

Vitality in Work: Stories from Ras Beirut

Lives and Livelihoods in
Turbulent Times
Working Paper Series (Vol. 3)

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Edited with a foreword by
Nikolay Mintchev,
Mariam Daher,
and Mayssa Jallad

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Lives and Livelihoods in Turbulent Times

By Nikolay Mintchev, Mariam Daher and Mayssa Jallad

FOREWORD

This third paper in the *Lives and Livelihoods in Turbulent Times* series is a photo essay by the Al'an project (Lara Sabra and Nessim Stevenson) that tells the story of three Ras Beirut residents. The first and second papers in the series (by Rahaf Zaher and Zainab Alawieh respectively) both highlighted the struggles that people face and the coping strategies that they use to obtain a livelihood at a time of economic collapse. The present paper continues with the theme of crisis, but it brings to the foreground the acts of loving, living, and expressing one's sense of self through work. All three participants in the study connect their crafts to something much larger than the craft itself – attachment and belonging to a place, being part of a tradition and a community, being the author of one's life story. Here, in the stories told by the three participants, tradition meets agency. There is a clear sense that the stories that people tell about fishing, pigeon fancying and sewing, all have a grounding in personal histories, as well as larger family and community histories. Yet at the same time these stories are also expressions of independence and of creating and maintaining one's place in the world.

The world is changing, however, and so are people's opportunities to maintain their livelihoods. A good quality livelihood is not just about earning money but also about having meaning in life, and in Ras Beirut both of these things are currently in decline, one because of the dire economic crisis, the other because of investments in unaffordable residential high-rises and infrastructural developments that are pushing people out of their neighbourhoods. Needless to say, the economic crisis and the massive wealth inequality that is so prevalent in Beirut are not unrelated; they are two sides of the same problem and any significant change in a positive direction requires both sound economic recovery policies, and resistance to elite wealth capture and profit-driven investments. Most people would agree that economic recovery would be meaningless for the public unless it can create good quality jobs and give people the opportunity to earn a decent living. But what exactly is a good job, and what does flourishing

through one's work look like? The stories presented in this paper offer an important point of departure for answering this question. They do not provide a full answer because no matter what recovery looks like, the new jobs that will be created will not necessarily be the jobs of fishermen, pigeon fanciers and seamstresses – at least not on any significant scale. What we do learn from this study, however, is that a good quality livelihood is one that creates meaning and autonomy, while fostering a sense of belonging and community. These experiences do not need to be grounded in long local histories in the way that they are grounded for the residents whose stories are presented here; people often move, re-settle, and move again, and there are many ways through which they form new attachments even when they are on the move. But whether grounded in tradition or not, meaning, autonomy, and sociality have to be kept at the centre of any vision of economic recovery and future economic justice. Restoring the value of the currency and resuming economic growth are both crucially important for Lebanon at the moment, but unless they translate into meaningful work with fair pay and good working conditions, their promise to benefit the larger public, rather than a small group of financial and political elites, will continue to ring hollow in the future to come.





Vitality in Work: Stories from Ras Beirut

Texts by Lara Sabra - Photos by Nessim
Stevenson

INTRODUCTION

Ras Beirut Al'an is a visual research project of intangible heritage practices in Ras Beirut, Lebanon. Over the past few months, we have been employing multiple research tools to fulfill our objective of capturing and archiving the practices, encounters, and spaces that make up the life of the city as we know it amid collapse.

To do this, we have conducted recorded interviews with Adnan al Oud, a fisherman in Ayn el Mreisseh, Mohammad "Abu Mostafa" Itani, a pigeon-fancier in Dalieh, and Feryal, a seamstress in Hamra. Engaging with these individuals has taught us about the way in which livelihood practices – like fishing – intersect with the intangible heritage and collective memory of Beirut. These interviews have also led us to consider how political structures and economic collapse could threaten these practices, disappearing the city as we have come to know it.

Adnan, the fisherman – Ayn el Mreisseh – April 2021

Fishing: a dying livelihood in a coastal city



Adnan, a fisherman, out on his boat in the early hours of the morning outside the port of Ayn el Mreisseh

“A long time ago, a boat that carried nuns sank in the sea. A lucky nun survived and managed to swim safely to the shore. She stayed next to the water spring in the neighborhood and lit candles to thank God for saving her life. The curious children of the fishermen who lived around the spring came to see the nun. She taught them reading and writing. To express their appreciation, the fishermen built the nun a room next to the spring and gave her the title of Rayseh [female chief of the fishermen]. Since then, the neighborhood came to be called Ayn el-Mreisseh, or “the spring of the fisherwoman chief.”

