and Vazquez identify a dimorphic (male/female) idea of gender; with a subordinate position of women within this idea relating to patriarchy as one of the Eurocentered modern and global oppressing mechanism on one hand, and heteronormativity on the other hand, being another component within this mechanism in which heterosexualism is the norm (Icaza and Vazquez 2016). These categories are of importance later on in this thesis, since development organizations tend to work either to dismantle the former system of oppression, patriarchy, or the latter, heteronormativity, but as will be elaborated on in detail, decolonizing both at the same time confronts organizations with practical challenges that are not easy to overcome, especially when the religion factor is added (Icaza and Vazquez 2016).

Furthermore, it is important to get a notion of the place of gender in precolonial Lebanon, since, when trying to understand the nature and scope of changes in social structures that the processes, constituting the modern, global, and Eurocentered system imposed, it is not possible to grasp decoloniality regarding gender. In the section below, this study aims to expand on the intersections of both religion and gender, as well as on their respective and intertwining relations to the field of international development.

### *1.5 Gender and Religion in the field of development*

This section entails an explanation and introduction to the international field of development, the places both religion and gender hold in this field, the intersections of religion and gender in this field and a critical reflection on its importance for this thesis. Engaging in the intersections of gender and religion, through patriarchy, are central to this section of this chapter while this study aims to add another critical approach to decolonizing gender by stressing the importance of heteronormativity, its relation to religion and patriarchy.

Writing on the intersection of gender and religion, from a decolonizing perspective, and its relation to development is considered to be an often-overlooked intersection. Emma Tomalin (2007) identifies that the lack of attention to gender considerations within the religions and development scholarship. Indeed, while the broader development studies literature suggests decades of solid gender focus, gender analysis has yet to be fully applied to the religious dimensions of development theory and practice although the presence of exceptions to this statement (Hefferan 2015). As Tomalin has noted, this lack of attention to gender and religion can produce a simplified version of reality, both regarding religion as well as gender (Tomalin 2013). The currently existing research leaves a blind spot on a decolonial approach to both religion as well as gender in development. Bradley and Kirmani (2015) engaged on a project to find the intersection of religion, gender, and development in South Asia, leaving out the (de)coloniality approach but nonetheless creating an incredible blueprint for further research on these often-overlooked intersections. They write the following:

“The achievement of gender equality, which has historically focused on improving the status of women but has recently been expanded by some international development organizations and donor agencies to include the rights of sexual minorities, has consistently been identified as a key development goal by these engaging organizations. In the context of the rights of women and sexual minorities, religion has generally been viewed as a conservative force – one that acts as a hindrance to the achievement of gender and sexual equality. At the same time, religion has, at times, also been used as a means of supporting arguments for gender or sexual equality by those advocating equal rights” (Bradley and Kirmani 2015).

Bradley and Kirmani’s research is focused on the Indian and Pakistani context and the relation of religion, gender, and colonialism, in the field of development, is being made in the India case study. The reference to this case study is simply due to the lack of existing literature and research on the matter in the context of the Middle East, or Lebanon, to be more specific. There has, however, been a growing network of organizations that emerged across India who work for the rights of sexual minorities, including transgender and intersex people,

stressing the long-lasting pre-colonial traditions of having multiple gender categories in society. These organizations have been successful in opening the space for discussion around alternative sexualities and a decolonized approach to gender. However, apart from small gains for the transgender-or Hijra community in terms of the legal recognition of a third gender in some government schemes, little legal progress has been made (Bradley and Kirmani 2015). Similar organizations also exist in the Lebanese context. Examples are Helem, AFE (Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality), and Marsa. The inclusion of Helem in this research is indeed to make a similar case for the Lebanese context as well.

Interesting for this study is the fact that most issues regarding gender equality in its broadest way, including a multiple gender and intersex approach, can be traced back to the colonial period. In relation to the mentioned example of India, it is section 377 of the Indian Penal Code makes non-peno-vaginal sex ‘against the order of nature,’ and thus illegal. And although the Delhi High Court declared section 377 to be unconstitutional, it was overturned by the Supreme Court, reinstating section 377, largely fueled by petitions and pleas from conservative religious groups, including Hindu, Muslim, and Christian organizations. Representatives of some of these organizations issued a joint statement, welcoming the decisions of the Supreme Court, stating:

“Our India is a religious country whose overwhelming majority believes in religion and upholds traditions of the east. All religions emphasize on construction of a family through marital relation between men and women, on which depend not only the existence of human race and lasting peace and tranquility in the society, but it also establishes the respected and central position of women in the society.” (‘Joint Statement’ 2013; in: Bradley and Kirmani 2015).

This statement places heterosexual marriage at the center of both the public national sphere, as well as the private religious sphere. It emphasizes the Eurocentered model of the nation state, which, in most cases, leads to the situation in which traditional systems of organizing social life continue to govern the private sphere, including the mechanisms that revolve around gender and sexuality (Bartelink and Wilson 2020). Mirroring images of the secular public sphere and a religious private sphere, considered to be the modern approach of the nation state by its own definition (Arce and Long 200), were absorbed in the organizational system of the colonized and the colonizers’ discourse on the colonized (Bartelink and Wilson 2020). It therefore creates problems for gender equality, both from a more traditional academic perspective in which gender equality usually refers to women’s rights and feminist discourses, as well as gender equality where heteronormative binary

mechanisms on gender are challenged (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018). The same applies to the Lebanese context and is at the core of this thesis' approach.

From this perspective, a crucial contribution to the field could be found in Gender and Development (GAD) studies. It brings gender, and not only women, into the analysis of development and its concurrent power relations between masculinities and femininities. GAD constitutes a paradigm that sought to identify how power operates and not only to incorporate women in development. Scholars in this field, such as Mohanty, argued that intersectionality should be used as an analytical tool to understand multiple social oppressions are not only interrelated but also bounded together. From the GAD perspective, gender is considered a social construction, which means that a human being becomes a 'woman' or a 'man' through processes of socialization at home, school, through state practices and policies, through the global market and through mediation of organizations and institutions such as religious ones (Icaza and Vazquez 2016). By highlighting this social constructive nature of gender, GAD scholars brought attention to the dominant heterosexual and heteronormative order, and how this order continues to erase diverse gender- and sexual identities (Icaza and Vazquez 2016).

GAD was preceded by the WID (women in development) and WAD (women and development) paradigms. Icaza and Vazquez write that the dominant heterosexual social order remained unquestioned in these schools of thought. By disaggregating women, and focusing on their social positions only, the heterosexual order was left as a norm, or, as Icaza and Vazquez write: "as the 'normal' way things are" (Icaza and Vazquez, 2016). This unquestioned heterosexual order is, for example, also present in World Bank's policy interventions in Africa and the Middle East, which tend to assume men as prone to sexually risky behaviour, and women as less prone to non-heterosexual practices (Bergeron 2006; Griffin 2007; Icaza and Vazquez 2016).

An additional illustration of an undisturbed heterosexual framework can be seen in the emphasis on promoting girls' education as a central objective within development policy. The underlying premise is that education serves as a means to address gender-based discrimination against women in society, particularly in global Southern regions, countering the resurgence of fundamentalist movements worldwide. However, this assumption rests upon the notion that fixed male and female sexual identities are the norm. Consequently, this approach affects how access to education is perceived, linked to a pre-established sexual hierarchy where alternative identities, such as those of lesbian, gay, transgender, and intersex individuals, are not fully taken into account or acknowledged (Icaza and Vazquez 2016).

