

Talking like a Woman: Feminist Group Dynamics in the Queer/Trans Israeli Performance Group Dirty Laundry

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Dirty Laundry, or Kvisa Shchora in Hebrew, developed as a queer political performance group in Israel in 1999, a year after the first Gay Pride festival was held in Tel Aviv. According to founding members of the group, Dirty Laundry formed in response to the depoliticized and homonormative nature of Israel's emerging gay and lesbian movement. The movement ignored issues of Palestinian oppression and transphobia, while eliding feminist critique and ideology. In 2000, the second Intifada would begin in earnest and it would become impossible for Israeli citizens to ignore the Palestinian crisis. Members of Dirty Laundry represented an incredibly broad makeup of ethnicities genders and sexualities, including Palestinians, Jewish Israelis, transgender men and women, gays and lesbians, and Mizrahim and Ashkenazim and took their cue from a growing worldwide queer activist movement.

Within Israel and the Middle East queer sexuality has only recently emerged in discourses of the left. Israel and the Palestinian Territories have been written about extensively, with little attention paid to non-normative sexualities and their role in Middle Eastern history and culture. Dirty Laundry used street performances to parody Israeli state militarism and to demand an end to the occupation of the Palestinian territories through an agonistic call to solidarity and coalition. Dirty Laundry emerged out of a tradition of queer protest performance and Gay Shame activism which can be traced to

New York and San Francisco in the late 1990's. Dirty Laundry re-imagines the Middle East as a place where queer aesthetics and political activism can make an important and unique intervention into state sanctioned violence and identity struggles.

In 2007, I had the great privilege of interviewing several of the primary and founding members of Dirty Laundry. (Note: the quotes from these members are from these interviews and are listed in the "Works Cited" section). It became immediately clear in both the interviews and the political actions staged by the group that feminism functioned as an ideological grounding for all group processes and events, both within their meetings and within the political protests and actions they staged. Despite the cross-gendered, cross-cultural nature of the group, each group member with whom I spoke reiterated their commitment to feminist practice and the ways in which a strong culture of feminism allowed the group to feel productive, inclusive, and affective for everyone involved. This article explores how four members of Dirty Laundry saw feminism operating within the group and the important role feminism had in making Dirty Laundry a unique and important activist group. In addition, I will explore two events staged by the group, which I believe demonstrate a queer and transgender feminist Middle Eastern politics. The first event, a beauty pageant staged in Holon, pointed to the violence of beauty standards and body fascism. The second, an action at the 2003 Gay Pride festival in Tel Aviv, challenged the governmental policy that would not allow gender to be changed on official Israeli ID cards.

Feminism emerged early in the group as a way of talking and organizing and was not solely the domain of bodies that were gendered female. The importance of feminist forms of practice and political action was seen as a necessary point of departure for all actions, meetings, and discussions. Dirty Laundry was a group premised on connectedness and inclusiveness. Seeing gender and sexuality activism in a network of political connections, associations, and entanglements formed a common thread within the narratives of the individuals with whom I spoke.

Dirty Laundry did not set out to accomplish one political goal, such as ending the occupation, or empowering women, but instead saw these as connected struggles. Dani, a transgender woman from Tel Aviv and one of the founding members, talks about Dirty Laundry's approach to connection early on in their work: "one focal point is the connection of things together. Like viewing the class oppression in Israel, as connected to feminism and viewing feminism as connected to militarism, viewing militarism as connected to something that has to do with homophobia." Dani described finding Dirty Laundry as a place that brought together all the pieces of her identity:

But the way I felt was like: 'I am being torn in pieces,' every time I went to an organization that had an issue to deal with. For example, something against the occupation, I would really love the action they did, or the political work, but I would really get annoyed at things that would contradict other parts of my identity. For example, I went to a place where it was anti-occupation, but it was terribly chauvinist.

For Dani, the majority of the activist groups with which she had been involved were misogynist and were premised on masculine systems of discussion and power; groups in which a lot of jockeying for position and dominance took place. In Dirty Laundry, things were different. A feminist praxis was employed in all aspects of discussion and decision making. I asked Dani to define feminist practice within Dirty Laundry and she talked about the need for consensus, but the fact that consensus is only one aspect of a complex of ways of operating that constitute feminist practice, “this is a very small expression to actually describe the atmosphere, which is much more important, at least for me, than actual consensus.” The feeling Dani describes was one of value, where every idea was recognized and considered. “The atmosphere was that every view mattered, no matter if you’re just one person.” Intention and feeling were also important aspects of the group’s praxis, “the way the discussion goes is really by: what’s behind your view? What do you mean? How would things make you feel wanted and whole?” Avdan, a transgender man from Jerusalem discusses Dirty Laundry’s feminist decision-making as having influenced activist groups throughout Israel and Palestine:

In terms of being able to be inclusive. Because, we did all the time have issues about Mizrahi agendas and Mizrahi people in the group and transgender people. I think that the meeting(s) in Kvisa Shchora were the best example I’ve ever been to of how (a) real feminist decision making process can happen.

For Avdan, issues around race and gender did not become divisive in Dirty Laundry's meetings, but were instead handled with openness and respect.