– Aseel Sawalha, *Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City*

On April 21, Nessim and I went to the port of Ayn el Mreisseh to interview Adnan al Oud, a fisherman. It was a clear morning, and the weather was warm. The streets were mostly empty and peaceful, save for a crowd of stray cats eating from food left for them on the corner of the street. We walked towards the main street of Dar el Mreisseh to get to the port: it was a mostly quiet residential neighborhood. There was a narrow staircase leading from the street to the port below, with an open metal gate. We went down the stairs and found that the port was quiet with only a couple of fishermen sitting on plastic chairs in a corner. Adnan greeted us and we sat on plastic chairs near some boats and on top of several fishing nets that were strewn on the ground.

Our interview with Adnan lasted almost two hours, and he told us several stories of his fishing experiences and his relationship to the sea. The interview took on the genre of a life history interview, with Adnan explaining to us the origin of his bond to the sea and how he took on the vocation of fishing. As he spoke to us about his own life growing up in Ayn el Mreisseh, he drew a history of the space and the neighborhood. Also, Adnan’s interview revealed the ways in which the economic and political conditions

heavily impact the natural environment and the livelihoods that are connected to our environment. Beirut, as a coastal city, has long been home to a fisherman community. But this community has been threatened by the appropriation of coastal land by private companies. Anthropologist Aseel Sawalha writes about this in her book *Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar City*:

Until 1995, there were around fifty fishing boats operating out of the local fishing port. Each boat provided work for three or four fishermen, who in turn supported 150-200 families. The number of fishermen dropped from eighty to forty after the port was appropriated by two private investors to construct the Dreams Building, a thirty-floor luxury residential tower. In response, the fishermen fought to preserve their right to fish from the port and relied heavily on their long history in the area. They proudly talked about their success in an earlier struggle against the municipal effort to build a highway and shut down the port.¹ (Sawalha, 2010: 70)

Adnan's interview further uncovered how fishing is a livelihood that, while being an inherent part of Beirut's history and heritage, is slowly diminishing. It revealed the strong and intense tie that some urban inhabitants have to the sea in Beirut. This points to the connection between livelihoods and the natural environment of the city, and how the destruction of the natural environment has serious consequences on people's ability to make lives.

“The sea is a part of who I am”

I began the interview by asking Adnan to introduce himself and talk a little bit about how he became a fisherman. He said:

“My name is Adnan al Oud, and I am 78 years old. I've been living in Ayn el Mreisseh since I was young. And the same goes for my parents and grandparents before me. From when I was a small kid, my friends and I would go down to the sea after school and go fishing. It was a hobby. Then when I grew older, I worked as a firefighter in Beirut. During my day off, I would go down to the sea. When I retired from being a firefighter, I went back to the sea and became a fisherman. I was raised beside the sea. Starting with my grandpa, to my dad, to me. This influenced me a lot. Even if it's stormy and it's impossible to go down in a boat, I still need to come and just look at the sea. Because I feel that the sea is my life, it is a part of who I am. So, I can't leave the sea.”



Adnan the fisherman on his boat out at sea in Beirut

¹ Sawalha, Aseel. *Reconstructing Beirut*. University of Texas Press, 2010. Accessed April 23, 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/721876>.

From the beginning of the interview, Adnan reveals how the sea has always been an intrinsic part of his life, even before becoming a fisherman. Fishing began as a hobby for him and a way of interacting with the nature of the city – it began as a way of enjoying his life and then transformed into his livelihood. This showed me how the sea has an important presence in the lives of those who live in Ayn el Mreisseh and Ras Beirut. This becomes more evident when Adnan spoke of his son's relationship to fishing. Adnan told me that he used to take his son fishing with him as a child, "and it just went into his blood. He got attached to the sea. He has another regular job, but after his work, he takes his small boat and goes down to the sea." In this way, fishing is not just "work" or a way to make money. It is a way of being close to the sea and to nature.

Adnan also related to me his memories of the neighborhood and the fisherman community. By doing this, he showed how the sea created neighborly and community bonds.

“In Ayn el Mreisseh, we are united from all sects, we’ve always been like that. And because of that, I love this place. Here in the *mynā*’ [port], we have people from all different backgrounds, and we all love one another.

The area has transformed completely. Until recently, Ayn el Mreisseh wasn't very developed. Once every week, us fishermen would gather with our fish. We would make a fire and cook the fish, without cleaning it or removing the guts. Each person would bring something: lemons, bread, tomatoes, and we would sit and eat together. Those were good days. But the days have changed. We used to see the sun coming up at dawn. Now, all the buildings have covered the sun. Everything changed, the whole world changed.”