However, and in spite of, the significant contributions of GAD in reevaluating and

implementing development practices, the endeavor to expand its reach via mainstreaming tactics led to the assimilation of the concept of 'gender' as a matter of efficiency—whether in the context of the market or the state—rather than being tackled as a matter of social justice (Miller and Razavi 1995; Icaza and Vazquez 2016). The integration of gender into policies followed a somewhat simplistic approach of 'add women and stir,' while concurrently, for many feminists engaged in development, the presence of gender within the development framework became an unquestioned assumption, a starting point deeply ingrained in common understanding, guiding deliberations and endorsing 'development' endeavors in regions of the global South (Icaza and Vazquez 2016). According to Icaza and Vazquez (2016), the challenge of decoloniality of gender is the challenge to think beyond Western-centered categories and open up the possibility of thinking about the communal, of thinking about coalitional resistances producing a world otherwise.

Moreover, as the aforementioned case on India illustrates, the lack of (case study) research highlights the need for more empirically based studies engaging with the described topics. There are, similar to the case in India, organizations active in many countries that challenge the dominant heterosexual and heteronormative order, which erases diverse gender- and sexual identities but at the same time, many organizations reiterate the concept of gender through a binary approach. Furthermore, and relating to religious and secular approaches to gender, as a result of the earlier described place religion has in secular contexts, religious influence on gender, sexuality, reproduction, and other intimate dimensions of people's private lives has increased and the historical structures of superiority and marginalization have all but disappeared (Mahmood 2015; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018).

In this chapter, it was found that the coloniality of religion and the coloniality of gender have a profound impact on postcolonial societies. Moreover, the intersection of religion in gender in the field of development was discussed. It provided insights on the approaches within the field of development on gender, as well as on the implications of including religion in these approaches. In the next chapter, an analysis of the intersection of religion and gender in development will take place in the context of Lebanon.



## **2. Religion, gender, and coloniality in the Lebanese context**

The following chapters aims to navigate through the intertwining mechanisms of religion, gender, and development in the Lebanese context from a decolonial perspective. It is therefore important to sketch the scope of the relation between gender and religion in Lebanese context, which will be done in this chapter. A general history of the country is added first to grasp the power relations of modern-day Lebanon. After examining the historical and social backgrounds of Lebanon, the interplay of gender and religion are discussed in the specific Lebanese context.

### *2.1 History of Lebanon, situating Lebanon in the Middle East*

For most of its history Lebanon has been a unique illustration of intimate connections between religion, demography, and politics (Faour 2007). With eighteen different recognized religious communities and the entrenchment of these sects into the political system it would be impossible to understand Lebanese politics without an understanding of the religious context and since both politics and religion largely influence the (re)construction of gender in society they have to be taken into account when gender is studied, especially in the Lebanese context where, as said, politics and religion heavily influence each other. To understand this entanglement, one must look at how these groups lived together in the past: what rules and laws were set up between them and which of those rules and laws are still in effect today or still have an effect on the politics of gender in Lebanon. Most of these contracts between the religious groups, and therefore politics, were set up during Ottoman rule, although influenced by a more recent history of Lebanon, since French mandate rule and independence onwards (Faour 2007).

The recent history of Lebanon has known periods of political instability, alternated with periods of relative economic growth and welfare. Although the Lebanese population is often confronted with hard times, it always seeks ways to keep Lebanon on track. Decay and rebuilding are central themes in the history of Lebanon. As the Lebanese poet Nadia Tuani once wrote: “Beirut has died a thousand times and has been reborn a thousand times” (Siepe 2008).

The Lebanese population consists of Christians, Druze, Shi’a Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and ethnic minorities such as Armenians and Palestinians. Since Lebanon was founded as a sovereign country in 1943, these demographics have often been at the forefront of the conflicts that filled large parts of the last century. What has to be understood is that

within the different sectarian groups there is also not always consensus. The different political parties and their (often present) military counterparts are therefore not only in conflict with the other sectarian groups, they also do not always reach consensus within their own sectarian group. Many Lebanese people emigrated to Europe, North America or South America, due to an ongoing presence of violence, or a general sense of lack of perspective (Siepe 2008).

The current balance of power in Lebanon can be traced back to its independence in 1943. During the First World War, the Ottoman empire, of which Lebanon was a part, chose to align itself with the losing side (Siepe 2008). After the Great War, the Ottoman empire was divided amongst the French and the British under the Sykes-Picot agreement (Faour 2007). Syria and Lebanon became mandate territories of France (Faour 2007). One of the first things the French did was adding areas to the new mandate territory of Lebanon, meeting the wishes of the Maronites in the Lebanon-mountain range and coastal areas, therewith creating the so called Great-Lebanon (Faour 2007). Most Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a, and the Greek orthodox were not pleased with these new borders since their strong family-and economic ties with Syria (Faour 2007). Most Muslims were also against the new balance of power: the Maronite predominance in an alignment with the French high commissioner (Faour 2007). During the French mandate years (1920-1943) the political system that still determines the politics of Lebanon was created (Siepe 2008). Lebanon got a unicameral system, in which the seats were distributed amongst sectarian divisions (Siepe 2008). It was also decided that the President of the new republic was to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the house a Shi'a Muslim (Siepe 2008). Based on a census in 1932, the Christians, mostly Maronites, had a slight majority over the Muslims and therefore the power division was set to be 6:5 in the advantage of the Christian population of the country (Faour 2007). In the years thereafter, the Muslim population grew to be larger in numbers than the Christians, mostly due to higher birth rates (Siepe 2008). However, a census was never conducted again, and the balance of power remained in favor of the Christians (Siepe 2008). This political system provided for new conflicts to take hold or old conflicts to reignite again (Faour 2007). And although a national identity is present as well, it usually comes second to the confessional or sectarian identity (Siepe 2008). During the Second World war the British and the Free French movement sought to end Vichy France's control over Lebanon (Siepe 2008). Greater Lebanese nationalists (mostly Maronite's) and the British insisted on Lebanese independence (Siepe 2008). Before Lebanon's independence, a National Pact was created by the Maronite al Khouri and the Sunni Muslim al Solh (Faour

2007). The aspirations of the religious groups had to be reconciled in order to create a stable republic (Siepe 2008). The National Pact consisted of four principles, being (Siepe 2008):

1. Lebanon is an independent state. Christians will stop identifying with ‘the West’ and Muslims will stop pursue a unity with Syria.
2. Lebanon is an Arabic country, with Arabic as official language. It may uphold its intellectual and spiritual ties with the West.
3. Lebanon is a member of the family of Arabic states and always takes a neutral position when conflict ignites between these Arabic states.
4. The political posts will be divided along confessional lines, maintaining the 6:5 ratio. This confessional principle was to be implemented in the army as well.

After elections in 1943, the parliament chose the nationalist Beshara al Khouri as president and Riyad al Solh as prime minister of an independent government that promptly removed all articles in the constitution that provided a base of power for the French high commissioner (Siepe 2008). The French imprisoned al Khouri and al Solh but after international pressure and heavy domestic protests France released al Khouri and al Solh on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1943, which was then designated as independence day (Siepe 2008). The National Pact of al Khouri and al Solh remained the base of Lebanese politics until the outbreak of the civil war in 1975 and although this confessional system was designed to avert sectarian conflicts and protect minorities, it appeared to only enhance the differences (Siepe 2008).

With the he Ta’if accords in 1989, on which will be elaborated on more in detail below, the end of the civil war was in sight (Siepe 2008). It provided for a slightly more balanced but still precarious situation when it comes to the distribution of power in Lebanon (Faour 2007). The sectarian principles from the constitution of 1943 were upheld, although being redrawn to provide for a fairer distribution (Faour 2007). Since 1989 the precarious balance of power in Lebanon is based on the eighteen recognized religious sects in Lebanon, with the Christian sects holding 64 seats, being divided amongst the Maronites (34), Greek-Orthodox (14), Melkite-Church (8, also called Greek-Catholic), Armenian-Apostolic Church (5), Armenian-Catholic (1), Combined Protestant Churches (1), Other Christian minority groups (1) (Malley 2018). Muslim (and Druze) parties also hold 64 seats, being divided as following: Sunni (27), Shi’a (27), Alawite (2) and Druze (8) (Malley 2018).

