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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical Femininities on Shores: Unveiling Gendered Realities Within Ladies-only Resorts in Lebanon

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Abstract

Following a gendered mobilities approach, this one-of-a-kind, multi-sited study explores the differentiated beach leisure lifestyles and practices of local female beachgoers frequenting the increasingly popular ladies-only resorts in Lebanon through the examination of the complex synergy between business, gender, lifestyle, religion and mental constructions. Stemming from in-depth interviews, the qualitative findings have exposed the various forces at play behind some gendered business practices and beach leisure choices shaping the beach industry in Lebanon as well as how the beach leisure business is contributing to the redefinition and reinterpretation of the female body, womanhood and feminism.

Keywords: Ladies-only resorts, Women-only beaches, Gendered beach industry, Gendered beach leisure, Gendered mobilities

1. Introduction

Voices from the beach can be hard to hear. They can be snatched from the lips by the wind or drowned in the white noise of the waves. But there are beaches, too, on which voices are hard to hear because of the silence.

- Greg Dening, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across times, Cultures and Self* (2004)

‘Swimsuit ban in Saida: Never before in the history of Lebanon’ is the title chosen by L’Orient Le Jour to report an incident that took place in the southern city of Sidon (locally called Saida), triggering more questions than it attempted to answer (Ghosn, 2023). Sidon is infamously known for being the ‘seat’ of the Phoenician Civilization in that most of the ships which would ply the seas and spread Phoenician culture were launched from its iconic old port. This biblical city is in the spotlight not so much for its grassroots NGOs helping local communities nor for a cultural event taking place near its iconic crusader sea castle nor for the regeneration of its old souks from the Mamluk era, but rather for banning swimsuits and alcohol from its public beaches — an unprecedented decision by

a public authority. On May 14, 2023, a few days earlier, two couples of beachgoers were forced to leave Saida’s public beach by some 30 men, accompanied by two sheikhs, who were displeased with the women’s indecent attire. In a matter of seconds, Saida’s public beach became the stage where a torn Lebanon was on display and some beach mobilities and practices (Enloe, 2014; Hazbun, 2010) were questioned or defended; feminist activists called for women’s freedom to choose their beachgoing attire while the opposing Islamist group called for modesty and virtue against nudity and immorality, as they say. Starting this article with this controversy is a way to remind us of the fluidity and constant change of our world which have been beautifully captured by Ovid, the great Roman poet, in his Magnum Opus poem ‘Metamorphoses’, written about 2000 years ago. Indeed, beach leisure keeps changing, moving forward and backward while following trends, lifestyles, beliefs, opinions, mental imaginaries and political narratives which ebb and flow over time:

*All things are fluid; every image forms,
Wandering through change. Time is itself a river
In constant movement, and the hours flow by*

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*Like water, wave on wave, pursued, pursuing,
Forever fugitive, forever new.
That which has been, is not; that which was not,
Begins to be; motion and moment always
In the process of renewal ...
Not even the so-called elements are constant...*

(An extract from *Metamorphoses*, cited in [McGilchrist, 2018](#), p. 290).

And when change and fluidity make their ways into our beaches, they shake our minds, push the limits, redefine what we know and re-question the unquestionable. The historical deep connection of Lebanon to the sea is bringing openness as much as the lack of it; navigating the troubled waters is quite a feat in a country where the beach is given as many meanings as the complex Lebanese social fabric mosaic which can't seem to become a united nation. This disheartening beach controversy isn't the first and most likely not the last one, reminding us of the famous Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi when he wrote that Lebanon is a house of many mansions ([Salibi, 1988](#)). Is this hybrid and fluid beach culture the natural result of a multiple, complex, fast-moving, ambiguous, fuzzy, plastic, uncertain, paradoxical, even chaotic world, to repeat the words of [Bauman \(2012\)](#)? What we do know is that this unfortunate incident in Sidon has put fuel to an already fiery debate about beach leisure lifestyles in Lebanon, taking our minds back to 2017 when a lady was banned from swimming at the *Mira Mar Resort Hotel and Spa* in the northern coastal city Tripoli as she was wearing the full-body burkini ([Abi Ramia, 2017](#)). Along Lebanese shores, the boundaries between 'local' and 'global', 'before' and 'now', 'Western' and 'Eastern', 'this' and 'that' have become almost transparent, clearly resulting in plural possibilities, complex overlays and hybridised beach environments that don't fit in predefined boxes. In this sense, we can explore beach leisure "in terms of how all its elements are in constant flux, resonating with the waves carrying diverse flows emitted by sources near and distant" (Chambers, cited in [Hazbun, 2010](#), p. 214). If the French sociologist Michel [Maffesoli \(1996\)](#) is correct, and we are now living in the times of the tribes - a postmodern era in which identity is increasingly organized around affinity with lifestyle groups that share aesthetic and experiential sensibilities – then ladies-only beaches are sites witnessing the formation of emotional communities and homosocial femininities. Contrary to popular belief which once saw the beach as a 'non-place' that is devoid of any cultural

character ([Gillis, 2012](#)), the shore is in fact dynamic, complex, liquid, and is now recognized as having a socio-cultural meaning with its own dynamics of gender, race and class as well as being the place where 'liquid modernity' ([Bauman, 2012](#)) is thriving. As the American marine biologist Rachel Carson nicely puts it, "in every outthrust headland, in every curving beach, in every grain of sand there is the story of the earth" (cited in [Winkler, 2015](#), p. 141). Ultimately, beach leisure cannot be reduced to a western-centered master narrative which is blind to the complex forces and influences as well as interactive processes that have shaped beach tourism development ([Hazbun, 2010](#), p. 216). This study is telling a non-western story. It is channeling the local voices of those who want to be heard without being known, exposing nooks and crannies that are shaping beach leisure in this part of the world that is far from being understood and fully uncovered. Following a thorough analysis of worldwide women-centric businesses with a focus on the many gendered facets of the beach leisure industry, the lid is lifted on the qualitative findings relating to the women-only beach resorts/clubs in Lebanon, adding a much needed layer of understanding of our local beach leisure mobilities and dynamics that are mapped onto our wider collective commonalities.

2. Genderizing Businesses in the Name of Lifestyles

Since time immemorial, we need to gender things, even celestial bodies. Gender is timeless and encountered everywhere. When we talk about gender, power is never too far. They walk together. Hand in hand. One cannot be without the other. Various spatial dimensions of power relations between sexes are seen in the representation and consumption of leisure ([Aitchison, 2003](#)) as well as in the differential use, control, and domination of space and place, illustrating this complex interrelation between gender, mobility, spatiality, identity, lifestyle and power. Spatial inequity and the unequal power dynamics between men and women resulted in the theorisation of gendered mobilities, places and lifestyles which are contextually, temporarily and locally specific ([Aitchison, 2003](#)). Interestingly, the male body is culturally performed as a more mobile body, while the female body is more restricted and spatially circumscribed. More freedom was often accorded to boys than girls "to move around their neighbourhoods, to engage in unsupervised walking or riding bicycles to meet with friends, to go camping, fishing or hiking, or to ride on public transport." ([Sheller, 2008](#), p. 259). Along with religio-cultural practices

associated with female modesty such as veiling, *pardah*, or general separation of the sexes, limitations on women's mobility have also been closely linked to threats of harassment and violence both in western and non-western societies. This gendered view is so well depicted in the following passage:

Women do not feel comfortable or safe on the streets if they are alone there after dark. They cannot therefore come and go as they please, but have to make careful choices about where they spend their leisure time, and about who they spend it with ... not only was travelling to leisure venues a problem for women ... many women did not feel comfortable inside such venues. The majority of women said they would not feel comfortable going by themselves to pubs, clubs, wine bars or cinemas. (Green, Hebron and Woodward, cited in [Aitchison, 2003](#), p. 68).

Women's policing of their own behaviour was dominated by their desire for 'safe' leisure which meant "going where there are other women, good transport, and a few or no men" (Deem, cited in [Aitchison, 2003](#), p. 68).