In this quote, Adnan begins to discuss the overwhelming transformations that have taken place in Beirut. These transformations include the increased pollution of the sea, the construction of coastal highways and luxury buildings, and the economic collapse. They occurred against the will of the fishermen, destroying the environment, and leading to the diminishment of livelihoods and community bonds.



View of the port of Ayn el Mreisseh from the boat

A dying livelihood

As the interview progressed, it became clear that the fisherman community has faced an onslaught of struggles and tribulations especially in recent years. Most fishermen teach their children how to fish; it is an inherited vocation that is passed on from generation to generation. However, the worsening circumstances render it difficult for people to make their living from fishing. Adnan says:

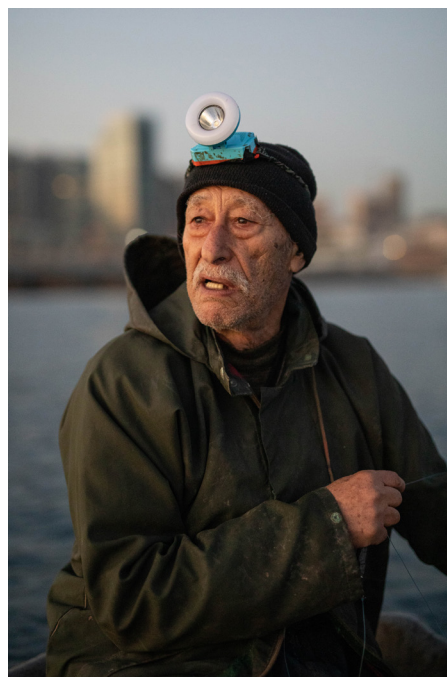
“I tell this to everyone: the sea won’t make you any money. Now it’s dead, there’s nothing there. Because there’s no help or support. Those ministers and *zu’ama* that we have, they do nothing. They promise that they’ll help us before elections, and when they get elected, we never hear from them again. No one looks at us. We organised so many rallies for them here, and they would get us maps, they’d tell us: “we’ll build you the best port.” Nothing, no one did anything.

Things got worse after the economic crisis. The supplies that we need are much more expensive now, like the fishing nets, and the fuel for the boats. So even if you sell the fish, it will barely make enough money to cover the supplies. You need to sell 2-3 kilos of fish to make 300,000 LL and then you can only cover fuel with that. I’m old, so immigration won’t happen for me. I just ask God to stabilize things. If things don’t calm down, we’ll come to worse circumstances, a bigger crisis like the one we went through in the 70s.”

In this interjection, Adnan explains succinctly the continued neglect that the fishermen face, and the direct impact the economic crisis has had on

their lives. The difficulty of making a livelihood from the ancient practice of fishing is worsened by the environmental crisis that the sea is undergoing.

Adnan talked about this environmental degradation at length later in the interview, when I asked him how the city has changed throughout his lifetime. He said:



Adnan wearing a headlamp



Caught fish in a basket



“The ecosystem and the environment changed. In the sea, we used to have coral reefs. But they don’t grow there anymore. These kinds of plants are important for the environment of the sea and the health of the fish. But none of them are there anymore because of how much pollution there is in the sea. There are a lot of fish that have been lost and that have disappeared. For example, *luqz al-ramli* [seabass], *Sultan Ibrahim* [red snapper], *Abu Richeh Faridi* [barracuda]. They’re all lost. If you find one of these fish, you’ll be dumbfounded. Now the sea is only full of garbage.

The starvation we have here on land, we have it in the sea as well. The big fish can’t find anything to eat. There’s hunger, because of the pollution and the lack of fish. And here on land, it’s the same. Because of poverty, *el-‘alam ‘am tekol ba‘da* [people are eating each other].”

When I asked Adnan how the city has changed throughout his lifetime, he instead talked about the ecosystem and the environment of the sea. He spoke only of the change and the degradation that the sea has faced. This showed me that Adnan, like many other fishermen, locates the sea as an intrinsic and vital part of the city. The sea is not separate or external to the city, it is fundamental and central to Beirut. This is evident from the beginning of the interview when Adnan articulated his belonging to Beirut by talking about his relationship to the sea.