The Ta’if accords made an end to the Lebanese civil war that lasted from April 1975 until October 1990 (Malley 2018). The accords also promised to eventually make an end to a sectarian division of politics, since, as was noted during the accords, the institutionalized

sectarianism had led to most of the political problems leading up to the civil war (Malley 2018). The abolishment of sectarianism was even considered a “fundamental national objective” (Taif Accord 1989). Until today this promise has not yet been fulfilled (Siepe 2008).

The political system during the French mandate divided political power along clearly defined sectarian lines (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Understanding the current state of Lebanon also involves looking at the trajectory of Lebanon’s development before French interference. Some of the social trends in the country that remain existent until today and that are of importance when looking at reimagining and decolonizing the intersection of gender and religion can be traced back to Ottoman rule over the area. Foundations of the current religious culture and the approach to gender can be, as said, traced back to Ottoman times, but are reinforced and consolidated in the current political system of confessionalism. The next section will therefore discuss religion and gender in Lebanon from a decolonizing perspective.

## *2.2 Decolonizing religion and gender in the Lebanese context*

The political system, in which the state is a secular entity that nonetheless derives its authority from the divisions among religious groups, allows the state to empower and propel “the monopoly of certain elites” (Bahlawan 2014; Bartelink et al. 2017). To clarify, the state-sanctioned religious leadership of each sect also functions to control and restrict societal changes, impeding individuals' chances to enhance their socioeconomic standing, and, moreover, this arrangement safeguards the political and economic monopoly held by the political leadership (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). The roles of religious leaders are complex, given that they are both spiritual figures and public representatives of their respective religious communities. These leaders also benefit from endorsement by the political elite. Consequently, the extent to which the religious community members view these leaders as spiritual guides versus political figures is limited due to the leaders' political affiliations (Henley 2016; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). While religious leaders play a role in managing religious diversity on behalf of the state, their focus on safeguarding communal rights can hinder harmonious interreligious relations (Henley 2016; Mollica and Dingley 2015; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Despite international organizations valuing the involvement of religious leaders in societal transformation, this might not hold true in Lebanon due to the political alignments of these leaders (Henley 2016; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Similarly, as argued by Mahmood (2012) for Egypt and the broader Middle East, sectarianism in Lebanon is not an ancient tradition but rather a contemporary phenomenon entwined with the

historical and modern dynamics as discussed earlier.

Moreover, Lebanon's constitution lacks provisions for a civil code governing matters like marriage and divorce, leaving these affairs to be governed by the religious courts of the aforementioned eighteen religious' communities (Panchetti 2017; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). This implies that such matters are not purely private but fall under religious jurisdiction (Weiss 2010; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). This, in turn, has implications for individuals seeking interreligious marriages or civil marriages not tied to any religious tradition, which only occurred for the first time in 2012 (Panchetti 2017; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). There is resistance to this system, particularly from civil society groups advocating for a secular civil space. The movement advocating for a secular personal status law to establish a "secular sect" illustrates this (Haugbolle 2013; Mikdashi 2015; Panchetti 2017; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018).

Further, the very foundation of the nation of Lebanon has been intricately linked to religion, as discussed above, which has structured its social, political, and economic spheres. Maronite Christians often identify themselves with Europe, especially France, emphasizing a Phoenician narrative that positions Lebanon as a bridge between the East and West. On the other hand, Muslims assert Lebanon's identity as both Arab and belonging to the wider "Islamic world" (Firro 2003; Kaufman 2000; Zogheib 2014; Womack 2012; Kassem 2022). This competition has led to an exclusive approach to citizenship, with the nation's colonial origins heavily favoring (Maronite) Christians over its Muslim population. While Christian influence was solidified during the French mandate, the Lebanese civil war disrupted this, resulting in a shift of power from Maronite dominance to the rise of Sunni and Shia groups through the aforementioned Ta'if accords (Traboulsi 2007; Kassem 2022a). In the contemporary landscape, Lebanon's existence hinges on a delicate equilibrium of power among its three primary religious factions—Christian Maronites, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims. This equilibrium is maintained through a confessional system as the nation navigates the complex web of global divisions (Hajjar 2009; Di Peri 2014; Kassem 2022a).

Owing to its frail governance structure characterized by tendencies for Westernization and neoliberal policies, Lebanon is far from being a homogenous entity. Instead, it represents a terrain where diverse religious and national groups coexist in parallel. Each of these groups carries distinct and often conflicting foundational narratives and envisioned horizons (Hakim 2013; Hermez 2015; Kassem 2022a).

In terms of education, public visibility, media representation, and participation in the labour market, women in Lebanon reportedly exhibit commendable performance, enjoying a

noteworthy degree of independence, liberty, and self-determination (Fox et al. 2016; 2016; Harb 2010; Keddie 2012; Welborne 2011; Stephan 2012; Kassem 2022b). However, despite strides made since the colonial era and the establishment of the nation-state, various forms of patriarchal norms and suppressive conditions persist. These are especially evident concerning women's rights to citizenship and private legal matters. Furthermore, women's socio-economic mobility remains highly heterogeneous and is influenced by factors as diverse as social class, ethnicity, age, physical appearance, and geographic region (Hashem 2017; Kassem 2022b).

Furthermore, Lebanon lacks clear avenues for transgender people to obtain legal gender recognition, increasing their vulnerability to abuses by security forces, such as arbitrary arrests, and to systemic discrimination in healthcare, housing, and employment (Noralla 2022). More so, the UN released a statement in 2022 in which it addressed its concerns about the rising hate speech, discrimination in society, and violence against transgender individuals and organizations in Lebanon (UN Joint Statement 2022).

The pervasive dominance of patriarchal and heteronormative structures and evident gender disparities, ranging from disparities between men and women and transgender individuals, and furthermore originating from the colonial-era legal framework inherited by Lebanon to the present-day political and economic landscapes that maintain these inequalities, remain significant challenges (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Origins for many of these disparities can be traced back to the incorporation of the Ottoman civil code, the Mecelle. It formed the foundation of Personal Status Laws that provide the legal frameworks that are of interest when discussing gender (Bartelink et al. 2017).

The Lebanese legal framework lacks provisions for a civil code that oversees aspects such as marriage, divorce, and other familial concerns. Instead, the constitution establishes that these matters are governed by the Personal Status Laws, which are administered by the eighteen religious sects and their corresponding courts. These laws exert significant influence over gender equality within the nation, as they encompass crucial areas like inheritance, marital unions, and divorce, but also areas such as nonconforming gender identity and expression (Bartelink et al. 2017; Zeidan in Safdar, 2016). The jurisdiction of these religious courts extends to these realms. The persistence of these laws is attributed to the country's sectarian landscape. Given Lebanon's history marked by periods of civil unrest, the current arrangement prioritizes maintaining a careful equilibrium between political and religious influences. This balance is deemed paramount due to the nation's complex political past, characterized by prolonged bouts of civil conflict. Altering these legal statutes could

potentially disrupt this delicate equilibrium of power (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Moreover, while there is freedom of religion in Lebanon, and people can have diverse religious and spiritual orientations, the major religions continue to have a lot of influence on the organization of social and family life, due to their, as Bartelink and Le Roux (2018) call it, religio-legal positioning in the Lebanese state.

Dealing with diversity, whether it refers to religious diversity or gender diversity, can be challenging in all kinds of nation states (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). In postcolonial societies, addressing these contentions becomes notably intricate, given the intertwining legacies of cultural interchange with colonial powers and the legacies of liberation movements (Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2013; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Within the Lebanese context, the management of these complexities during the colonial era resulted, as discussed, in the allocation of property rights to the purview of the (secular) state, while family affairs were relegated to religious governance (Scott 2018; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Moreover, family law became closely linked to tradition, with a strong association with women's rights and safeguarding the identity of the colonized population.