On a different note, it should be pointed that gendered spaces - if experienced by choice - may be beneficial and can empower women by allowing them to develop their own rituals as in nonindustrial societies with menstrual huts ([Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988](#)) or by enabling them to develop leadership skills independently from men as in the case of American women's colleges ([Tidball, 1980](#)) or by providing a "room of one's own" in which to be creative ([Woolf, 1929](#)). In our contemporary world, this gendered wave has hit many industries and sectors (transportation, aviation, banks, healthcare, retail, academia and more) with an increasing number of cities and businesses offering women-only services and sections such as New York city (She Taxis/*She Rides*), Cairo (Pink Taxi), Kerala (She-Taxi, She-Bus), Tokyo (women-only carriages on its metro and suburban train lines), Guangzhou (women-only lanes at Baiyun International Airport), Air India (women-only rows on planes), Mashhad (Bank Melli women-only branch), San Francisco (UCSF's National Center of Excellence in women's health), Jeddah (Kingdom Tower's women-only floor), University of Vermont (women-only debate championship) to name a few. Gendered realities are also experienced in the hospitality industry. Women-only restaurants are trending around the world, from Erbil to London. In the Kurdish city Erbil, Tara Mohammed Ihssan - 23-year-old business graduate who was fed up of unwanted attention on nights out with friends – opened a women-only restaurant with an all-female staff ([AlArabiya, 2018](#)):

If you want to go out, it is so uncomfortable because everyone is staring at you (...) So I have always thought about doing something like this for me and for the rest of the girls to feel comfortable (...) I find it unfair as all the cafes here are just for men, why can't you accept that there is this cafe for ladies.

Echoing the words of the Kurdish lady, the manager of the women-only *KC'z Bar* ([Cericola, 2013](#)), located in London's soho neighbourhood, explains:

We want it to be a place women can come to after work. It's not about preventing men from coming on but it is about putting what women want first. It is by women for women and it is not just for gay women. Networking is the main thing.

Moving to the mountains, women are also supporting women on the slopes. In North America, women-only ski programming (women-only snowboard camps, women-only sessions, women-only weekends, etc.) has mushroomed to the point where it is unlikely for skiers to not come across a ski resort that doesn't offer an all-female lesson at the very least.¹ Carving safe spaces specifically for women within a sport culture that can still feel overly competitive and intimidating, such gendered courses ensure fun and supportive experiences for female snow enthusiasts with similarly camaraderie spirits. *Breckenridge Ski Resort* in Colorado, for example, boasts a three-day women's ski camp and a weekly Women and Wine lesson while *Whistler Blackcomb* in Western British Columbia offers women-only clinics. Interestingly, female-only programming is starting to gain traction at a dappling of international ski resorts that are encapsulating gendered lived realities as well, making these winter wonderlands all the more enticing ([Leach et al., 2003](#)). Dan Sherman, the Chief Marketing Office (CMO) of *Ski.com* elaborates this point in the following words:

Ski resorts and hotels are designing experiences specifically for women, including ski camps and lessons, gastronomic and wine programs, yoga, spa treatments, and more. These programs are designed specifically to make it more fun for women to enjoy the mountain lifestyle with other like-minded women.²

¹ <https://www.heremagazine.com/articles/female-ski-resorts>.

² <https://www.self.com/gallery/women-only-ski-camps-for-skiers-of-all-skill-levels>.

These gender-specific ski companies are offering ladies the possibility to experience a different approach to skiing. Traditional ski companies often don't cater to the needs of solo women skiers. In the mighty Italian Dolomites, a puzzling scene between a weeping woman and her male partner witnessed by Lizzie Russell set off a chain of thoughts and events that changed her life and her husband's future. The ski business WoW (Women only Weeks)³ was born:

At the top, a woman was sitting, skis off, sobbing profusely. In between sobs, she was hurling abuse at her partner who was standing some 50 m below, uselessly coaxing her to re-don her skis and attempt to join him. The woman's pain and fear was tangible. I empathised with her totally. And that is where my ski business idea started. Our burgeoning idea blossomed in defining moment number six. Simply entitled WoW! (Women only Weeks), it was born of a recognition that men and women, generally, approach challenges and critical moments of uncertainty very differently. In skiing, more than in most other recreational sports, we believe this difference becomes more acute. Women assess the risks, often too much, and although technically able, need reassurance, approval and that vital ingredient: empathy. Men are more gung-ho, their natural competitiveness and instinctive self-belief allowing them to apparently plunge into the abyss and start thinking about the consequences only half way down. Coupled with their physical power, they seem to succeed where women lag behind.

On the official website of *WoW Ski Tours* (solo ski holidays for women), the WOW factor has a gender taste:

Our solo skier holidays, the original WoW – Women Only Week, bring out the best in women by creating a testosterone free environment, avoiding any potential pressure of criticism or competition. Whether you're a 'speed queen', a technical expert or a teeterer at the top of a piste, it's a recognised fact that women process information and assess situations differently. We've a strong, inbuilt instinct to protect ourselves, calculating and preempting potential risks prior to undertaking a task. Whatever your level, our approach to our Women Only Tours allows for more relaxed, empathetic skiing, where women can operate at their best, without being coaxed into going faster and steeper than instinct tells them is against their nature. A WoW ski

experience is not supposed to be 'onward, upward and faster', or about being part of the 'clique'. So, if you are looking for an approach that gives you the opportunity to hone your technique at your own pace, yet explore and challenge your own limits, to be part of a small exclusive group of wonderful women, and to be guided down every slope, then this tour is perfect for you.⁴

Female-only travel is a multi-million dollar market and one of the fastest-growing segments of the entire tourism market with plenty of room to expand. New female-only trips are making their way into traditional tour operators' offerings and astute women-only travel companies are starting up to accommodate the surge and meet the needs of single mothers, female professionals, girlfriends getting away together, or mothers and daughters looking for a way to reconnect. Some companies specialize in trips for entrepreneurial women, others on food, cooking, adventure, or spa and wellness. There are women-only journeys available for nearly every interest. One may ask oneself, why are women-only travel businesses a fast growing trend? Travel isn't only fun, but also empowering. Women report that when they travel only with other women, it is stress free and they can let their hair down. They don't worry about primping, what they eat, who is looking at them, flirting and sexist behaviour. It is even OK to ask stupid questions or giggle. In short, they feel free to be themselves, exploring the world on their own terms. Moreover, bonding with other women through shared experiences is rewarding, allowing them to experience a sense of sisterhood. Women enjoy being with other women who 'speak their language' and understand their common everyday challenges. It is not so much about men not being there but more about enjoying the companionship of other women. Camaraderie and commonalities form quickly in women-only travel tours that focus on experiential learning adventure:

I love when women come together to form a sisterhood. That's what happened during my recent women's-only trip. I shared wonderful memories and bonded deeply with a group of awesome women! I made many new friends and we'll all be joining another Road Scholar women's-only travel group soon!

- Beverly from Baton Rouge, La. | Road Scholar Class of '17⁵

³ <https://www.wowskitours.com/solo-ski-holiday-for-women>.

⁴ <https://www.wowskitours.com/solo-ski-holiday-for-women>.

⁵ <https://www.road scholar.org/collections/women-only-adventures/>.

In some countries around the world where gender segregation is the product of religious and cultural mores, these women-only trips are giving women the opportunity to bond with other women across cultural divides. On *Intrepidtravel.com*, women are offered the possibility to visit and engage with local women behind the curtain in places where mixed-gender groups cannot go. They may ride in female-only carriages in Iran or visit a women's cooperative in Morocco. *Nathab.com* is focusing on Natural Habitat Adventures by offering women opportunities to visit polar bears in Manitoba, the monarch migration in Mexico as well as explore waterfalls, geysers, glaciers and volcanoes in Iceland. Another good example is *Adventurewomen.com* which offers a non-competitive environment for ladies who enjoy trekking, cycling, horseback riding, sailing, diving, climbing, kayaking, and hiking, without feeling daunted by societal expectations. The focus is on celebrating accomplishment, and giving each other emotional support in a team spirit. What makes *Damesly.com* and *Road Scholar* different is that they take learning beyond the local history and culture and nature into actionable skills training. Whilst the former is focusing on outdoor workshops for creative female professionals on topics like photography and writing, the latter is leaning towards women's-only excursions with the aim to learn about diverse traditions and cultures such as the healing practices used by Indigenous peoples in Santa Fe, Mexico as well as learning how to prepare delicious cuisine and how to gain flexibility with yoga.

