"Mixed Feelings: Racism and ‘Othering’ in Lebanon from a Lebanese Perspective"

A photo-exhibition and informal discussion organized by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs & The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship - AUB

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A Summary by Bayan Jaber

Lebanese individuals of African or Asian heritage are often subject to racism and "othering" in Lebanon, a country where race exists as a social construct and is further empowered through institutional frameworks. The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) held an informal discussion to launch a photo-exhibition entitled "Mixed Feelings" on October 8, 2014 at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The project by Marta Bogdanska and Nisreen Kaj combined images and words to highlight the issue of racism in contemporary Lebanon.

The “Mixed Feelings” exhibition is taking place from October 8 until October 14. The project is in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation – Middle East Office. It will be exhibited in other venues throughout Lebanon this year.

The exhibition touches on race, ‘othering’, identity, belonging, classism and racialization. Thirty-three portraits of Lebanese individuals from Asian or African heritage are on display at IFI and on AUB campus, near the Cafetaria. A third of these participants was interviewed and shared their experiences. Their thoughts were printed and are displayed alongside the portraits. Furthermore, the discussion allowed audience members to share their personal experiences and insights regarding racism, and coping mechanisms were shared as well.

Nisreen Kaj, from the "Mixed Feelings" project, noted that the interviews revealed interesting themes of racialization. "There are very institutionalized forms of racism", she said. She observed that the human body has become a site for ‘othering’ and there is a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in Lebanese society. Many of Lebanon's migrant groups are referred to using derogatory and racist terms such as: the monkey, the slave, the dirty skin, the maid, the Sri Lanki, the sexually promiscuous or the chocolate.
Francisca Ankrah, from the "Mixed Feelings" project said that when she was around eight years old, a kid refused to play with her “because she is a Sri Lankan”. When she told him she was from Ghana, he replied: "when you grow up you will be a Sri Lankan/maid". "It kind of shocked me how they associated the color of my skin to a profession" she said, explaining that she kept crying afterwards and didn't feel like going out in fear of being bullied.

Some of the audience members also shared their personal experiences with racism in Lebanon. A Sudanese woman said that her three year old daughter was harassed and beaten in a public school and the school system did nothing to protect her. "We are all humans, we hope Lebanese people can treat us like humans", she said.

Roula Hamati, Research and Advocacy Officer at Insan Association said that no law addresses racism or protects people who are abused. In fact, she revealed that policies and administrative decisions actually perpetuate racist conditions.

She referred to the four different working categories in Lebanon which classify people in terms of occupation as an example. The first category includes people who perform white-collar jobs. The second category is comprised of people working in national or international companies. This category is usually composed of Americans or Europeans. The third category includes people who do menial jobs. This category is usually filled by Syrians, Sudanese and other Arab nationalities. The fourth category is that of migrant domestic workers who originate from a number of countries such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, or Sri Lanka.

Although the system does not actually divide the categories in terms of nationality, there is a deep racial composition within these categories and this entails different rights for each. For example, people working in the third and fourth categories do not have the right to bring their spouses or children to Lebanon. Racism also exists in the education system whereby the Lebanese Ministry of Education has made it almost impossible for migrant workers to register their children in public schools. It is thus important to have a mechanism that addresses the issue and provides legal redress for people subject to racism.

Rania Masri, Associate Director at The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, compared living in a racist society to living in a contaminated swimming pool where it is impossible to cleanse ourselves from the filth. She stressed the importance of raising awareness about racism and presenting it as an issue that deeply affects people. Furthermore, she noted that the social construct of race and identity in Lebanon should be challenged.