As per Mahmood's analysis (2012), the simultaneous relegation of religion, sexuality, and family matters to the private domain has interconnected their regulatory trajectories. This intertwining has culminated in conflicts surrounding religion often transpiring within the context of gender and sexuality. It is evident that disparities tied to religion tend to converge on gender and sexuality issues, as this domain constitutes the realm where secular modernity has permitted religion to exert influence and control.

However, and as addressed briefly in the first chapter, it was anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2012) who countered the prevailing misconception that it is solely the religious influence on family law within the Middle East that underpins the widespread gender inequality observed in the region. While religion undoubtedly constructs and legitimizes the disparity between women and men in the Middle East, Mahmood contends that secularism also contributes to this gender inequality. The governance of gender dynamics by religious principles in Lebanon has been profoundly shaped by the organizational structure introduced during the colonial era to establish nation-states. These newly formed states have perpetuated a strict partition between the public and private domains, a legacy inherited from colonial powers. This division places family law, a private matter, under religious authority (Mahmood 2012; Scott 2018; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018).

For instance, while there are variations in the legal and societal structures governing marriage and family matters, there are marked resemblances in how colonial rule led to

heightened regulation of marriage practices throughout the Middle East and the broader Arab region (Joseph 2018; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Under colonial influence, Islamic marriage contracts in the Middle East adopted forms that further disadvantaged women. In Lebanon, the codification of laws significantly curtailed the scope for negotiation in family-related concerns, especially when compared to the Ottoman era. This rendered interreligious marriages nearly impossible without one of the spouses converting (Joseph 1999; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Illustrations from Jordan, Morocco, and other nations displayed mounting legal inequalities between genders during colonial rule, which persisted as foundational elements within these states' judicial structures post-independence (Scott 2018; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018).

Regarding the status of transgender individuals in the Lebanese context from a decolonizing perspective, there is less literature. The in chapter one described structures that created and upheld a binary view on gender can be applied in a broader setting, therewith also referring to the Lebanese context. However, it is at least known that in ancient Middle Eastern cultures, such as Mesopotamian, Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Akkadian cultures, there is historical evidence of a male-to-female priesthood, which was sacred and given reverence (Wick 2022). Furthermore, the Global Interfaith Network for People of all Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions (GIN-SSOGIE) published a report in 2023 in which they write the following:

“Firstly, lands and resources were appropriated, and British or French occupying forces ostensibly maintained the peace but retained all political power. They then created artificial nations with artificial borders on their way out that suddenly forced people who had no kinship to one another to operate as a single nation, such as in Iraq and Lebanon. Those conditions prepared a ground ripe for dictatorships to form, to suppress populations. In the event where the people did succeed in creating a democracy, it would be destroyed, and dictators installed if the democracy did not align with the interests of imperialist nations. Dr. Habib then introduced some history around sexual and gender diversity in the region. At the height of Arab civilization, which was often referred to as the Islamic Golden Age, gender and sexual variance was a widely observed and recorded phenomenon.”

In addition, Massad (2015), although not specifically referring to transgender individuals but to LGBT+ individuals, wrote that these identities cannot be easily imported into Arab societies, since the binary gender system and heteronormative sexuality is the product of Western modernity and does not belong to precolonial Arab culture.

Furthermore, Kurdi (2021) write that sectarianism in Lebanon has had an ambivalent



impact on societal and political attitudes concerning sexual and gender nonconformity, exhibiting both facilitating and impeding effects on acceptance. On one hand, the official state doctrine promoting social and religious diversity, along with pluralism and the rights of minorities, theoretically lays the groundwork for embracing other variations of social diversity, such as sexual and gender nonconformity. This is somewhat attributed to the way communities and urban spaces are structured, allowing for the emergence of isolated pockets of diverse attitudes. Yet, the grip of sectarianism solidifies the influence of religion and religious leaders within the political framework. Moreover, the ongoing political unease surrounding the composition of the population reinforces traditional patriarchal norms and policies, which are seen as conflicting with the notion of tolerance towards sexual and gender nonconformity. According to Kurdi (2021) it is predominantly religious leaders—both from the Muslim and Christian communities—that vocally oppose sexual and gender nonconformity. The notions above are also prevalent in the work of Makarem (2011), who writes the following:

“In Lebanon, the identity of the emerging middle class at the end of the nineteenth century was formed by two apparently contradicting currents: on one hand, the remnants of the feudal/religious order, and, on the other hand, a new emerging identity that comes with the modern state, based on capitalist notions of nuclear family, upward social mobility, and proscribed gender roles. The same period also saw the gradual disappearance of homoerotic poetry that was prevalent during the rule of the Islamic empires (Makarem 2011).”

Moreover, following the same logic as relating to the binary gender system in which the position of women became framed by religion and secularism as a result of French colonial endeavors, one can argue that the criminalization and the legal status of transgender individuals is a result of the same logic. It also opens up the debate on the additional dimension of the coloniality of gender resulting in a strict binary definition of the concept as a result of colonialism. Therewith, it not only challenges patriarchal structures as such, but heteronormative structures as well, being an additional layer to challenge within patriarchy.

This chapter explored the history of Lebanon and its political make up as a result of colonialism. It furthermore discussed the histories of gender and religion in the country, their intertwining, the relation to coloniality, and, therewith, patriarchal systems of oppression. In the next chapters, the ways of decolonizing these oppressive structures will be dealt with in the context of two different organizations and two different approaches.

### **3. Challenging patriarchy: ABAAD**

The aims of this chapter are to explore how ABAAD navigates gender and religion in the Lebanese context by challenging the colonial embeddedness of the patriarchal system. It will commence with a background on ABAAD. Subsequently, it will discuss ABAAD's approaches to gender and religion. Lastly, it will address how ABAAD challenges patriarchy through its approaches and programs.

#### *3.1 Background*

ABAAD is a non-profit, non-governmental organization with no political or religious affiliations, dedicated to advancing equality, safeguarding rights, and empowering marginalized groups, particularly women (Bartelink et al. 2017). Founded in 2011, the organization was granted special consultative status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2016 (Bartelink et al. 2017). ABAAD's primary objective centers on fostering sustainable social and economic development in the Middle East and North Africa region. This is accomplished through initiatives that prioritize equality, protection, and the empowerment of marginalized groups, with a special focus on women. ABAAD's overarching vision envisions a society where "men and women live as equitable partners," and women are actively empowered to engage in democratic processes that shape both their lives and communities. In their Vision Statement of 2018, ABAAD writes that their perspective, the transformation of gender dynamics, stands as a pivotal facet of broader societal transformation (Vision Statement 2018; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018).

They furthermore write that a central element in their mission is the recognition of both men and women, with a call for engagement with both genders to establish a society devoid of dominant masculinities, violence against women, and discrimination (Vision Statement 2018; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). ABAAD's workforce comprises human rights advocates, legal experts, field specialists, social workers, and researchers, all working in unison to actualize their vision. Although intentionally positioned beyond religious divisions, ABAAD has effectively emerged as a significant and respected player within Lebanon's civil society landscape, specifically in matters related to gender. Their prominence is accentuated by their co-chairmanship of the Task Force on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Lebanon since 2012 (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). This collaboration extends to working alongside the Ministry of Social Affairs, indicative of their active involvement (ABAAD Annual Report: Advocacy and Policy Development 2015). Moreover, ABAAD's engagement

encompasses a wide spectrum of actors, often with varying interests, including the feminist movement, political figures, and religious leaders (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018).