Beyond empowerment and safety, money also speaks - loudly. In fact, many women who join women-only travel groups are solo travelers as many traditional tour operators and cruise lines charge a single supplement of up to 200%, making them quite expensive and alien to the specific needs of solo female travelers, unlike most women-only tour operators which offer a single share with a fellow traveler without charging a single supplement. On a different note, rising numbers of female millionaires and billionaires around the world is fuelling the rise of wellness holidays and women-only trips and services. According to the Global Wellness Institute, Wellness Tourism - which incorporates a wide range of activities including spa, yoga, detox, fitness and stress relief - is growing and proving popular with solo female travellers, knowing that it is worth \$494 billion globally. The number of female ultra-high net worth individuals (UHNWI) - those with net assets of \$30 million or more, excluding their primary residences - is increasing faster than male UHNWI, encouraging travel agencies, hotels and tour operators to focus on their interests such as holidays that

combine wellness with business or voluntary work, according to data provider WealthInsight ([Barnato, 2016](#)). Roselyn Lekdee, economist at WealthInsight, stresses that wealthy females 'are becoming more selective about holidays, demanding personal and more sophisticated services'; the number of wealthy females rose by 5.3 percent between 2010 and 2014 in locations with large UHNWI populations, including Europe, Asia-Pacific and North America (Germany, U.K., Switzerland, France and Sweden, Japan, China, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, U.S. and Canada) while the number of male UHNWIs rose by 4.4 percent, although there were still far more male than female multimillionaires.

Operating on the same wavelength, the hotel industry has introduced the women-only hotel floors in order to show appreciation to the very specific needs of female travellers in terms of safety and amenities tailored to women's interests which are different than their male counterparts. In *Bella Sky Hotel* Copenhagen, the 17th floor 'Bella Donna' was designed by women for women who can enjoy soft colors, fresh flowers, fruit smoothies, fashion magazines, exclusive bathroom products, including day and night moisturizers; the whole creating a female friendly environment. *Premier Hotel*, New York is another top property where women-only rooms come with an oversized bathtub and an array of female-oriented furniture and amenities including curling and flat irons, nail files, bath salts, loofahs, makeup lights, vanity stool, extra hangers for skirts and dresses, powerful hair dryers, female-friendly television programming. Much like a Club level, these hotels offer restricted access to women-only floors by programmed elevator or hall key cards. Many also employ only female staff for these floors - from housekeeping to concierge services. Whilst some women who are traveling solo feel an increased sense of security knowing that men are not allowed, many others simply appreciate not running into the room service guy when they open their room door in a bathrobe to pick up the morning newspaper. Interestingly, hotels that have these "No-man's Lands" report that their popularity continues to increase and women who use them willingly pay the typical \$10 to \$50 upcharge for the pampering perks and secure access, according to Covington Travel tour operator. Conversely, *The Hilton on Park Lane*, Mayfair - a Londonese district popular with Arab visitors - had to quietly drop its female-only floor just a few years after launching it, suggesting that the floor may have lacked appeal because its bedrooms were more expensive than others in the hotel, according to media reports. Pushing gender segregation even further, *The Four Seasons Hotel* in Riyadh is featuring a female-only gym

and the female-only floor has its own check-in desk and lounge. Whether in Middle Eastern regions with large Muslim populaces or elsewhere, 'executive women are seeking sophistication, luxury and exclusivity'. In fact, the female-focused rooms are appreciated not necessarily because of the absence of men, but because women don't have to worry about packing every single little thing they may need on a business trip. However, it is good to note that some people feel that women-exclusive floors discriminate against males, take women back to a time when they were not equal players in the business world and stereotype women as vulnerable. Despite contrasting opinions, the trend continues to grow.

Aqua Expeditions has launched the first ever women's only cruises to offer women a safe and inclusive environment with a focus on educational learning in the form of guided small group excursions into local riverside communities. Female guests will be able to explore the world's greatest rivers in the utmost comfort with luxury accommodation and guest service at its finest and embark on limited-edition experiential journeys such as traveling by bike alongside the Mekong through local villages or kayaking down the Amazon to spot extraordinary wildlife.⁶

Even beaches couldn't escape this genderization wave that is turning our shores into territories strongly guarded by all sorts of feminist views, including contradictory ones standing on the extreme ends of the spectrum.

3. Performing Gendered Beach Leisure

Beach leisure has a gendered history and the beach industry has developed and spread around the world on the basis of patriarchal ideas, sexualised representations and gendered performances (Enloe, 2002, 2014; Hazbun, 2010; Metusela & Waitt, 2012). Simultaneously liberatory and coercive, sea-shores have become gendered and sexualised places where various gendered beach practices and forms of femininity are 'in play'. The development of beach tourism has enabled the self-development of women while constraining them into unavoidable gendered practices.

3.1. Gender segregation on beaches beyond the Middle East

On the beach, the male gaze is not always welcome. Several female beach goers want to avoid

the indecent stares of men checking out their bodies which objectifies women and limits them to being sexual objects to be desired and examined by prying male eyes. Ladies-only resorts allow women to be themselves on the beach as their bodily practices are not restricted by religious guidelines and male desires. For some women, ladies-only resorts are a sort of haven, where they can be as happy as a 'fish in water', where their bodily practices are not restricted by religious guidelines and male desires, and where they can feel that they can be themselves (The Sidney Morning Herald, 2008). Some interesting examples are found in countries within and outside the Middle East, namely Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Finland, Italy and the USA.

Located on Egypt's north coast, about 150 miles north of Cairo, *La Femme* ladies-only resort has become the place to be for wealthy, young Egyptian women who want to enjoy the beach away from men's prying eyes. Inside the resort, women transform themselves as veils are taken away, skin is revealed and femininity is uncovered (Gauch, 2006). Interestingly, *La Femme* ladies-only resorts not only attract veiled women but also those who want to experience the unique atmosphere found inside such places where one is free to wear any kind of swimsuit, from the most matronly one-piece to the most revealing string bikini, noting that the quality of the service on offer is another big feature ranging from free cooking demonstrations to yoga and belly-dancing classes to beauty competitions. Clearly, while many women seek out segregated beaches out of religious considerations, others consider such places for comfort and peace of mind (Gauch, 2006). 'Homeness' or a sense of feeling 'at home' is experienced by a number of women inside ladies-only resorts. The desire to relax, 'chill out', in an unchallenging familiar environment and be extremely comfortable is very much part of this experience. However, for those who cannot afford ladies-only resorts, some other options are being considered such as for example wearing the dreaded full-body Islamic swimsuit that cover them from the neck down to the ankles in mixed beaches or finding a completely secluded beach or hitting the beach earlier than anyone else or swimming in their clothes. Some took a radical decision: they simply stopped going to the beach at all (Gauch, 2006). This situation echoes the controversial summer campaign in Spain for promoting body positivity and diversity of body types without stereotypes and aesthetic violence, showing that there are women who still don't feel comfortable showing off their beach bodies, preferring to stay home or dreaming of having ladies-only beaches or hoping that they

⁶ <https://www.cruise.co.uk/bulletin/the-first-ever-womens-only-cruise/>.

would one day feel welcome on mixed beaches, without guilt or shame. Interestingly, ‘*The summer is also ours*’ (el verano tambien es nuestro) is the slogan of the promotional poster showing five diverse women of different shapes, sizes and skin tones, including a topless woman after a mastectomy, relaxing on the beach. Irene Montero, Spain's minister of equality, wants a summer of equality:

Today we toast to a summer for all, without stereotypes and without violence against our bodies (...) all bodies are valid and we have the right to enjoy life as we are, without guilt or shame. Summer is for everyone! (Rodriguez, 2022).

On the Adriatic Riviera, the council of Riccione has altered its bylaws to allow a section of its famed beach to be made women-only. As a matter of fact, the initiative has been apparently fuelled by a sharp increase in the number of free-spending tourists coming to Riccione from the Arabian peninsula (Hooper, 2006). Defending her idea, the councillor Loretta Villa told *Corriere della Sera* newspaper how important it is to meet the needs of tourists – All of them:

Riccione is a city that lives off tourism. We need to be in a position to respond to the demands of our guests. And in this case the motives are not superficial, but cultural and religious. We have already had some indirect requests for separate beach areas (Hooper, 2006).