It was saddening and disheartening to hear Adnan speak about the continued disintegration of the ecosystem and environment of the sea, and the effect this has on the fisherman community. By talking to him, I learned about the environmental crisis that Beirut is facing, which is rarely discussed and overshadowed by the economic and political conditions. However, Adnan’s story shows that these crises overlap and intersect with one another. The

economic collapse along with the environmental crisis inhibit the fishermen’s ability to make a living from the sea and threaten their ties to nature. The fisherman community is tied in strong and durable ways to the sea as a natural space, not only to make their income. This is most evident in Adnan’s touching closing remark:

“Look, there’s nothing more beautiful than the sea. If a fisherman gets just one kilo of fish, he’ll be happy. If he doesn’t, he’ll still say *alhamdulillah*. When you go to the sea, you’ll feel like you’re free from this world. A fisherman can make food for his family, or pay for his rent, or tuition for his kids. He can make things work. But the sea won’t make him rich. No one ever got rich from the sea. The saying goes ,*‘ala şayād al-samak, ma bitle‘eh ‘a jismu qamys*. [You won’t find a shirt on the fisherman’s chest].

As long as my health is good, I won’t leave the sea. Because the sea is part of my life. If you offered me a castle in the mountains, I’ll refuse. I’ll tell you, give me a room near the sea and I’ll be happy. I’ll sit, sleep, eat there. I’ll escape from the whole world there.”





Abu Mustafa, the pigeon-fancier – Dalieh – May 2021

Pigeon-fancying: making life bearable



A pigeon loft

Ever since I began taking long walks in Beirut a few years ago, I have been enchanted by the sight of pigeons flying in circles around a few rooftops of the city. Who is directing them, why, and how? Who is behind this beautifully choreographed dance of pigeons? With these questions in mind, Nessim and I decided to interview Mohammad “Abu Mustafa” Itani, a pigeon-fancier in Dalieh. We were able to get into contact with Abu Mustafa through a contact at the AUB Neighborhood Initiative, who knows him.

On May 18, we contacted Abu Mustafa and agreed to meet with him at 4:30 PM at Dalieh, a rocky formation at the northern coast of the neighborhood of Raouche. The sky was blue and clear. Nessim and I walked down the hill from the Raouche to Dalieh under the hot sun, there was a light breeze. When we got to Dalieh, there were only a few people dispersed around the area. A man was sitting on a mat alone, and then to the left there was a small, tented area with tables and a chair. Five men sat in a circle, under the shade, on plastic chairs and an old sofa. When we approached, Abu Mustafa greeted us warmly and quickly supplied two chairs. To do the interview, we sat next to the shack where Abu Mustafa kept his pigeons.

While we set things up, Abu Mustafa looked around himself distractedly, calling earnestly to passers-by: “Boat trip, guys?” Abu Mustafa’s workday is split between fishing and organizing boat trips around the pigeon rocks, which is how he makes his livelihood. But what makes his life bearable, he told us, is the time that he spends flying his pigeons in the late afternoons. “It’s how I enjoy myself,” he said. After talking to him, I reflected on how practices like pigeon-fancying can make life a bit more bearable, not just for the pigeon-fancier, but for the urban inhabitant who pauses to watch the pigeons fly over the city. This made me think of the question: Amid multi-system collapse, what makes a life worthwhile? What makes life beyond survival possible?

Abu Mustafa and I talked about how he came to the practice of pigeon-fancying. But his answers to my questions about pigeon-fancying covered several other topics as well, such as his relationship with Dalieh and Ras Beirut, how the city has transformed over time, and the many threats that confront those who frequent and occupy the shared but contested space of Dalieh. Similar to my interview with Adnan, Abu Mustafa conjured a story and a history of the city in his answers to my questions about pigeon-fancying. By listening to his personal



Abu Mustafa, a pigeon-fancier in Beirut, holding his birds

story, I learned about the practices, struggles, and spaces that make up Beirut.

“Spaces to breathe”

From the onset of the interview, Abu Mustafa established his clear and undying sense of rootedness and belonging to Dalieh, the space where he spent most of his days. To introduce himself, he said:

“My name is Mohammad Itani. *Ana ibn hal mantaqa, ibn Ras Beirut* [I am the son of Ras Beirut]. We used to live here in Dalieh, and my dad was a fisherman, so I also ended up being a fisherman. My hobby is to raise pigeons. Every day I come here in the morning to work and to fly the pigeons, and because it is my place – my whole life is here. So, this place is a part of my body. I can't leave this place, I can't leave it. We're a family here, and we all love animals. One of us has chickens, he keeps them around here. Another one of us feeds the cats – the cats are for Abu Omar. And I have pigeons.”