### *3.2 ABAAD's positioning regarding gender and religion*

ABAAD's work is, as discussed above, targeting the improvement of gender equality, and the protection and empowerment of marginalized groups (ABAAD, 2023). In order to do so, ABAAD applies a multi-level strategic approach in its programming that includes elements that challenge patriarchy, which will be elaborated on in the next section. However, in the section above on background, one can read that ABAAD's overarching vision on society is one in which "men and women live as equitable partners," and women are actively empowered to engage in democratic processes that shape both their lives and communities. This approach seems to suggest a binary gender approach. In order to get an exact understanding of ABAAD's explanation of Gender, one of the founders and directors of ABAAD, was willing to cooperate in this research and was interviewed on these matters. The question: "How do you envision gender and gender equality? What do gender and gender equality mean for ABAAD?" was answered as follows:

Well, it means [...] equal positions between men and women, equal access to resources and opportunities. At the same time, women and men can enjoy, like, fair treatment and more justice and actual implementation of this in the system. (Aisha, personal communication, 2018).

Furthermore, in the section 'Our Vision' on ABAAD's website (2023), there are five points that the organization bring to the fore. These five points are:

- Men and women live as equitable partners and work together to secure better lives for their future and the future of the societies they live in.
- Women are effectively empowered and participate in democratic processes that affect their lives and their communities.
- Men are willingly and effectively engaged in working towards achieving an equitable society free of hegemonic masculinities and the different types of violence against women.
- Women have fair access to the economic assets and the natural resources within their communities.
- Women live in freedom, dignity, and inner peace without facing discrimination.

The above can, since only men and women are addressed, as a binary approach on gender equality since the absence of transgender or a broader approach to sexualities is apparent in the formulations on ABAAD's website. ABAAD's director, however, also mentioned the following:

We have a very inclusive approach in supporting anybody that is affected by GBV, but, regardless of ethnicity, religiosity, confessional background, educational background, nationality, gender identity, we always take this concept forward by talking about gender and sexual identity (Aisha, personal communication, 2018).

Throughout the interviews with the director of the masculinities program of ABAAD and the founder and director of ABAAD this is the only entry of a broader approach on gender. Furthermore, on the website, while referring to gender equality, this seems to encompass solely the position of women.

ABAAD's view on religion is formed by a systemic approach in relation to their goals to achieve more gender equality as well as pragmatic approaches to achieved discussed goals. Bartelink and Le Roux (2018) further mention a 'transformational approach'. In relation to this research, this means that it is based on challenging the colonial structures that contribute to the reasons of inequality and at the same time it means that practicalities cannot be overlooked. The relation of patriarchy as a colonial system of oppression and religion is pointed out by the means of a quote of a employee of ABAAD in Bartelink et al. (2017):

... if you want to understand the Lebanese context as such, you can see it like a triangle. Where one point is patriarchy, another one we call it politics, and the third one is religion. And it is the interaction of these three points that is at the core in gender inequalities dynamics in the country (Yasmine, in Bartelink et al. 2017).

The entanglement of religion and politics is further elaborated on by the masculinities director of ABAAD:

And then, there's a lot of mixing of church and state within the Lebanese context and that naturally also makes it a much more difficult situation to differentiate between where religion is coming in and where maybe politics are coming in. A lot if not most of the highest-ranking religious leaders will be within the field of politics or will be give very strong opinions about political leaders and political parties within Lebanon, obviously which has a huge influence. (Samir, personal communication, 2017).

In addition to the power distributions in Lebanon in which religion plays a pivotal role, there is the part religion plays in socialization processes. It is the importance religion plays in socialization process and power distributions, largely created by the colonial endeavors surrounding secularism and the resulted shift of the personal sphere under religious authority that was described in previous chapters, and enabling patriarchy as a system of oppression that shapes ABAAD's approach on religion. This is further explained by the quotes below:

So those religious courts are obviously dictated by religious leaders in the country and when we talk about a lot of issues when it comes to domestic issues, violence, again inheritance rights or how easy it could be to get out of a marriage, the acknowledgement of issues such as marital rape, all of these become religious issues that have an effect on these Personal Status Laws that dictate the lives of all the citizens of Lebanon. Religious leaders have a huge impact and effect on issues of gender, gender-equality in the country. (Samir, personal communication, 2017).

And these influencers (religious leaders, political parties), whether we want it or not, they contribute to socialization, they contribute largely in shaping social norms. And having said that, it's key that, in the sense of, its important to neutralize them as opposers if you want to drive any strategy of change. Hence, for us, this approach is one of the strategies or tactics that we use in working on the social replanning of it. We do believe that, if you do this kind of collaboration, it can help a lot and we're actually able to achieve goals. (Aisha, personal communication, 2018).

Furthermore, and complementing the aforementioned structuring of religion within the patriarchal system, Bartelink et al. (2017) note that, in their case study on ABAAD, the participants in the interviews see religious leaders and religious communities' patriarchal views as a result from broader, patriarchal societal structures. The relation between religion and patriarchy is explained by participants by referring to a study conducted by the American University of Beirut, arguing that religion is not a significant obstacle to gender equality (El-Hage 2015; Bartelink et al. 2017). They furthermore argue that religious discourse is used to legitimize patriarchal cultural practices, while the most important obstacle to gender equality is the socialization of people, by society, into different gendered roles reflecting both quotes above (Bartelink et al. 2017). Moreover, ABAAD's founder and director described patriarchy as a system in which both men and women bear responsibilities for change:

So, talking about patriarchy in Lebanon, I have to say it's a vicious cycle that both men and women are contributing to. In the sense that the mother is raising kids in a certain way, it's an intergenerational process of values and norms that is also interacting with siblings, others, and then when you grow up as a citizen you recreate them with your partner until reaching the labourmarket. By the end of the day, it's the misuse of power in certain positions that put others in subordination. And this can be done by men towards women, and it's sometimes done by women towards women. Some women can be more patriarchal than some men by the end of the day as well. So, patriarchy is a way of thinking. It's an attitude that is transformed into practices that can be addressed only by shifting and addressing the socialization process. And that has to be done with women too. Not only with men. (Aisha, personal communication, 2018).

The above is in line with the findings of Bartelink and Le Roux (2018), who write that ABAAD challenges binaries as part of their approach that seeks to transform the structures of patriarchy. They argue that, in their work with men, 'ABAAD aims to move past the male/female binary. For example, in its GBV work men are not seen simply and solely as perpetrators, but (like women) as products of patriarchal structures that legitimizes violent relationships. However, the use of the word binary as explained by Bartelink and Le Roux (2018) could, in the context of this study, lead to misconceptions. The National Center for Transgender Equality (2023) argue that it is moving beyond these categories of women and men that leads to challenging binaries.

However, following Lugones' (2007; 2013) and Icaza and Vazquez' (2016) reasoning on patriarchy, it is this system of oppression, with a subordinate position of women within it, that is one of the two pillars of the coloniality of gender, the other being heteronormativity. ABAAD challenges patriarchy in their approaches to gender equality, which can be understood in the context of their approaches to gender and religion that has been discussed above. The analysis of ABAAD's ways of challenging patriarchy follows in the section below.

### *3.3 Challenging patriarchy in practical terms*

ABAAD has several strategies in order to challenge patriarchy, and therewith the gendered roles that are a result of it. Bartelink and Le Roux (2018) identified three approaches of gender activism by ABAAD. These include the support and empowerment for survivors from GBV (1), legal activism and advocacy (2), and changing social structures through engagement

with men, including religious leaders (3). Especially the latter two seem to challenge the oppressive system of patriarchy and are therefore analyzed in detail below.

Changing social structures through engagement with men is done through various programs. An example of one of these programs is the MenEngage Network of which ABAAD is a member. The MenEngage Network works on understanding how patriarchal masculinities maintain and deepen injustices and through this understanding they seek to identify ways of challenging and transforming them. In practical sense, for ABAAD this meant organizing a cycle of trainings on gender, masculinities, and engaging men in work on ending violence against women. ABAAD's masculinities director explains this approach below:

But we believe, that it's only by reaching out to men and letting them know about patriarchy and letting them know about gender equality and letting them know how we can be allies for development and peace through equality, that men are no longer seen as the problem "they become allies to demolish the real problem, which is patriarchy". (Samir, personal communication, 2017).