Another fascinating women-only beach in Italy dating back to the 19th century is *the Pedocin*, known for being an ‘oasis of calm’. Nestled in the north-eastern city of Trieste, *Pedocin* has been totally segregated by gender since its founding in 1890 and *Pedocin's* regulars find this distance freeing rather than restrictive (The Observers, France 24, 2010). Even islands were not left untouched by this craze for the women-only. *SuperShe island* is the first and only ‘shes-only island’; a private island getaway exclusively for women, tucked away in the Baltic sea off the coast of Finland. The owner – a woman entrepreneur named Kristina Roth - wanted to give women a space to be themselves and learn from each other, away from the distractions of the outside world – meaning men:

Women need to spend time with other women. Being on vacation with men can cause women to become sidetracked, whether it's to put on a swipe of lipstick or grab for a cover-up. We want SuperShe Island to be rejuvenating and a safe space where women can reinvent themselves and their desires. A place where you can recalibrate

without distractions - Kristina Roth, SuperShe Founder and CEO⁷

This no man's land, literally, is free from predators and temptation (sugar and alcohol are also banned). On the official website, we are welcomed with the following striking words: ‘For centuries, men have had their cigar clubs and golf resorts, where they can talk amongst themselves. And in just the same way, there are topics women prefer to discuss only in the company of women’.

Along Lebanese shores, *The Bellevue Beach Club* began offering women-only days in the mid-1990s after veiled women began asking for privacy.- Business was good – better than on mixed days, even. It soon went all women, all the time (Yee & Saad, 2018). At *the Bellevue*, there seemed to be:

as many different degrees of scanty cladding as there were women. For some women, religious scruples argued for more coverage. For others, style considerations, and the heat, argued for less. Each woman had made her own peace with the proportions. (Tahaoglu & Vardar, 2014).

One woman by the name of Nada once stated that she looks completely different on Facebook to the point of not being recognized if compared to how she looks at the *Bellevue beach Club*. These words highlight the different between how some female beach goers present themselves to the world and how they look when on female-only beaches (Tahaoglu & Vardar, 2014).

Across the Atlantic, a New York City Councilman announced in 2018 that he is willing to sponsor gender-segregated beach days for his Jewish and Muslim constituents. His idea is to rent a government-owned beach to host two gender-segregated swim days. However, the first-ever ‘Southern Brooklyn Beach Day’, hosting separate dates for men and women, has been opposed by the New York Civil Liberties Union. Brooklyn Democrat Chaim Deutsch claims that he has a lot of orthodox Jewish and Muslim constituents in his district who have never been able to go to the beach before: ‘They’ve never been able to smell the beach, to walk in the sand. Everyone should be able to enjoy the beach’, Deutch told the New York Post (Calder & Hicks, 2018). The lawmaker made the announcement on his Facebook page: “For many New Yorkers, including religious Jews and Muslims who observe modesty laws, there isn’t an opportunity to utilize our City’s beautiful beaches. I’m excited to offer the chance for EVERYONE to enjoy!”

⁷ <https://www.supershe.com/island/>.

3.2. Towards a halalisation of the beach industry?

Apart from women-only beaches, gender segregation is also experienced inside Muslim-friendly beach resorts, or what we call ‘Halal resorts’. With the emergence of a new breed of holiday under the slogan ‘sun, sea and halal’, Muslims are given the opportunity to enjoy “the same things as everyone else on the beach, bar a few concessions, and minus the alcohol”, as worded by [Suleaman \(2010\)](#). During the World Halal Travel Summit in Abu Dhabi, Mr Seyidli, the chairman of [HalalBooking.com](#), expressed his concerns over the lack of halal resorts:

If you look at halal beach resorts there are none in the UAE. Turkey is one of the few full service beach resort destinations that offer separate beaches for women, women-only swimming pools, pools for women with sons and family pools. They also offer prayer rooms close to the entertainment among other halal attractions (cited in [Scott & Sahoo, 2015](#)).

This lack of Muslim-friendly beach resorts – offering privacy for women - has been acknowledged by UAE officials and thus they are now working on it with developers and hotel operators in an attempt to address this gap ([Battour & Ismail, 2016](#); [Scott & Sahoo, 2015](#)). Interestingly, a 2016 Salaam Gateway report about Muslim-friendly beach resorts, made by Thomson Reuters and Dinar Standards, points out that there is a significant potential to launch these so-called ‘halal’ resorts in countries that have developed a halal-friendly ecosystem and encourages existing resort owners to “open new locations dedicated to Muslims in popular destinations such as the UAE ... where there is significant demand and can target middle-income households and non-Muslim customers” ([Thomson Reuters/Dinar-Standard, 2016](#), p. 37). A number of business people have had a flair for combining religiosity and womanly needs, hence why non-religious women have also been targeted, following some winning strategies. They understood that gender segregation on the beach was never meant to be a totally Islamic thing ([Gauch, 2006](#)). While many women seek out segregated beaches out of religious considerations, others consider such places for comfort and peace of mind. On the negative experience of women in mixed beaches, Dina El Mougy, an oil company administrator from Cairo, says that ‘men go to the beaches to watch the swimsuits ... It’s a kind of fashion show and very annoying. When I go to mixed beaches, I can only touch the water with my feet’ (cited in [Gauch, 2006](#)). In Turkey, the words of

Elif Çekiç, a cleaner in İstanbul, are highlighting how some women are trying to navigate mixed-beach leisure with all its complexities:

Sometimes I cover my body, sometimes not. For example, there is no women beach in Çöncök, but a small place where women bath. However, it is a very bad place. That’s why, we prefer to go to the mixed beach. But if there are villagers around us, we cannot bath there because we are afraid of probable gossips about us. We go to the sea at the time when they don’t come. We sometimes wear swimsuit and sometimes swimsuits with short. It depends on presence of our acquaintances. So, we can comfortably bath if there is a women beach ([Tahaoglu & Vardar, 2014](#)).

Looking at beach leisure from a religious lens and standing under the banner of sin-free tourism, the influential cleric Yasser Burhami thinks that gender segregation on the beach is the solution: ‘A five-star hotel with no alcohol, a beach for women – sisters – separated from men in a bay where the two sides can enjoy a vacation for a week without sins’ ([Longbottom, 2011](#)). These conservative views resonated with some Muslims who consider Islam as a source of identity and moral guidance and are seeking to enjoy the beach with an Islamic ethos. In this sense, the ‘islamisation’ of beach tourism through the creation of new halal touristic spaces can be partly understood as ‘a reaction to the aggressive process of cultural globalization, to define and to protect one’s own culture and cultural heritage’ ([Al-Hamarneh, n.d.](#)). However, following the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, some Muslim women would avoid even the ladies’ beach; she, like many women who have completed the hajj, will adopt more modest attire ([Yee & Saad, 2018](#)). In terms of who is allowed or not allowed to enter inside these feminized beach territories, the discrepancies between the ladies-only resorts are striking. In Lebanon, while some resorts set the limit to 8 years old for male kids, other places have a more relaxed policy with 9 years old being the maximum accepted for young boys. And to push the complexity even further, if some boys are physically looking older than their actual age, they are denied entry to ‘protect’ their eyes and minds, as well as the peace of mind of women. The final decision on who can enter ladies-only resorts is left to the discretion of management teams, knowing that some female beach goers prefer keeping their sons or grandsons away in order to avoid them getting used to seeing women’s bodies ([Yee & Saad, 2018](#)).