I was inspired and touched by the strength of his commitment to the place. The *mantaqa* of Ras Beirut and Dalieh is such a strong and important part of his lifeworld that he uses it to introduce himself. When I followed up to this introduction by asking Abu Mustafa if the economic situation ever makes him think about immigrating, he surprised me by pointing to a different threat than that of the collapse:

“We are in this place now. If a developmental project doesn't happen, we will stay here. But if a project happens, then we might have to leave. A large portion of this land has been bought by private companies, and they might want to develop it. But I hope that it will stay like this, in its natural state. *Heik, aħla*. Like this is nicer. You've seen Beirut, it's become like a pile of rocks and concrete. There is not one green shrub in all of Beirut. This space still has a little bit of light, a bit of green, some emptiness. *Inshallah* it will stay like this.”

In this quote, Abu Mustafa summarizes a struggle that has faced Dalieh, one of the last public beaches in Beirut, for several years. Historically, Dalieh has

been a public natural space frequented by families, couples, children, migrants, fishermen, and so on. It has been an outing destination for families since the early 1940s. Until the 1960s, Dalieh and Ramlet el Bayda hosted the annual *Arba'a Ayyub* [Job's Wednesday] celebration: residents from different neighborhoods in Beirut would come together to march to the seafront, where they would picnic, and children would fly kites². Further, Dalieh is Beirut's last surviving seaside community. Fishermen have lived there in shacks since the 1950s. The site came under contestation in 1995, when a real estate company owned by former PM Rafiq el-Hariri bought most shares in all properties in Dalieh³. The company negotiated with the fishermen squatting there and managed to eventually evict most of them and prepared to close it off to the public. This was met with several political campaigns and mobilizations, which have temporarily halted the .total encroachment of the land

Abu Mustafa's interjection reveals that the threat of "development" is always imminent and looming in the fishermen's lives. This threat is powerful and can take away something essential to the life of the city: it could take away one of the few "spaces to breathe."

"I remember Ras Beirut and how it was 50 years ago. I remember how it used to be. The buildings

were few. As time passed, the green and empty spaces started disappearing. Spaces where people could breathe... A lot of people come here to enjoy the space and to swim. It is a public beach and people can come here without paying a fee. I hope that there will always be places where the poor can live, swim, and relax. I just hope that the municipality of Beirut can leave this place alone and prevent any projects from taking place."

What does it really mean to have a "space to breathe"? Having a space to breathe, especially in the middle of an overwhelming socio-economic crisis, might mean having some distance from the heavy realities and duties of life. For Abu Mustafa, this specifically refers to his ability to raise and fly his pigeons. At one point, he told me: "I can't stop flying pigeons, and I hope it will never come to that. It makes my life enjoyable." In the same way that he is tied to the space, he is also tied to the pigeons that he said are like his children. Abu Mustafa's ability to fly the pigeons, however, depends on the availability of Dalieh as a public space, free to be appropriated and used by all.



A bird flying over Dalieh's beach



A pigeon loft

² Saksouk-Sasso, Abir. "Making Spaces for Communal Sovereignty: The Story of Beirut's Dalieh." *The Arab Studies Journal* 23, no. 1 (2015): p. 312. Accessed April 25, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44744909>.

³ *Ibid.*, 311.

Pigeon-fancying, intangible heritage, and urban memory

Abu Mustafa continued sharing his memories of the city when I asked him about pigeon-fancying. I was curious about how and why Abu Mustafa began to keep pigeons. I asked him about this, and he replied:

“When I was a kid, the *mantaqa* here in Ras Beirut used to be full of pigeon-fanciers. When the pigeon-fanciers used to fly their pigeons, there would be thousands of birds in the sky. Now, it’s rare for you to see birds in the sky above Beirut. I used to go with my mom to a butcher shop at Sakiyet el Jenzeer, and there were at least 15 pigeon-keepers who used to gather there. The butcher also kept pigeons. They

would talk about the pigeons they captured, the pigeons they sold or bought, and sometimes they would bring their pigeons with them. The butcher shop would become like a “*souk hamem*,” (a pigeon market) and I would just sit and watch and listen to their conversations. This is when I started paying attention to the pigeons more – I was around 9-years-old at the time.”

Abu Mustafa’s answer to my question conjures an image of Beirut that does not exist anymore. It makes me reflect on how the practices and spaces that make the city are not fixed or unyielding to change but will someday exist only in the memory of its inhabitants. That is the threat posed by private companies that seek to “develop” natural spaces like Dalieh and obliterate its existence as a free, empty, and green space.



