

Politics With A Side Of Coffee:

A Look Into Women-Only Cafés

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Throughout history, coffee shops and cafes were perceived as unifying centers for people of various cultures and backgrounds. From its origins in the Arab world to its global popularity today, coffee has been a staple for social gatherings and a symbol of hospitality. The diary entries of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, a Palestinian composer and oud player from the early 1900s, reveal the enduring appeal of coffee shops as social hubs. He writes, “I would start my day at the Ma’aref Café with friends drinking the arghileh until 10 or 11 in the morning when Abu Darwish would arrive and order his first smoke, then his second, then his third.”¹ The sentiments in Jawhariyyeh’s diary entry remain common today, reflecting the enduring role of coffee shops in the Arab world throughout different periods of history.

While many may consider coffee shops to be settings of social unification, a closer look at their history reveals otherwise. Coffee shops may have served as a gathering place for many to meet, but they were also sites

of exclusion. Before exploring these complexities, an examination of the history of coffee is crucial to understanding how we got to where we are today.

Coffee cultivation and trade began in the Arabian Peninsula, where many thought that it would keep the congregation focused during religious prayers.² As coffee spread across the Arab world, it became a staple for home gatherings—an offer of coffee symbolized a display of hospitality. As this drink grew in popularity, so did coffee houses, which became centers of modernity. In Wasif Jawhariyyeh’s diary, he recounts how cafes were home to the phonograph and cinematograph, a newly introduced form of entertainment. Coffeeshop visits soon transformed into a commonly undertaken leisure activity. People would perform shows and Jawhariyyeh himself would play his oud to audiences as they sipped their coffee and smoked.¹

However, coffee shops did not just entertain. With coffee often being affordable, it prompted many to engage in

communication, playing a role in bringing about progress and change. In Egypt, the café “Al Looeh” became the headquarters of the nationalist party of Mustafa Kamal, the founder of modern Turkey.³ This gathering of people posed a threat to those in power. Many sultans and kings would often prohibit coffee drinking and cafes, as they were popular places for people to gather and potentially discuss dissenting ideas. An example of this is Sultan Murad IV, who issued a decree in 1633 that made the consumption of coffee a capital offense.⁴ This was due to the fact that the Janissaries, who were viewed as a potentially rebellious group by the ruling authorities, often gathered in coffeehouses. Cafes became hosts for progress, and this continues to be reflected in modern media. In the 2022 Egyptian film *Kira and El Gin*, a coffee shop serves as the rebellion headquarters for those planning to overthrow the British occupation.

Cafes gave rise to social movements. However, despite accepting patrons from diverse

economic backgrounds, their doors for a long time remained closed for a forgotten portion of the population: women. Although coffee culture extended to women, the cafes did not. This became a problem, since coffee shops were where political discussions took place and public issues were addressed—being within their doors was crucial to being heard. In other words, by making cafes male-dominated spaces, this ensured that women were left out of the public sphere. The enduring impact of women’s exclusion from cafes is still visible today in the prevalent image of Arab coffee shops where tables are often crowded with men smoking hookah and sipping on tea and coffee. In many ways, the exclusion of women from these shops is just as much about limiting their mobility in the streets as it is about limiting their ideas. When you are not heard, you are not seen, and every law and rule in society will reflect this.

This has left many women in a difficult position, and for some, led to the movement of women-only cafes that have opened across the Arab world. Sabaya café in Jordan is one of them; on the café’s front door, a sign states that men are not welcome. When describing her experiences, Hanin Majali, the café’s owner, says, “The most important thing for me is that they feel at home and my dream is that Sabaya will become a meeting point for women from all walks of life.”⁵ Other owners of women-only cafes have stated

that their shops are places where “professional women can relax without the societal pressures that come when men are present.”

However, not everyone would agree that women-only cafes are the future for women’s involvement in public issues and integration into Arab societies. Some believe that, rather than creating a space only for women or for men, spaces that integrate people regardless of gender are needed. Nabt Fenjan, a café in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia is a women-only café that attempted to create a mixed-gender space. However, the government refused to grant it the license on the grounds that women could not serve male customers.

This apparent loss was seen as a win for many women, as women-only spaces, according to some, are where women can mingle freely. In one case, a mall in Saudi Arabia referred to as the “Ladies Kingdom” opened its women-only space to men. The result was a plunge in business. “No one even comes to the cafes anymore,” complained one worker. The main concern of the women who used to frequent this place was men seeking to “pick up women.”⁶ The concept of mixed spaces, for many, is happening too fast and is not allowing engrained culture to catch up. The entrenched image of men dominating coffee shops and the patriarchal society they are able to comfortably reside in have made it difficult for progress to occur.

While women-only cafes

may not reflect the progressive image many would hope to find, they are important spaces for Arab women. Given the patriarchal nature of Arab societies, many women may feel uncomfortable or even threatened in mixed-gender spaces, particularly in the presence of men who they may not know or trust. Women-only cafes offer a place where they can congregate and socialize without fear of harassment or unwanted attention. That could not be said in Wasif Jawhariyyeh’s time. Of course, this is not to downplay the importance of mixed spaces. Creating more opportunities for different groups to interact and learn from one another is a key step toward building more inclusive and diverse societies. However, this should not be done at the expense of women’s feelings of safety and security.

The emergence of women-only cafes is a significant sign of progress for women in the Arab world. These cafes provide a safe space for women to gather, exchange ideas, and engage in political discussions—activities that for centuries only men could enjoy. Therefore, these spaces can be a source of empowerment to many Arab women and help amplify their voices in political and social dialogues, facilitating the introduction of more gender-inclusive laws. Hopefully someday soon they can do so freely even outside the sanctuary of women-only cafes.