From a business perspective, Muslim travelers are now being identified within the hospitality industry as a specific segment with unique faith-based needs

and Muslim women travelers are an emerging sub-segment with a unique set of lifestyle preferences and behaviour patterns in their leisure consumption, knowing that significant variances exist in terms of the characteristics and profiles of Muslim women travelers across the globe due to socio-cultural differences. In 2018, there were estimated 63 million Muslim women travelers - making up 45% of the global Muslim visitor arrivals. Therefore, it is vital to gain a deeper understanding of their motivations and decision-making process behind their leisure mobilities. According to the [Mastercard-Crescentrating 2019](#) report on Muslim women in travel, a sub-segment of Muslim travelers look for recreational spaces that provide privacy for males and females. These include swimming pools, gyms, beaches, spas, beauty salons and women-only floors in hotels. More specifically, about 40% of Muslim women travellers find it important to have women-only beaches. If we combine this result with the 60% of Muslim women travellers who give importance to women-only pools/hours, we would have about 100% of Muslim women travellers for whom gender segregation is needed, whether on beaches or in pool, knowing that some do not mind swimming in a mixed setting but find it challenging to find facilities that allow them to wear the burkini, the modest Muslim-friendly swimsuit. Along with lack of privacy, dress code restrictions is another challenge that they need to face. Looking further into the future, the Muslim travel market is projected to reach unprecedented heights, with Muslim arrivals expected to hit 230 million by 2028 and the expenditure by Muslim travellers is projected to be USD 225 billion by the same year ([Mastercard/Crescentrating GMTI, 2023](#)). In terms of Muslim women friendly destinations, Malaysia is leading the way, followed closely by Indonesia and Qatar, signifying their comprehensive efforts to create a Muslim women-friendly environment. As a matter of fact, Lebanon has a high GMTI score of 59, indicating its strong commitment to Muslim-friendly services and facilities ([Mastercard/Crescentrating GMTI, 2023](#)).

Interestingly, although Gen Z Muslims – born after 1994 - are highly adaptable and at ease in most environments, almost 30% of Gen Z Muslim consider separate recreational facilities for Males and Females to be very important. As Fazal Bahardeen, Founder & CEO of CrescentRating/HalalTrip, argues, “Gen Zs will lead the narrative of the next phase of the development of Halal travel”. In fact, Gen Z female Muslims will redefine Muslim travel by seeking adaptability, authenticity, affordability, and accessibility in their travels. In other words, they are flexible travellers who value affordable, high-tech products/

destinations that offer authentic stories and meet their faith-based requirements ([Crescentrating/Halal trip report, 2023](#)). In terms of difficulties encountered by Muslim women travelers, the CrescentRating MWIT PAINS highlights the lack of Privacy, inadequate Amenities, problematic Identity (being Muslim may add another possible prejudice on top of gender and skin colour/ethnicity), difficulty to Network with local communities that have shared interests and the Safety issue that is related to the rise of Islamophobia ([Crescentrating/Halal trip report, 2023](#)). While Muslim travelers in general will appreciate products/services which cater to their faith-based needs, a combination of cultural, demographic, budget and purpose dimensions will result in unique Muslim travel segments with different service preferences, as shown in the below figure ([Fig. 1](#)).

When it comes to destination preferences, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Indonesia are currently considered to be top Muslim women-friendly destinations offering many Muslim travel services such as halal food, prayer spaces and recreational spaces with privacy, noting that all of these destinations are OIC⁸ countries that have consistently ranked high in the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI). However, some non-OIC destinations are making substantial efforts to be on the list.

3.3. Towards a rise of conservatism, liberalism and/or consumerism?

Criticizing gender segregation along Egyptian shores, the Lebanese sociologist Dalal al-Bizri argues that Egypt is gripped by ‘a sort of religious hysteria’ and ladies-only beaches like *La Femme* ‘reflect the general mood in the country’ (cited in [IOL, 2008](#)) while the Muslim intellectual Heba Raouf points out that ladies-only resorts are purely business-oriented places and are not Islamic in any way: ‘I only see capitalism and consumerism, women wearing designer swimsuits and showing off their wealth ... This is not Islam, hiding yourself from men while exposing yourself to women. This is a spectacle’ (cited in [Gauch, 2006](#)). Sharing similar views, a security guard posted outside a ladies-only resort in Egypt sees such places as just another form of ‘decadence’ and thinks that ‘these women should fear God, not men’ (cited in [IOL, 2008](#)). On a more general level, Muslim-friendly beach leisure practices have been strongly criticised by a number of opponents who consider this ‘Muslim gathering’ in so-called halal hotels/resorts as

⁸ The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), headquartered in Saudi Arabia, has 57 member states.

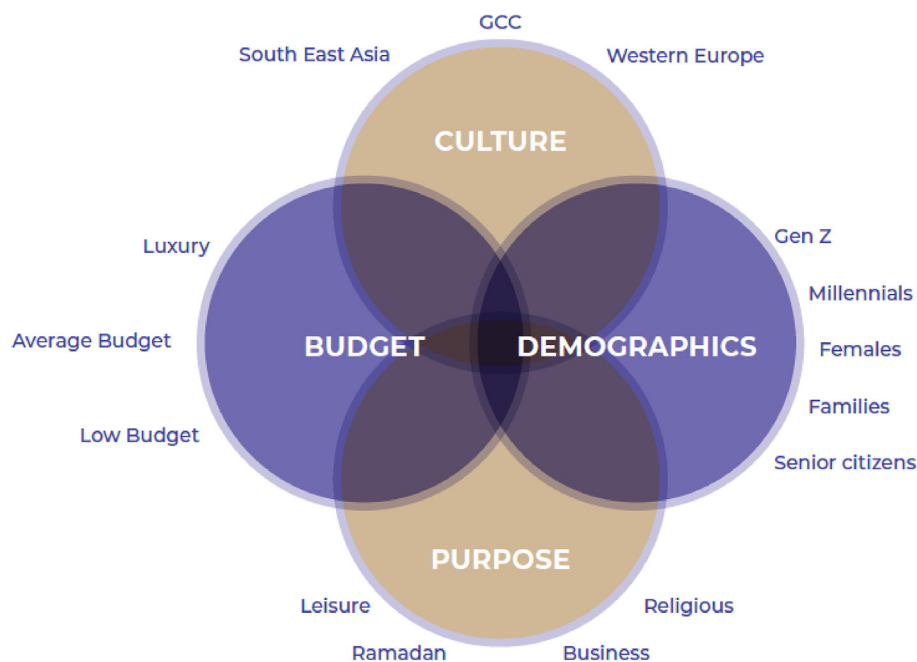


Fig. 1. Four dimensions in the Muslim travel market.

environments conducive to ‘communitarianism’, potentially leading to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism within the host country (Carboni & Janati, 2016; Girit, 2014). On a different note, the halalisation of Turkish shores has also come under fire. Demonstrating against the opening of a new woman-only beach, Antalya Halkevi Branch Chairperson Ayten Ceyhan is sharing her concerns and explaining why some women and men from Antalya Halkevi and Student Collectives from Akdeniz University are willing to fight this gender segregation by swimming together in the sea in Sarisu:

Lots of people from all over the work come to Antalya and swim in the sea. Nobody feels uncomfortable with that. We couldn't understand why they needed a women beach. We worry about one more thing. They will separate public transport and we will separately -as women and men-travel in the city. Instead of separating women and men, my offer [is] that they prevent violence against [women] and rape of women due to dissuasive laws (Tahaoğlu & Vardar, 2014).

Thinking along the same lines, Serpil Kemalbay from İmece Women Union in İstanbul believes that the party in power is sugar-coating their conservative policies by making them look as social ones, as public service:

It would be naive if we consider what AKP is doing as social policies, which is indeed a series

[of] policies that heighten walls between men and women (...) If you want social policy, open beaches to the poor (Tahaoğlu & Vardar, 2014).

According to Yasin Aktay, a Turkish sociologist and scholar of Islam, there is a link between the rise of halal beach leisure and the growing importance of conservative Muslims in Turkey (Duman, 2011). The ruling party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), is blamed for supporting the development of halal seaside hotels and resorts hence creating an alternative way of life, an alternative lifestyle on the beach against the western way of holidaying. Some sector representatives pointed out unlawful discrimination between domestic and foreign tourists, genders, bachelors and married tourists, alcohol consuming tourists and others. These hotels are especially criticised for using public beaches for their own purposes by creating private spaces for separating men and women (Duman, 2011).