Abu Mustafa holding a pigeon

Abu Mustafa said that he believes that the pigeon-fancier has the love of pigeons “in his blood,” and that the practice is something that he inherits. In Abu Mustafa’s case, two of his uncles were pigeon-fanciers, and this is how he learned how to train the pigeons. Now, Abu Mustafa’s son trains pigeons after watching his father train them when he was a kid. Abu Mustafa said, “it’s inherited from one generation to another.” However, his memories of pigeon-fancying practices in the city may illustrate that pigeon-fancying is not just an inherited practice that is passed down generationally in families only, but that it is transmitted by communities too. It is a part of the intangible heritage of Beirut.

While Abu Mustafa admitted that the practice of pigeon-fancying is diminishing because of the urbanization of Beirut, the economic collapse, and the threats of privatization on spaces like Dalieh, he expressed his hope that the practice will be sustained:

“It’s important that this practice should continue. First, pigeon-fancying distances you from many things in life. Young people need to be distracted by something these days. Not everything should be electronic or on a machine. We should go back to nature, a little bit. And this practice, it can allow us to do that. Pigeon-fancying is enjoyable, and it’s good for you.

It’s not artificial. Everything in it is on the land, it’s there naturally, in front of your eyes. The pigeons, they’re nice to look at above the city ... because they make nice shapes, nice images. It’s a beautiful sight.”

In this quote, Abu Mustafa relates his imagination of what the city should look like. By engaging in pigeon-fancying and occupying the space of Dalieh, Abu Mustafa and the rest of the occupants of Dalieh are participating in the production of a particular type of urban fabric and space. The city that they desire and imagine is one that engages with animals and with the natural environment. It is a city where empty and green spaces to live, play, swim, and “breathe” are freely available.

The pigeons truly are a beautiful sight. Whenever I stop to gaze at them, I see a human-animal dance routine, spontaneous, improvised, moving across the sky of the city. Pigeon-fancying can elevate life beyond the dreadfulness of collapse, destruction, and crisis. It creates a distance from many things in life, as Abu Mustafa said. Looking at the city through the lens of pigeon-fancying can help us see how people make art or beauty in their own ways, striving to relieve themselves from the ugliness of everyday life.



Abu Mustafa in his pigeon room

Feryal, the seamstress – Hamra – June 2022



Feryal a seamstress in Beirut at her workplace

After interviewing a fisherman and a pigeon-fancier, Nessim and I decided that our third interlocutor should be a craftswoman. I immediately thought of Feryal, my mother's seamstress. The first time I went with my mother to Feryal's place, it was to fix my high school graduation dress seven years ago. Her workplace is in a building on Makdessi Street, and I remember being fascinated by the elevator:

it was quite big, like a small room, rectangular, and old. Clothes and fabric were hanging everywhere. There were several sewing machines sitting on cupboards, small tables, and Feryal's main desk in the corner. There was so much to look at. The shop had a distinct personality, and it remained in my memory long after I visited.

On a warm Wednesday morning in June, I passed by Feryal's workplace to ask if she would be willing to talk with Nessim and I. There was a sign near the elevator that said the electricity was unstable, so I went up the stairs to the second floor. The walls inside the building had graffiti on them. The building looked a bit abandoned, but when I walked into Feryal's workplace, it still retained the charm and character that I ascribed to it years ago: there were rows and rows of clothes, pieces of fabric, mannequins wearing satin. To the right of her main working desk, Feryal had arranged rows of multicolored sewing thread wheels. She showed me how she has even used these wheels of sewing thread as knobs for her cupboards and shelves. Before we even began speaking, I realized, as I looked around the place, that this was not just a sewing workshop – it was a place of creativity, love, and passion. This glimpse of

the workplace illustrated to me the nourishment that Feryal's livelihood provided her with. For Feryal, her work was quite clearly not only a source of financial sustenance; rather it sustained her by giving her a sense of purpose and joy.

Feryal agreed to be interviewed by us, and so a week later, Nessim and I showed up to her workplace with the camera gear and interview questions. When we began setting up, she told us that her arm is in a bit of pain. I was worried that this would impede her ability to engage in the interview, but she said: "Don't worry, I'll talk... I'm used to pain," winking at me. Indeed, listening to Feryal share her personal story revealed the layers of pain and struggle that she underwent to establish a life and a livelihood during the civil war and the current economic collapse. As we spoke, she shed light on the troubles that she endured as a girl having had to leave school early to support her family after the death of her father, and later entering a marriage with a man who influenced her into leaving