Dirty Laundry also used the feminine linguistic form whenever possible in all of their discussions. This may not seem significant to an English speaker, but in Hebrew the masculine form of words is used as a default even in a room of women if one man is present or enters the room. This seemingly small feminist move had a massive impact on how the group ran and its relationship to gender. As a speech act on a large scale, this shift asked that the feminine linguistic form be given as much (if not more) weight than the masculine. Rania, a Palestinian woman who had been a member of Dirty Laundry since 2000, explained the complexity of this shift. "If you speak in a feminine version you speak certain words and if you speak in a masculine version you speak different words. And it's enough for one man in a room of a hundred women for you to speak in a masculine version." Rania went on to explain that there was no hard and fast rule about speaking in the feminine, but that group members simply adopted that form of speech in order to further the goal of operating in a feminist framework.

During our interviews, body fascism and particularly beauty standards applied to women's bodies emerged as a theme of Dirty Laundry's work in general. The group regularly staged actions at beauty pageants, but one such action really demonstrated the group's creativity, compassion, and playful aesthetics. In this particular action, members of Dirty Laundry gathered on the same day that Tel Aviv's only gay and lesbian publication was holding a pageant for gay men in Tel Aviv and staged a counter-

pageant in Holon a nearby suburb. This pageant was meant to counter-act the objectification, exclusion, and body fascism of the actual pageant through appeals to individuality, affirmation, inclusion, and a total lack of competition. Avdan describes the pageant:

It was the day of a beauty contest and Kvisa (Dirty Laundry) had a tradition of doing a demonstration against beauty contests. Instead of demonstrating in front of the beauty contest we decided to go to Holon. We just brought a very long purple carpet and crowns and we let people just go on the carpet from side to side with a crown on their heads and people were clapping their hands. Feeling how it was to be a beauty queen and the idea was everyone is beautiful. We had, well a lot of children, but also old immigrants from the Soviet Union and middle aged men. (2007)

Dirty Laundry's beauty pageant was an attempt to share the group's internal philosophy of feminism, inclusion, positivity, and community building with a group of suburban Israeli's who might not otherwise have access to political action and feminist critique. Rania also noted the excitement of the crowd. Whether or not they understood the full critique of body politics the pageant was making, everyone in the audience enjoyed performing and taking part in the performance of beauty. "We had this carpet, this red carpet. And we asked people to go on it and to be a queen for a day. It was amazing to see the faces of the women, or the kids, or the people there. And no matter how you

look you are beautiful and to go with this feeling, it is amazing.” The red carpet, as a signifier of glamour, celebrity and recognition, was an important aspect of the ritual, emphasizing each individual’s right to be the object of adoration and to participate in the act of being viewed.

Another event staged by Dirty Laundry at the 2003 Gay Pride Parade in Tel Aviv involved creating fake Israeli ID cards. The government mandates that Israeli ID cards should be carried at all times by Israeli citizens and must be presented whenever a soldier or policewoman (man) asks. This is especially vexing for Arab Israelis, who are often hassled and detained even if they are Israeli citizens (not to mention Palestinians living in the territories, who are not recognized as citizens at all). Though the designation Jewish or Arab has been officially removed from the ID cards, every Israeli I spoke to said that it is still possible to discern their identity based on coded information on the cards, such as systems of stars (Palestinians are given a certain number of stars, while Jewish Israelis have a different number). In addition, one’s name is still a clear indicator of whether they are Jewish or Muslim. The ID cards also discriminate against transgender Israelis, because the only recourse for officially changing one’s gender on an Israeli ID is through undergoing an official sex-change involving hormone therapy and surgery under the advice of a physician and clinical psychologist. Even then, it involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. Dirty laundry created facsimile Israeli ID cards that were made to look like the real thing and were distributed to the Gay Pride attendees. Dirty Laundry’s cards had a lot of verisimilitude, but still contained certain modifications that would draw the attention of anyone who looked at them. The cards

would ideally inspire their holder to examine them carefully and think more critically about the “real” ID they carried in their own pockets. Rania translated the ID cards. First, the card asks the recipient to “open for a moment your ID,” but this is written in a feminine, instead of a masculine form. Where the actual card lists the person’s first and last name, Dirty Laundry’s cards say, “Name: ‘If I’m transgenderd and (have not had surgery) then the internal office won’t give me the right to change my name from Jacob to Ester.’” According to Rania, you have to have both top and bottom surgery in order to change your name on an Israeli ID. However, other Israelis with whom I spoke suggested that only top surgery and hormones are necessary. “The Internal Ministry decide(s) when to change you sex on your ID to female, or male. All psychiatric exams, you have to go through a lot of psychiatric committees to allow you to make the surgery.” The card also discusses the ways in which Israeli ID cards discriminate against Palestinian and Israeli Arabs. These cards were distributed in large numbers to those who attended the Gay Pride celebrations that year and squared well with Dirty Laundry’s slogan, “No Pride in the Oppression of Others.” These cards did not alter the way Israeli ID cards are designed today, but it did force Israelis to look closely at the very fundamental ways discrimination and classification on the basis of race, nationality, gender and sexuality are reified and enforced in every aspect of daily life in Israel.

Dirty Laundry has since disbanded, but all of the members I spoke to have gone on to do other activist work. They work to support such causes as ending the occupation, transgender activism, feminist activism, and anti-capitalist activism. In some cases, members have joined or formed groups that are working on multiple issues, like Dirty

Laundry. The legacy of Dirty Laundry has dramatically changed the activist landscape in Israel, influencing other activist groups to be more feminist and queer friendly. Everyone who I spoke to said that their time with Dirty Laundry had been important in their development as activists and that they have tried to bring feminist group dynamics to all the groups with which they have worked since.

Works Cited

Avdan. Personal Interview. 11 Aug. 2007.

Dani. Personal Interview. 10 Aug. 2007.

Rania. Personal Interview. 14 Aug. 2007.