4. Research Design

Drawing on gendered mobilities with a social constructivist lens, this qualitative research - unrestricted and exploratory by nature - focuses on experience, interpretation, and meaning-making with an inductive reasoning (bottom-up) grasping multiple socially-constructed realities that cannot be predicted a priori (Riley & Love, 2000). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meanings people

have constructed, that is, how people construct their worlds, how they make sense and interpret their experiences (Merriam, 2009). I have been able to investigate the complexity and uniqueness of our beach leisure environments which allows for a better and deeper understanding of the socio-cultural, economic and political connectivities shaping the complex beach leisure industry in Lebanon. The fieldwork has been conducted in multiple beach destinations to explore gender-based beach leisure practices of culturally-diverse Lebanese communities and what are thought to be ‘contrasting examples’ (Abercrombie et al., cited in White et al., 2009, p. 22) which allows us to capture the ‘essence’ of the particular instead of making generalisations and pushes us to engage with ‘the paradox within the case, the tension between the universal and the particular and the ambiguity or conflict it presents’ (Simons, 2009, p. 167). It offers the researcher the possibility to make contextualised, polyphonic voices heard, giving space to a hidden reality, previously silenced voices, which have been repressed by dominant discourses and narratives. This in-depth, multifaceted investigation of ladies-only resorts - embracing creativity, hybridity, messiness, transdisciplinarity, flexibility and criticality (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015, p. 31) - can document multiple perspectives, explore contested viewpoints as well as demonstrate the synergy between key forces. However, it is worth noting that this short-term, condensed, multi-sited case study reflects the ‘now’ but may not fully mirror all the dynamics of change that can occur over time.

In terms of participant sampling, both purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Babbie, 2011) have been employed to identify the participants who should take part in this study about ladies-only resorts and the lived experiences of female beach goers in Lebanon. A diverse set of key informants from the public and private sector (officials, syndicates, resort managers, etc.) have been carefully selected by using the ‘purposive sampling’ method, ensuring rich data and a variety of perspectives, while the ‘snowball sampling’ method have been favoured to select the beach goers given the sensitivity of the research topic which makes it difficult and unethical to interview people on the beach and potentially hurt their private beach leisure moments. The in-depth interviews with both key informants and beach goers have been carried out in Lebanon during the summer months of June, July and August 2018. These interviews lasted from 45 min to 1 h 30 min and took place in various locations across Lebanon. Overall, a total of 44 in-depth interviews were conducted and only the relevant ones have been used for this specific study.

5. Unearthed Voices: Intricacies Surrounding Women-only Resorts in Lebanon

Women's beaches are flourishing in Lebanon, especially along the southern Lebanese coast that is known for being a quite conservative area. At first sight, gender segregation on beaches may be associated with the trendy concept of ‘halal leisure’. However, ladies-only resorts are not only places frequented by women with religious motives, but also by those who are seeking comfort and privacy. In short, it is not just a matter of faith, but also a matter of comfort not only for Muslims but also Christians. There are overlapping meanings of gendered and ‘religiosed’ beach practices; it isn't only about enjoying the beach in a halal way, but also in a way that puts the needs of women first.

5.1. Away from strict beach dresscodes: display of more Skin ... or less

Unlike other mixed-gender resorts, the flexibility of ladies-only resorts in terms of beach outfits is an important factor that female customers seem to be appreciating:

I go to mixed resorts sometimes but I do have a preference for ladies-only resorts because such places make me feel more comfortable since they do not put regulations on what women can wear or not. I like wearing a bathing suit with a ‘short’ on top of it. In mixed resorts, I can't wear that. (Mariam)

Putting faith on the side, ladies-only resorts are also places where any woman, whether religious or not, can comfortably enjoy the beach without worrying about the sexually imbued male gaze which tends to shamelessly scan her semi-naked body from head to toe, making her feel rather uncomfortable than desirable. On these mixed-gender beaches, some self-conscious women find themselves under scrutiny as their female body is being checked out and ‘sexualised’ by these seemingly ‘harmless’ gazes, making them feel ‘violated’. That is not the case on women-only beaches where the comfort of women is key.

5.2. Away from strict beauty standards: more untanned, unshaved, unwaxed, unfit female bodies

Ladies-only resorts have become the ‘the place to be’ for those who want to tan or perfect their tan, before exposing themselves in mixed beaches. Indeed, they use these resorts as places where bodies can be fully ‘prepared’ for the moment when it has to

be revealed to the other gender in mixed beaches. This kind of 'preparation' is a necessary step to make the bodies ready to face the male gaze, usually happening before summer time around the months of April and May, making ladies-only resorts a temporary 'stop' in the beach leisure journey of some women rather than the destination itself:

In ladies-only resorts, you can see women tanning their bodies so they can have a perfectly tanned body before going to mixed beaches with their friends. They perfect their skin tan in ladies-only resorts because they know that no one they know would see them there, especially their male friends. (Ghinwa)

As pointed out by various scholarly works, a perfectly tanned body is a symbol of the modern, empowered woman leading a lifestyle that is in tune with modern times, which is a far cry from the seaside dresses covering the bodies of Victorian women. More than a simple skin colour, the tan is a powerful symbol of modernity for which women are ready to do what it takes to get the perfect tan, even if that means going to ladies-only resorts, sometimes miles away from their homes. This woman explains how her white skin makes her feel self-conscious about her bodily appearance which is the reason why she favours going to women-only beaches up until she becomes confident enough with her skin colour. In her mind, whiteness is not part of the beach leisure landscape and therefore her white skin should be kept away from those she knows, especially male eyes:

I go there to tan. I think it is a good place for tanning because I do not like tanlines. In mixed resorts, I wouldn't feel comfortable because I wouldn't be able to wear swimsuits that are suitable for tanning. I do not go to mixed resorts when I am not tanned. Because I am really white. When it is a last minute beach outing. At the beginning of summer, I prefer going to ladies-only resorts because I am really white. There, I can comfortably expose my body to sun, get the tan I want then go to mixed beaches. (Soha)

Moreover, the societal pressure of being perfectly shaved and looking neat, on point, on the beach, more like the 'Pamela Anderson style' in Baywatch, is off of women's shoulders inside these gender-segregated beaches. A bit of unshaved hair showing on legs, back or near private parts? That is fine. After all, these women are surrounded by ... women, and who else can understand what womanhood is other than women themselves. This Muslim girl has summarised quite well the importance of these beaches for women wanting to embrace their womanhood and expose their female bodies as they please:

I think the ladies-only resort is a good idea. Some women, including myself, go there when they are on their period or when they do not feel like waxing or shaving or when they want to tan comfortably. It is very convenient. I go there quite often to take time out for myself and just sit down and relax on the beach. (Faten)

These 'hairy' female bodies will not be harshly judged the same way as if they were exposed to the male gaze in mixed beaches. In other words, some female beach goers turn to ladies-only resorts with the idea that other women, more so than men, are naturally more understanding, less judgmental of 'unpolished' female bodies. This kind of 'sisterhood' that is felt inside these 'women's territories' along the Lebanese coast is key to understanding the popularity of gender segregation on the beach. In short, ladies-only resorts have become a kind of 'haven' for hairy, untanned, imperfect female bodies where women can expose their womanhood 'au naturel', without much worry.