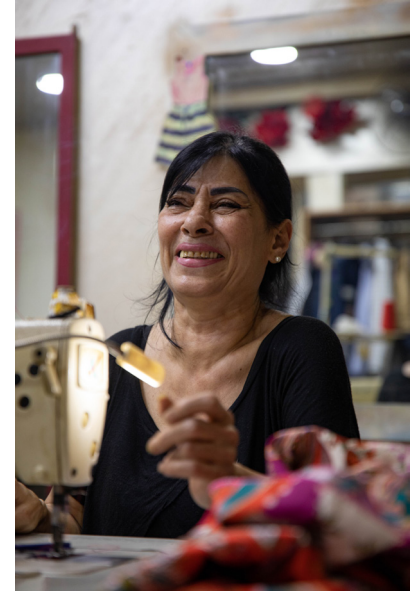
Lebanon. This invited me to ruminate on the variety of ways in which structures of power can inhibit and restrict a life – but also on how people are still able to navigate their lives and livelihoods amid such circumstances. Her story points to the agentive capacity of marginalized people typically rendered as victims of subjugation. What could this teach us in our own context of destruction wrought by economic, political, and social crises? Is it possible to control your own life when everything else – your whole world – seems to be uncontrollably collapsing?

“If you love something, it will love you back”

Immediately the interview took on a very profound direction when I asked Feryal if she felt any sense of belonging to Beirut. She looked me straight in the eye and said:



Feryal's sewing equipment



Feryal at her workplace

“There’s no chance for me to be anywhere else. I can’t be in any place other than Beirut. I don’t travel away from Lebanon. Ask any of my customers, they all know that even if I am starving to death, I won’t leave from here. No matter what, I belong here. That’s just how my brain is wired. Even if all of Lebanon collapses and there’s nothing left of it, I won’t leave from here. I don’t even think about leaving. It doesn’t come into my head as an option.”

I am moved by this interjection: it is rare to hear someone talk like this these days. This first quote from Feryal becomes a thread that is sustained throughout the entire interview. She continuously alluded to her steadfast sense of belonging to Beirut, emphasizing that she could never leave. Her refusal to leave and rootedness in the city framed her entire life trajectory, as she would soon inform us. But before getting to the root of Feryal’s intense feeling of belonging and the insistence to stay, I wanted to hear more about sewing:

“I’ve loved sewing since I was young. I started when I was 7-years-old. I was beaten up at home and

at school. I would remove my schoolbooks and replace them with fabric, a pair of scissors, and a needle... I would experiment and play with them. I began working when I was 9. That was when my dad died, and we didn’t have anyone close to us to help us. I loved sewing, and that’s why it took me just a few months to learn how to do things. I started learning how to sew zippers, then pockets, and then when I was 12, I began working on the sewing machine. I would learn things quickly, because I loved it, and when you love something like that you catch things quickly. When you love something, it will love you back. *Bta’tiya, bta’tik* – you give and you will receive. This is the most important thing. If you like it, you’ll do well. Even if hard times come. You have to keep working at it, and you’ll make it.”

From the beginning of the interview, Feryal established her affinity and love for her work. By saying things like: “I don’t know why I love it, I was born like this,” she described how she was drawn

to the craft of sewing. Sewing was not a vocation or a job that she actively chose out of necessity or because she was following someone's footsteps. Rather, it was a craft that she tended towards, by which she was fascinated and invigorated, and that made her strive to learn more. What struck me the most about Feryal's statement was the phrase: "Bta'tiya, bta'tik." She presents sewing or any other vocation as revolving around a form of reciprocity. Success, then, is achievable only if you love what you do, because "it will love you back." This may seem like an abstract or basically meaningless statement. But the actual meaning and value of this phrase emerged more concretely in the following exchange, when Feryal talked about her daughter.

Feryal: "If you don't love something, you can't learn it. That's why, when I tried to teach my daughter how to sew, it didn't work."

Lara: "Why did you want to teach your daughter how to sew?"

Feryal: "Look, if someone doesn't do well in school, they need to have a skill that they can live from. I didn't continue with my schooling, because my dad died early. If I didn't like sewing, I never would have been able to work. My daughter didn't continue her schooling either, she got married early and she left school. Now, she's been looking for work for over a year, and she can't find anything. I told her: sewing is work in your hands, you won't need anyone. If you can't open a store, you can work from inside your house. I wanted my daughter to learn to sew so that she will never need to depend on anyone."

Feryal did not just contend that it is important to be independent or to have a skill – she continued to

describe work or livelihood as something that must be loved. In Feryal's words, a skill, a talent, or a livelihood stem from a person's love for it which nourishes and sustains it and brings success. In this way, she forged a firm connection between "life" and "livelihood." A livelihood, in her formulation, secures the necessities of life, it is a financial endeavor, but it is also life-sustaining in a different way. From it emerges one's love of life and a sense of fulfillment and independence. In this way, Feryal explains how her love towards her livelihood and her love of life are intrinsically connected or dependent on each other. One reinforces the other and vice versa in an ongoing cycle.