More so, these processes led to the conclusion, formulated by the religious leaders, that societal systems impose traditional and patriarchal social norms in the name of religion (MenEngage Network 2016; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018)).

Furthermore, ABAAD organized 'Dialogues with Religious Leaders to end GBV in the MENA region.' The dialogue sessions included religious leaders as well as representatives from the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue, the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women, independent researchers, lawyers, and delegates from other civil society and feminist organizations (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). ABAAD uses a constructive approach regarding the involvement of religious leaders in their campaigns. This is to ensure that dialogue is at least maintained regarding issues where agreement is not yet found. ABAAD's approach has led to the formation of roundtables with religious leaders as part of a continual strategy to keep up dialogue with them. The masculinities director of ABAAD explains how ABAAD engages with religious leaders as follows:

And so, we made our campaign on working with religious leaders and violence against women. Then, from that, again using that common denominator, that platform of we have worked together, we are interested in working more with you, we set the ground for those Roundtables in which we were able to debate a lot of issues that were previously undebatable with religious leaders. They previously would not enter into

discussions with us when we want to take about our different viewpoints on marital rape or our different viewpoints on discriminant inheritance laws, discriminant divorce laws, discriminant any of the topics of those Roundtables. So, for us, it really was a long-term continual strategy trying to engage in very influential men in our culture. Not abandoning our ideals nor giving them full credibility when it came to gender but finding where we did agree and pushing there for policy change which it did facilitate the law on domestic violence greatly by working with these religious leaders and their followers. And then, being able to at least open up dialogue for those issues that we don't agree on. (Samir, personal communication, 2017).

Furthermore, one of the campaigns as a result of these roundtable dialogue was the We Believe Campaign. In the campaign video, religious leaders cite their holy scriptures and speak out against GBV. Further, Bartelink and Le Roux (2018) mention that ABAAD is careful when it comes to the language used when working with religious leaders, aiming to make their advances towards religious leaders as inclusive as possible. The reason for this is that “in the context of postcolonial contestations over gender, religion, and secularism in Lebanon, promoting gender equality is easily framed as a Western imperialist project that runs counter to religious values” (Longman and Bradley 2015; Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). The same was found in a report by the European Commission, called ‘Engaging with Religious Actors on Gender Inequality and Gender-Based Violence, ABAAD writes that some religious leaders have criticized ABAAD’s work as being part of “a Western imperialist project” that counters religious values and promotes Western ideas and power (ABAAD and European Commission 2021). It is the use of careful language, as described above, that keeps dialogue ongoing.

ABAAD runs more programs that aim at involving men and religious leaders in order to challenge patriarchy. The reasoning behind these programs remains the same as the reasoning behind the above-mentioned programs and discussing other projects. Hence, ABAAD’s legal challenges to patriarchy will be discussed below.

An example of ABAAD’s legal challenging of patriarchy is mentioned in the introduction and can be found in its lobbying for the repeal of a law that allowed a man, accused or convicted of rape, to avoid sentencing by marrying his victim. The law was repealed by the Lebanese parliament in August 2017 and the decision to repeal the law – Article 522 of the Lebanese penal code, also known as the ‘rape law’ – followed lobbying from various organizations, among which was ABAAD. Moreover, the campaign was



launched by ABAAD (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Another campaign, targeting gender inequality through the legal system, was called ‘Life for Life,’ and advocates for life-time imprisonment for those who rape a family member (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018).

The chapter above discussed ABAAD’s approaches to challenging the patriarchal system of oppression through gender. It did so by looking at ABAAD’s approaches to gender and religion to create an understanding of how ABAAD envisions the entanglement of gender, religion, and patriarchy. Subsequently, the programs that ABAAD runs to put into practice their ideals on gender equality by challenging the patriarchal system, and the ambiguous role religion plays in it, were analyzed. Although criticism on ABAAD’s approaches to gender can be found, it is nonetheless important to stress the importance of their work in improving the lives of many women in Lebanon. Working in these discourses poses challenges regarding what approaches are most successful and who is to benefit. Furthermore, ABAAD’s existence with its mission to improve gender equality is already challenging patriarchy. Critique addressed by some religious leaders, addressing ABAAD’s work as an ‘Western imperialist project’ should be seen in relation to the coloniality of religion and gender as well. The increase of religious authority over personal matters as a result of secularization as described in chapter one and the fact that religion in postcolonial societies can be more hostile towards contemporary liberal Western perspectives, being, in turn, a reaction to ages of colonialism (Akhavi 2003), contribute to these critiques. The complex interplay of these notions makes it all the more necessary that dialogue is maintained to challenge the colonial structures that are the foundation of both these notions.

Nonetheless, as explained in the first chapter in the last section, the approach towards gender as a fixed binary can lead to difficulties when it comes to the acceptance of non-normative views of gender (Bradley and Kirmani 2015). It is therefore, that a question that remains is how gender in itself is decolonized entirely, meaning, how the heteronormative binary gender system within patriarchy is challenged. One of the organizations that aims to achieve this in the Lebanese context is Helem. The approaches of Helem towards heteronormativity are central in the next chapter.

#### **4. Challenging heteronormativity: Helem**

The aims of this chapter are to explore how Helem navigates gender and religion in the Lebanese context by challenging the colonial embeddedness of the heteronormativity within patriarchy. It is thus an extra layer in the decolonial process of challenging patriarchy. The chapter will commence with a background on Helem. Subsequently, it will discuss Helem's approaches to gender and religion. Finally, it will address how Helem challenges heteronormativity through its approaches and programs.

##### *4.1 Background*

Helem is the first LGBT+ rights organization in the Arab world, officially established in Beirut, Lebanon in 2001. After its inception, there were intense discussions about the strategy and organizational form the movement should take. Some argued for establishing a markedly LGBT+ group, others to keep a broader sexual rights and sexual freedoms approach. There was also a discussion about how much public visibility should be afforded to the organization (Kurdi 2021). Out of these discussions emerged Helem. Helem is an abbreviation of: "Himaya Lubnaniya lil Mithliyeen wal Mithliyat". In Arabic, the name means "Lebanese protection for gays and lesbians," and its acronym means "dream" (Makarem 2011). Its mission is to lead the struggle for the liberation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Intersex, Transgendered, Queer, and other people with non-conforming sexualities and/or gender identities in Lebanon and the MENA region from all sorts of violations of their individual and collective civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights (Helem 2023). The goals to achieve this mission consist of empowering LGBT+ leaders to advocate for their own liberation, to seek to create initiatives and spaces where LGBT+ communities can leverage unity and build power, to support individuals with resources to resist homophobia and transphobia, to establish education programs and community building programs, to mobilize people to change laws, policies, and practices that deny LGBT+ individuals equality and, therewith, reduce their quality of life (Helem 2023).

Membership within the organization is open to anyone who have the time and motivation to contribute to the cause. The team of Helem consists of fifteen activists, with a central core of five individuals primarily engaged in executive and administrative tasks. The legal services component of Helem involves the vigilant monitoring of cases involving individuals who have been arrested due to their sexuality or nonnormative gender identity. This encompasses offering support to transgender people who face recurrent harassment by law enforcement. Helem plays a role in providing the necessary legal support required for

their release. Helem furthermore operates a hotline designed to receive requests for various forms of support. The organization is committed to extending comprehensive assistance in each case. The experiences garnered from these endeavors significantly inform the discussions held during community mobilizing meetings. These meetings serve as a platform for deliberating on organizational activities, on-field interventions, awareness campaigns, and addressing emerging matters within the scope of Helem's work. (Saleh 2015).