5.3. Away from meddlesomeness and masculine practices: more sense of sisterhood

On a different note, jealousy also plays a role in the decision of women favouring ladies-only resorts over mixed beaches. Indeed, the image of their wives revealing much of their bodies and being stared at by men is quite hard to bear for some husbands. In order to avoid these jealous feelings, some wives make the choice to stay away from mixed beaches, out of love, out of respect for the partner or out of obligation:

There are some Christian women who go to ladies-only resorts just because their husbands are very jealous and they want to please them. You know, they want to avoid problems with their husbands and prefer having peace of mind. (Mona)

Comparing to other western countries, Lebanon is still a patriarchal country where displaying the semi-naked body of a married woman to other men is still frowned upon as the body of wives is still very much considered to be the privilege of their husbands' gaze. As such, women learn to navigate these heightened feelings of jealousy in summertime by taking 'sensible' decisions, ready to make extra efforts and compromises to avoid unnecessary marital tensions and save their marriages. However, these women have actually learnt to enjoy this unique, 'womanly' beach setting by making it a pleasurable experience. Being within a 'woman's territory' is not all that bad, after all. It can even be fun and beneficial, akin to 'girls' nights' that are quite popular

given their mental and health benefits, ranging from stress reduction to an increase of ‘happy’ hormones:

I like going to ladies-only resorts with my female friends because it feels nice to be surrounded by women, without having men around us. Sometimes, I need it. It is fun. (Abeer)

This ‘getting together’ between women is sometimes needed, in a place where they feel free to enjoy themselves, ‘be themselves’, in ways they would not be able to do in other common resorts. These ‘women-only territories’ seem to be offering ‘freedom’ for these women by allowing them to free themselves from the bodily concerns and the chains of media representations of how a woman ought to look on a beach. When talking about ladies-only resorts, what may come to mind is the image of the Muslim lady, conservative, veiled, with her body fully covered once outside the resort. But the truth could not be further from this image. Indeed, some conservative Christian women are also part of the clientele as they have found satisfaction in these single-sex resorts. Of course, guessing the religious background of female customers inside ladies-only resorts is tricky, but this male manager of a quite known resort did his own investigation, out of curiosity, to find out about the type of clientele within these women-only territories:

Ladies-only resorts are highly frequented by Christian women, even more than Muslim women, because they can comfortably sunbathe the way they want and uncover some parts of their bodies. They can carelessly open their legs. Once, I went to a ladies-only resort and stayed in the parking lot to try to understand the type of clientele who come to such resorts. I saw many women wearing mini skirts walking towards their cars so I realised that many women in ladies-only resorts were actually liberal, not conservative ones. (Elie)

No concept, no matter how trendy it is, comes without its fair share of criticism. These women's territories along the coast have been questioned, which shows that there is no unanimity around gender segregation along Lebanese shores. What is certain is that the ladies-only concept does not leave indifferent its supporters, nor its critics.

5.4. Unhalalness, brazenness, fakeness and etiquetteless?

Despite their success stories, ladies-only resorts have been harshly criticised by a number of customers, pointing out a number of issues, including the ‘unhalalness’ of these places. Initially, ladies-only

resorts have been built to meet the needs of women who cannot enjoy beach leisure in the presence of men, mainly for religious reasons. But this ‘male-free’ environment is being nowadays perceived as ‘un-islamic’ by a number of female customers, whether in terms of resort design or in terms of practices. Indeed, some women have expressed their disappointment with the lack of privacy offered by ladies-only resorts, rendering them not ‘halal’ enough. Her disappointing experience made this Muslim woman decide to keep going to mixed resorts as they were not, she believes, much different than ladies-only resorts in terms of privacy:

I have tried a ladies-only resort but it was not great. It did not feel that it was a resort in accordance with the sharia. Women can still be seen by people living in those high buildings around the resort. There is not much privacy. (Fatima)

While some have questioned the ‘halalness’ of women-only resorts, others have pointed out some indecent bodily practices that are making some women feel uncomfortable, especially those who have kids. Seeing topless female bodies within the premises of a ladies-only resort has, for example, shocked this Muslim woman who stressed some questionable manners:

I dislike women showing their breasts at ladies-only resorts. I once saw a woman who had her breasts uncovered, in the middle of the beach. This shocked me. Children should not see that. It is not right. Women should have manners even when they are only surrounded by women. I can only understand those who need to breastfeed their babies because it is about motherhood. (Zaynab)

Apart from breasts, the woman's butt is also a source of annoyance in ladies-only resorts. Indeed, wearing the thong bikini, which reveals most of the woman's butt, is being considered as bad given the presence of kids whose eyes and minds should be protected. This female manager of a women-only resort explains it very clearly:

In our resort, women can wear thong swimsuits but they have an obligation to be discreet and only be on the extreme sides of the beach. But if a customer is bothered and complains about it, then we tell the woman wearing the thong swimsuit to cover herself. It has happened before because some women do not want their children to see women showing their butts. Our German customers are mainly the ones who like wearing thongs. (Manal)

Naturally, perception of resorts can change over time which can potentially affect beach mobilities

along the Lebanese coast. Indeed, whilst some female customers have remained loyal to these ladies-only resorts, others could not bear the level of annoyance caused by naked breasts and some 'etiqueteless' practices, making them seriously reconsider their resort choices. That is what happened to this Muslim young girl who has had enough of ladies-only resorts and prefers going to mixed resorts, instead. Her lengthy explanation of this change, which includes some personal and social reasons, is a good case in point:

I feel that many women in ladies-only resorts are 'fake' because they go there to perfect their tan, especially at the beginning of summertime. These women want to look perfectly tanned before going to parties or before going to mixed resorts. Fourth, without sounding very negative, there is a lack of classiness, lack of etiquette, in ladies-only resorts. Some smoke shishas, others throw nuts on the floor, etc. I am not saying everyone is like that. But some do that. Maybe I witnessed that because ladies-only resorts are located in the south of Lebanon. You do not see these 'unclassy' people in top-notch mixed resorts located up north in Byblos, for example. (Nawal)

This 'lack of modesty' and 'etiquette' found in ladies-only resorts is the reason why this woman has not enjoyed her experience inside these gender-segregated places and has decided to stop going there:

I disliked the atmosphere inside ladies-only resorts. Women there feel free to do whatever they want and wear whatever they want because they are only surrounded by women. They are so liberal in their ways which I think is too much. They think that being among women allows them to disregard manners and modesty. But I believe that 'etiquette' is always important no matter where we are, whether we are in mixed or ladies-only beaches. (Yara)

5.5. Breeding ground for sectarianism and lesbianism?

Interestingly, the weight of civil war memories and mental representations of the way the 'Other' Lebanese looks, acts and thinks can be experienced along Lebanese shores. Lebanese people are still suspicious of each other's practices on the beach which reveals a lack of trust and comfort that is still being felt deep inside. Suspecting bad intentions on the part of those displaying alternative beach leisure lifestyles hides in fact a sad reality, which is a deep misunderstanding of the bodily needs of the Other women, knowing that the spectre of civil war and homosexuality comes back haunting many minds whenever they sense, rightly or

wrongly, that ladies-only resorts are fuelling unwanted division between communities as well as providing fertile grounds for the expression of lesbianism and immorality. This man working in the beach industry isn't far from such views:

I am against this concept. We should not have closed communities in our Lebanese society. Christians and Muslims have always mingled on beaches. Also, I believe ladies-only resorts are more dangerous than mixed resorts because we will have more lesbians in our society. These resorts will harm our society. I want to teach the conservative women that religion should stay away from resorts. Religion is a vertical relationship between the woman and God while relationships between people is horizontal and religion should not be in-between. When religion can't evolve to catch up with our modern time, then people should do it instead. (Ziad)

Perceiving these ladies-only resorts as 'dangerous' reminds us of this age-old debate over how religion should be performed in public, specifically the way we do leisure, and reveals this negativism surrounding lesbianism in Lebanon. Although painting the clientele of ladies only-resorts as 'lesbian' may sound extreme, this Christian married man seems to be sure of it:

These ladies-only resorts are spots for lesbians to socialise and 'hunt'. All are lesbians. A friend of mine who works in one of those resorts once told me that lesbians go there, because they are all women. (Tony)

Ladies-only resorts are said to have become a sort of 'meeting-place' for lesbians where they can interact and attract each other. Women may have hidden their bodies away from the male gaze but not from the female gaze, which can also be filled with sexual thoughts. Although forbidden, some lesbian bodily practices have been witnessed by some staff members such as this young girl who still remembers this puzzling scene:

I saw lesbians on several women-only beaches. Once, I saw lesbians dancing and kissing each other in front of people. I have seen women in the restrooms hugging. (Salma)

This man sees a link between the development of ladies-only resorts and the urge to satisfy human needs – in this case lesbian's needs. He believes that gender segregation on the beach can make the life of the lesbian community much easier in Lebanon:

Need is the mother of creation. In Lebanon, there is a need for more ladies-only resorts so that the lesbians can meet in these women-only territories. (Toufic)