"I never needed anyone"

In addition to the joy and fulfillment that Feryal's love for sewing brought to her life daily, her work as a seamstress was also valuable to her as a source of independence and empowerment.

Feryal continued to speak about the importance of being independent, saying:

"I thank God a million times that I never needed anyone. Since I was young, I've been working, and until now I'm still working. I never needed anyone. My daughter was one and a half years old when I left my husband in Australia. Before I met him, I was working, and I came back here and opened a store and I've been working. I never needed anyone. If I had known that my husband wanted to emigrate, I wouldn't have married him. But anyway, we got married [*katabna kteb*]. Two weeks later, he told me: we have to go to Australia, I'll travel, and you'll follow me. If I had known from before, I never would have taken him. He knew that I didn't want to travel, that's why he didn't tell me before we got married. I eventually ended up going to Australia and I stayed there for two and a half years. I cried until there were no tears left. There wasn't a day that passed when I didn't cry. Then he sent me back to Lebanon on

a visit. And when I got here, I told him, if you want to come, come. If not, stay in Australia, but I'm staying in Lebanon. Even in the middle of the civil war, I was here to stay."

"I never needed anyone." Feryal repeated this phrase at least ten times throughout our hour-long conversation. It was evident that this was something of great importance to her. Of course, this is not the first story of a woman who establishes a career or creates work for herself to become independent. But Feryal's story was unique to me in the way that she framed her independence. What did it really mean to be independent? Independent of what? To Feryal, being independent was about choosing where to live. She did not want to bend to anyone's will or vision of what her life should look like, where she should live it, or what makes a life meaningful. Even amid war, she chose to come back to Beirut, to the place where she wanted to be and where she felt that she belonged. It was a decision that many

might find to be nonsensical or illogical – but it was *her* decision, and that is what emerged as having the most importance in our conversation.

Feryal's story was a clear demonstration of the very famous feminist slogan: "The personal is political." She talked to us about her personal love of sewing and how she came to her vocation. Through her relation of this personal history, she conjured a political history as well. Her personal struggles melded with the social and political context in which she found herself – the two were inseparable. This context was not solely defined by the civil war in which she was raised nor in the economic collapse that she was now facing along with the rest of the population. These difficulties were compounded by the burdens of patriarchal expectations and injustices. Still, Feryal made her own world in the way that she saw fit, away from the desires of her husband, and despite the difficulties of living under a civil war. In this way, she built a life for herself and created a space to do her work. She built a site of alterity and creativity to replace or alleviate the deprivation and marginality that confronted her.



Feryal the seamstress sewing at her workdesk



The gaps within economic collapse

While we had initially set out to uncover the way in which certain crafts and practices might be diminishing – like sewing clothes – Feryal revealed the opposite. She told us:

“Now, with the situation, people started getting their clothes sewn and mended more. Because before, they used to find whatever they wanted to find at stores. They would get their products wherever they wanted. Several years ago, it was rare that people would come to get their clothes sewn – but now they are. They’re not just buying already-made clothes. No, the craft won’t diminish. Some days will pass when work lessens. But it will always rise back up again.”

The economic crisis has rendered several livelihoods obsolete and has marked the city with its traces of abandonment and desolation as storefronts and restaurants close down. But could it be possible that there are gaps within such circumstances of collapse? Feryal’s story complicates things. Her story shows how subjugation, oppression, and collapse do not exist as concrete, unmoving, and imposed realities; rather they are negotiated and challenged by ordinary people. Feryal does not simply accept or submit to the controlling and patriarchal whims of her husband who expects her to inherit his decisions and the pathway that he has chosen for his life. She leaves him and makes a life possible for herself in the place of her choosing with the vocation that she taught herself and that she loves. In the same way, economic collapse forces people to search for alternatives as big clothing stores diminish or become less affordable, and they resort to the work of seamstresses or tailors. The necessity to mend or fix clothes also becomes more urgent in these circumstances. From conditions of scarcity or repression arises a new or alternative way of life.

In many ways, Feryal’s story represents the antithesis of everything that I typically hear about Beirut and about work. Unlike most people I know, Feryal wants to live here. She exerted considerable and purposeful effort throughout her life to be able to do this. Also, Feryal loves her work: she loves what

she does for a living, she cherishes it, she dedicates herself to it fully and willingly. When I entered Feryal’s workshop and talked to her, I learned about how livelihoods are life-giving not solely because they offer material or financial sustenance. Livelihoods can also be sources of joy and passion and can make life bearable in the face of violence, injustice, and collapse.





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