#### *4.2 Helem's positioning regarding gender and religion*

Helem is, as discussed above, working to establish forms of equality for LGBT+ individuals in the MENA region, and is foremost active in Lebanon (Helem 2023). In order to create more equality for LGBT+ individuals, Helem applies certain programs that were mentioned above as well. Helem's approach to gender is inherently one that is non-heteronormative, since it is exactly heteronormativity that forms one of the core elements of what Helem is fighting for (Joseph Aoun 2018). The manager of the Helem's safe spaces in 2018 explained gender in the Lebanese context and what gender is for Helem:

Like you have the sexual answers where gender roles are 'coming from' biology, and then they're translated into gender roles. So, people are attached to these roles. So, translating to the Lebanese 'gender' context, it means that the role of a woman is to satisfy the man sexually. This is my interpretation of how it goes. It can also be interpreted in the context of relationships, one is staying at home, cooking, taking care of the children and the house. The opposite is going to work and make money and that sort of stuff, but then, here at Helem, we don't believe in these roles. [...] I believe in a situation in which two people go to work and they have shared and equal responsibility. But then these gender roles they are laid on so many things. Like, this is how I perceive it. With this question you can go to a lot of directions, but this is what I think is most important, the sexual/relationship roles that flow out of gender norms. What is most important is that the man, being the macho man that I described earlier, as a result of the patriarchal system in Lebanon, is always the more important one within gender roles, and that has to be challenged. (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018).

Another participant expressed how non-normative gender is stigmatized in Lebanese society and what this stigmatization leads to:

There is a lot of stigma around it. Also the trans community. I mean, the stories about trans people who are standing in the streets waiting for a cab and then get arrested... Because cops or undercover cops assume that they are standing in the streets scouting for clients, as sex workers. But they are just standing there waiting for a cab. But it's the stigma what makes people think that they are standing there and looking for a client to make some money. So, these are issues that we have seen in the past couple of years. And then you ask the internal security forces what the logic is behind it, or why they are arresting people from the trans community and you try to explain the whole situation. Their response is: yes, but they can find a normal job, no? But the problem is: they can't find a normal job because you won't hire them. Because no one will hire them. And they need to survive. (Saba, personal communication, 2018).

That transgender individuals are stigmatized is also explained by Safdar (2016). She writes that social stigma is rife and that it is coupled with high levels of family rejection. Many transgender individuals in Lebanon suffer from feelings of abandonment, isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Safdar 2016). Moreover, a spokesperson from Helem, Tarek Zeidan, expressed in Safdar's article that the whole system in Lebanon is set up based on a binary gender system, which poses severe problems for transgender individuals.

Helem's view on religion follows a decolonial approach as well. It largely follows the ideas on the coloniality of religion in the first chapter. In interviews, the idea that Western secularization processes increased religious power over personal matters, was mentioned. The quote below addresses these issues:

I think, first of all, the Western/Christian culture and secularism has imposed more oppression in the region than existed before. It shifted power of personal issues entirely to religious sects. I mean; it doesn't mean that in Lebanon, or in the region, there was no patriarchy. There was, for sure. However, there was more acceptance to 'open sexuality', outside the heteronormative norms, than now, especially that it wasn't categorized as being gay or trans or whatever. It was, even if you go to rural areas in Lebanon nowadays, there are those people who sleep with men and everybody knows these people sleep with each other. And nobody aggresses them. But then, it's not accepted totally, but then at least it's tolerated. (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018).

The quote above furthermore mentions that patriarchy already existed in the region before Western colonial rule. That raises questions on what the decoloniality of gender and religion

for Lebanon actually means and to what extent patriarchy and heteronormativity have to be challenged. It was explained in the interviews that, although the existence of patriarchal structures was existent, there was more acceptance for non-heteronormative norms, as addressed in the quote above as well. Examples of this were also mentioned in the interview with the safe spaces manager of Helem:

For example, Shiites are known to be the most liberated people sexually. For example, they created a type of marriage, which was called the 'pleasure marriage', I don't know whether you've heard of it, so it's basically kind of a contract, where a man, who dates a woman, goes into a momentary marriage, like, it's specific by time and the amount of offerings, and then within that marriage, it's allowed for you to have sex with a man or trans man or woman. They kind of institutionalised sex. (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018).

One, there is nothing in the constitution that is against non-normative sexualities for example. Two, and the criminal code, which is inspired by the French mandate, so before the French came, non-normative sexualities were decriminalised by the Ottoman Empire, in 1858, which is more than a hundred years before Europe. And then the mandates and the occupation or the colonial powers came to recriminalize non-normative sexualities. And, so, the legal, the criminal code is inspired by the French penal code of the third French republic. Now, they're in the fifth, going into the sixth, but us, we're stuck with it, along with other countries who have the same penal code, you know. (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018).

When it comes to decoloniality, it might be these structures that have to be addressed again in order to open up a new conversation about LGBT+ rights (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018). Interestingly, Helem says to be working from a Human Rights perspective, which, according to Maldonado-Torres (2017) is another form of coloniality of power. There have been extensive academic discussions on whether the incorporation of Western ideas on LGBT+ rights can cause backlashes regarding the initial goals of a LGBT+ movement in previously colonized regions (Kurdi 2021). Massad (2002), for example, writes that when international human rights are applied in the MENA region, they not only fail to resonate with local populations, but also risk harming the groups they claim to protect, since a likely response is more state- and religious oppression. In line with this is what the safe spaces manager of Helem brought up, in relation to challenging existing structures and doing so in a Western narrative:

So, when things are not defined, the reaction of the society can be less aggressive. When things are defined, the society might act in a more aggressive way. This is what I'm saying. Like, in Beirut, when they categorize you as a gay person, even if they accept you, they're categorizing you aggressively. (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018).

It is therefore that Helem's navigating on these issues is a difficult issue. Kurdi (2021) argues that Helem, rather than being "a catalyst of imperial and Western intervention" should be better understood as a space where "contentious and contradictory hedging of dominant power structures" take place. Moreover, Kurdi (2021) mentions that "when analyzing the relationship and exchanges between Western and non-Western (with particular reference here to the Lebanese context) social movements aiming at improving the situation of sexual and gender nonconforming people, we cannot simply depart from a unitary, coherent Western model of gender and sexuality, and consequently a unitary, coherent Western model of LGBT+ organizing. It is not only the East that is much more diverse than the orientalist gaze allows it to appear, but so is the West. When contemporary activists in non-Western contexts look for inspiration to 'Western' activism they find a wide variety of models coalesced in space and time." Nonetheless, the more socially accepted non-normative approach on gender and its prevalence in current Western societies provides LGBT+ organizations more often than not with questions relating these challenges (Massad 2002). Furthermore, within this wide variety of models the power structures within Western societies and over marginalized people within the Western context is also addressed, usually following a Foucauldian approach (Brigg 2002). However, the existence of a dominant Western model of challenging heteronormative structures means that local LGBT+ organizations have to deviate from or translate, negotiate, and appropriate in order to make their forms of activism fit the local context (Kurdi 2021).

It is against the background of this positioning of Helem in the field of international development and their approaches to gender and religion and their contestation that Helem's work on challenging the colonial structure of heteronormativity can be best understood. In the next section, Helem's ways of doing so in practical terms will be further elaborated on.