There is much negativity surrounding ladies-only resorts in Lebanon. Some key societal questions have been brought to the fore by those who believe that these ladies-only resorts provide fertile grounds for the expression of decadence, indecency, unclassiness, lesbianism and communitarianism. Women may have hidden their bodies away from the male gaze but not from the female gaze, which is not much better. Perceiving these ladies-only resorts as ‘depraved’ places and painting its female clientele as ‘morally corrupt’ and ‘etiquete-less’ reminds us of this age-old debate over morality, right and wrong, and how leisure should be performed in public, especially in the presence of kids whose eyes and minds should be, as some believe, protected. Praised or questioned, the enigmatic female body has long been subject to allegations and fantasies of all sorts, triggering heated debates among the intelligentsia who keep asking the same questions again and again, like a broken record. It is quite often a subject of controversy and ladies-only resorts seem to be another ‘element’ in the chain of controversy which does not seem to put Lebanese people in agreement. While some view ladies-only resorts with a highly critical eye, others prefer brandishing the right to privacy and difference. But what makes the question even more interesting is that fact that critics do not seem to be viewing these resorts the same way; to some, ladies-only resorts are being places of ‘excessive freedom’ and to others, they are places of ‘oppression’. Does gender segregation on the beach support women's subjugation or women's liberation? The answer is not clear cut, black or white, but rather complex, depending on the angle of view one perceives reality. Paradoxically, while some religious people are supporting the development of ladies-only resorts to stay away from temptation and wrongdoings fuelled by the mix of sexes on beaches, others see a strong link between ladies-only resorts and moral corruption. The paradox speaks for itself.

6. Conclusions

Conclusions do not truly conclude studies. Qualitative research is ‘liquid’. Findings are not static. Voices of people can change, so are conclusions. In one sense, research is like the beach, a shifting terrain where land (logic/data) and water (emotions/perspectives) meet, a liminal space caught in the double bind of constantly questioning and editing what has been written by others. All these Lebanese voices have brightened some ‘zones of shade’ in the beach leisure field and lifted the lid on some sexual, sexist and gendered dynamics happening in local seaside

environments wherein dominant meanings and discourses are reinforced and reproduced while being challenged in counter-hegemonic struggles and resistances. Controversies surrounding gender segregation on the beach are just another example of the embodiment of differentiated femininities as well the paradoxical views over what gender equality means, what is feminism, what is best for women, how the female body is (or should be) experienced and the way women should enjoy beach leisure; this time from the perspective of Lebanese people. In terms of debunking falsehoods, this study has contributed in part to challenge some hard-to-die stereotypes which are part of our cultural imaginary in Lebanon and even elsewhere. While some of these taken-for-granted beliefs may contain some grains of truth, reality is more layered with complexities than initially pictured. In fact, assuming that ladies-only resorts are unquestionably offering a Muslim-friendly atmosphere and are only frequented by conservative Muslim women is a distortion of reality that arise from modes of thought which find their roots in childhood and socio-religio-political conditioning that shaped our understanding of what Muslims and Christians want and need. My findings question the ‘islamicity’ of ladies-only resorts and complement the conclusions of other studies which stressed the lack of agreements over what should be considered as ‘halal leisure’ (El-Gohary, 2016; Hashem, 2016). On a different note, by transcending the question of the ‘halalisation’ of shores (Girit, 2014; Thomson Reuters/DinarStandard, 2016), this study about women-only beaches in Lebanon has dragged the debate into women's discourses which elucidated the complex overlapping meanings of gendered and ‘religioused’ beach practices and, more generally, gave the concept of spatialised feminism (Aitchison et al., 2000) another dimension, showing (again) how gender and space can be hardly separated in a country where some beaches are still maintaining their ‘women only’ proclivity. Doubtlessly, this research is a sort of ‘eye opener’, revealing how ladies-only resorts fell in that interstitial space negotiated between conservatism and laxity, between the pious and the liberal, between one type of womanhood ... and another. In fact, by attacking the concept of ladies-only resorts, it is not only the pious female Muslims we are targeting, but *any* woman who prefers gender segregation to satisfy some womanly needs. Away from religious debates and philosophical views, several pragmatic beach businesses have understood the needs of women in terms of bodily comforts and homosociality and are therefore tapping into this gendered void caused by mixed beaches, clearly reinforcing the subjectivity of

women's rights as a concept while raising the question whether transwomen would be considered as women by some ladies-only resorts – or not. In the midst of the LGBTQ pride month, this debate takes on a special meaning, reminding us of all the controversial questions related to allowing transwomen in ladies bathrooms (Ross & Price, 2023), women's gyms (Hopper, 2023) and women's prisons (Walker, 2023) which are tearing societies apart. Ladies-only resorts can be added to the list and owners/managers should be preparing themselves to this trans-wave knocking on the doors of their premises, in the name of equality. Would they be allowed entry? Or redirected to mixed resorts? Or maybe *trans*-resorts would be built specifically for them? And what about non-binary people whose gender is not male or female? The debate is open, taking us back to a very essential question, 'what is a woman'? In all cases, criticized or praised, visited or avoided, women-only beaches are meeting the needs of women. Some women, at least. By meeting the needs of the female market beyond religious people, women-only beaches - whether considered 'regressive' or 'emancipatory' - are not stuck outside modernity; they are very much within it. This study can contribute in undermining the popular script that stresses the risks of fueling religiosity and lesbianism while ignoring, purposefully or mistakenly, the existence of basic womanly needs that are simply related to flesh and emotions. Interestingly, the male voices were mainly the ones making lesbian-related claims, considering these ladies-only resorts as lesbian-making places, or to a lesser extent, lesbian meeting places. A range of biased mental connections and representations associated with lesbianism are imbricated in their mindsets and therein lies the crux of the matter. Demystifying lesbianism is one of the collateral effects of this study, steering our minds away from some questionable fantasies related to the sexuality of women. Pushing the analysis further, it has been found that beach leisure in Lebanon reflects a complex, multi-faith, multi-feminist society that keeps vacillating between past and modernity, East and West, conservatism and liberalism, tolerance and intolerance, open-mindedness and judgment of the Other, rendering it even more complex, hybrid, indecipherable and peculiar in the eyes of the outside world and even to Lebanese themselves. Generally, speaking, far from being a homogenous coastline, Lebanese beaches are more like fractured territories, gendered terrains that are, in fact, contested, regulated, manipulated, and negotiated by female beach goers who have various motives and different ways of thinking about religion, identity, community, values, culture, leisure, femininity and womanhood. By

echoing various gendered 'voices' on the ground, these findings have unearthed gendered grounded realities which are a reflection of the particularities, complexities and different shades of femininities found within the Lebanese society, specifically on the beach. Ladies-only resorts are a tapestry woven with facets of femininity and the voices of the Lebanese beach goers deserve to be heard by the beach industry given the number of issues that have been raised including the lack of privacy and a deficit of decency which seems to be bothering a number of female guests. Questions of virtue aside, there are clearly some marketing lessons stemming from these resorts where the needs of women are taking center stage while religious beliefs are given second place. From a business standpoint, opening new ladies-only resorts in Christian-majority areas may be an option to be considered by the beach industry given the non-negligible number of Christian women who are also interested in these female-only spots along Lebanese shores. The 'halal' element is only one piece of the complex women-only puzzle and ladies-only resorts are playing the card of womanhood, rather than faith. With all these elements in mind, we may ask ourselves, is this gendered beach concept pushing Lebanon towards more conservatism by encouraging gender segregation on beaches? Or more liberalism by offering space, an 'oasis of calm', for women to freely express themselves through their bodies, display as much skin as they want, and possibly meet lesbians? Or more consumerism by making beach goers 'victims' of a powerful consumerist system that keeps creating needs for products/services we didn't even need much in the first place, stimulating a demand that wasn't initially high, just for the sake of business and money? As paradoxical as it sounds, all the possibilities may be part of the answer, rather than being mere figments of the imagination. By acting as a repository of gendered 'stories' on Lebanese beaches, this study is only one of many destinations on the path to understanding beach leisure lifestyles and the intricacies (re)designing the beach industry. And needless to say that these precious voices are notes that are part of the music of a woman's life.

Conflict of interest

Jihane Adeimi declares no conflicts of interest.

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