#### *4.3 Challenging heteronormativity in practical terms*

In a practical sense, Helem has done extensive work relating to the removal of anti-LGBT+ articles from the Lebanese penal code, including the articles 534, 531, 532, 533, 521 and 526. According to the organization, these articles were designed to criminalize and control

sexuality and gender, especially non-normative genders (Helem 2023). Helem's work on decriminalization revolves around advocating with state and non-state institutions, human rights violations documentation, and research on the cost and harm produced by maintaining these laws and other related government policies and procedures (Helem 2023). Furthermore, Helem aims to create and expand a network of lawyers and paralegals who are able to advocate with and on behalf of detained queer individuals using the model defence against, among others, article 534, that was developed by the organization (Helem 2023). Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, adopted in 1943 during the period of the French mandate, penalizes "any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" with up to one-year imprisonment. This provision has been used against both men that have sexual relations against men, as well as transgender women (Kurdi 2021). Furthermore, it is the "Incitement to immorality" and "breach of public morality" laws in Lebanon, which include article 526 of the penal code, which prohibits "inciting people to immorality," and articles 531 and 532, which criminalize undefined "violation of public morality" that criminalize transgender people. However, in an article by Safdar (2016), as mentioned in the introduction, Helem's spokesperson Tarek Zeidan mentioned he was proud that Helem's advocacy so far led to a landmark ruling of one of the religious courts in Lebanon in favour of a transgender man. The Judge confirmed the right of a transgender man to change his official papers.

Nonetheless, Helem addressed that the need for advocacy and legal support is far from over since transgender people are still prosecuted and, besides outright prosecution, the police also use harassment, arbitrary detention, torture, and blackmail against people with a non-normative gender identity (Kurdi 2021). The laws are, however, enforced selectively, the police are more likely to target gay men and transgender persons with a lower class or refugee background (Kurdi 2021).

Furthermore, in cooperation with AFE, another LGBT+ rights organization in Lebanon, Helem set up a database with open access to the opinions of political leaders regarding LGBT+ matters. In an interview with one of the legal support employees of Helem, who also worked for AFE, the dynamics that the database resulted in were explained as follows:

A few months ago, there were Lebanese elections. So basically, what we did, we produced a page on our websites, where we kind of interviewed candidates as we could. We got into contact with their spokesperson, or we emailed them or through an app where you could ask them questions. So, we collected information, through their

campaigns on their views when it comes to LGBT communities. So, the questions we asked them mostly had to do with body rights, whether they were for or against decriminalizing 534, and then with all this information we created a page where you could find information on the candidates and their views that are interested to us. So, it helped our public to decide who to vote for. As a person that belongs to the LGBTQ community [...] So throughout that process it was quite intense because what was happening is, every time we would update this page, the candidates we comment and say: “no no no, I’m with you”. Because they were worried about their number of votes. [...] This is a way for us to document, so in the next couple of months, when we are thinking of policy reforms, we can actually approach them and say: “hey, do you remember when you said you were with us, here is the prove, here is the text message, or email, and we can hold it against them in a sense.” I have to say, this is probably one of the smartest things we have done so far. And it took a lot of work because we approached more than 700 candidates. [...] It gave us a better idea of how to approach these parties and candidates in the next couple of years. And it also created a conversation. And that is what we wanted. (Saba, personal communication, 2018).

The interviewee also addressed that religious leaders were usually against anything that has to do with non-normative sexual behaviour or non-normative gender identities. On the other hand, the safe spaces manager of Helem addressed that, where possible, Helem does work with religious leaders. During on of the interviews the following was mentioned:

Do you think Helem will be able to find religious leaders to work with?

They did already. But the thing is, those leaders that are on our side, are not as vocal as hateful individuals or hateful religious practitioners.

Can you expand just a little bit more on this?

For example, there was a guy, a priest, who was working on sexual health with us. To create more awareness on sexual health, including the use of a broader definition of gender in his approach. He did this also towards the ministry of health. You always have these people. I remember there was this gay bar being closed by the municipality. And this priest, told the municipality they were obstructing his fight for religious modernity. And there are more examples of this. But they cannot really interfere. It’s also hard for them. And then there is the Helem advocacy program that schedules to



have meetings with religious leaders and politicians. (Joseph Aoun, personal communication, 2018).

Unfortunately, no up to date data was available on whether these meetings were a success and what they resulted in. However, Helem's willingness to challenge heteronormativity through engagement with religious leaders is evident. Furthermore, it is, as discussed above, Helem's very existence, its various programs and its operations regarding legal procedures that challenges heteronormativity.

Criticism on Helem's approach to heteronormativity can be found in Saleh's article (2015) on Helem. Where ABAAD seems to work with a binary gender approach, Helem, in the first years of the 2010's was criticized for its low number of women oriented and women-led activities and the limited representation of women in its decision-making positions resulting in a patriarchal structure within the organization (Benoist 2014; Saleh 2015). The debate resulted in a reflection process and attempted restructuring of the organization that led to changes, based in GAD paradigms, including a commitment to incorporate more feminist politics in the organization's political work and the appointment of cisgender women as executive directors in 2014 and 2015.

As is the case with ABAAD, although criticism on approaches can be found, it is important to stress the importance of Helem's work in improving the lives of many LGBT+ individuals. Moreover, as the ABAAD case also demonstrated, working in these discourses poses challenges regarding what approaches are most successful. Furthermore, Helem's existence with its mission to improve gender equality is already challenging patriarchy and heteronormativity per se.

In short, the chapter above discussed Helem's approaches to challenging heteronormativity as a layer of the patriarchal system of oppression through gender. It did so by looking at Helem's approaches to gender and religion to create an understanding of how Helem envisions the entanglement of gender, religion, and patriarchy and heteronormativity therein. Subsequently, the programs that Helem runs to put into practice their ideals on gender equality by challenging heteronormativity within the patriarchal system, and the ambiguous role religion plays in it, were analyzed.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, this master's thesis embarked on a critical journey to decolonize deeply entrenched intersections of gender and religion within the Lebanese context, employing a case study approach centered around the transformative work of ABAAD and Helem. The multifaceted analysis delved into the endeavors of these two organizations, each challenging distinct yet interconnected dimensions of patriarchy, and collectively seeking to pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

The study revealed the intricate interplay between colonial legacies, religious ideologies, and gendered norms, which have perpetuated systems of oppression and exclusion. It did so by introducing the concepts and conceptual debates that revolve around coloniality, gender, religion, and the interplay of these concepts in the field of development. Furthermore, it provided an understanding of the background of Lebanon and how gender, religion, and the coloniality of these can be found in this context in order to position ABAAD and Helem therein.

ABAAD's efforts to challenge patriarchal structures by empowering women and dismantling discriminatory legal frameworks underscored the potential for reform within the religious and legal spheres. Simultaneously, Helem's unyielding commitment to challenging heteronormativity within the confines of patriarchy illuminated the intricate ways in which gender and sexuality are co-opted by societal norms, often perpetuated by religious institutions. ABAAD and Helem demonstrated the importance of their efforts to dismantle oppressive systems by acknowledging and amplifying marginalized voices under these systems.

Moreover, the challenges that ABAAD and Helem face are emblematic of the broader struggles within Lebanese society. The complex interplay of religion and politics necessitates sustained efforts for lasting change. The thesis underscores that the work of decolonization is ongoing, requiring continual dialogue and engagement with diverse stakeholders, including religious leaders, policymakers, and communities.

In a world characterized by globalization and the continuous prevalence of oppressive colonial structures, the implications of this research extend beyond Lebanon's borders. The lessons drawn from the experiences of ABAAD and Helem offer insights for activists, scholars, and policymakers seeking to address the entanglement of gender, religion, and their coloniality in various contexts.

In conclusion, this master's thesis not only shed light on the urgent need to decolonize

gender and religion in the Lebanese context but also highlighted the transformative potential of initiatives like ABAAD and Helem. By challenging patriarchal norms and heteronormativity, these organizations help to inspire to envision a future where identities are embraced, justice is inclusive, and collective liberation is celebrated. The journey towards decolonization is marked by challenges and complexities, yet the efforts by ABAAD and Helem to do so can help to remind that the pursuit of equality is a path worth traveling.

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