

Lebanese Women Witness to War

Lebanese women witness to war was the theme of a three day conference held in Paris from October 20 to 22, 1987 under the auspices of the League of Arab States.

Fifteen prominent career women representing a cross-section of Lebanese society interpreted the effect of war on the various walks of life in Lebanon.

A number of French and Arab journalists interested in the Lebanese crisis as well as Lebanese and Arab personalities residing in France attended the conference.

The session was opened by the Arab League Director in Paris, Dr. Hamadi Essid, a veteran Tunisian diplomat familiar with the complexities and intricacies of the Lebanese problem. Ambassador Essid acted on several occasions as the Arab League' special envoy to

Lebanon during the 1975-76 crisis. In his speech, Dr. Essid pinned great hopes on the contribution of Lebanese women in achieving peace.

Lebanon's Permanent Representative to UNESCO, Dr. Adel Ismail addressed the participants and Ms. Nelly Salameh acted as coordinator to the conference. Ms. Salameh, who introduced the speakers, described the role of Lebanese women in the war as "the saviours of the fabric of Lebanese society". She pointed to Lebanese women's contribution to the progress and development of their country in particular and the Arab world in general.

The conference revolved around five main themes. Following is a replica of the program, indicating the theme of each session, the speakers and the titles of the papers presented.

Program of the Conference: Lebanese Women Witness to War

First Session

Women and the Media in a Lebanon at War

Ilham Kallab-Bissat: "Image of women in the Lebanese media."

Alouié Sobh: "The literary and artistic production of Lebanese women during the war."

Second Session

Children: Victims of War

Fadia Hattit el-Amine: "Influence of war on mother-child relationship."

Leila Chikhani Nacouz: "Expressions of war through drawings of 7 to 12 year old girls."

Raja Nehmé: "Adolescent literature and war."

Third Session

Women and Confessionalism

Nadia el-Ali: "Relationship between confessionalism and feminist action in the Chouf region."

Dalal Bizri Bawab: "Women and Muslim religion during the war."

Matil Bounassif Yaghi: "Effects of confessionalism on Lebanese women during the war."

Fourth Session

Impact of War on the Status, Role and Work of Women

Nazik el-Amine: "The changing role of displaced women during the war in adverse situations."

May Hazzaz: "Defying the war: women witnessing issues of adverse situations."

Irene Lorfing: "Women and work in Lebanon during the war."

Laure Moughaizel: "Political participation of women during the war: political parties and syndicates."

Fifth Session

Family and Society

Yoland Houry: "War and delinquency."

Marie Thérèse Khair-Badawi: "Sexuality, women and war: sexuality put to the test."

Zeinab Raja Makki Tabbara: "Relationship between women and men through comic strips published during the war."

The full text of the conference papers can be obtained from the offices of the Arab League. Below are brief comments on some of the topics discussed.

Although women were the pillars that kept the country from disintegrating, they did not play an active role in the war and were misinterpreted in the media. They were shown either as socialites, social workers, or tragic figures mourning their dead. The ordinary Lebanese woman who faced the everyday problems of a country at war and who kept her family together, whose courage, loyalty, integrity and work both inside and outside the house (as a breadwinner) was not portrayed.

On the other hand women writers who dealt with subjects of women's emancipation, modernization and the struggle to prove themselves before the war became less personal in their literary writings and dealt with problems of their society at large becoming the voice that cried out the grievances and problems of the people. A similar experience was found among painters who mostly portrayed anguished images of a suffering people and expressions of aggression and destruction.

Children's drawings expressed their fear of war and disgust of violence. Research revealed themes most frequently drawn by children were houses, fire, ambulances, explosions, blood, death and soldiers.

The influence of war on mother-child relationship questions the impact of war on the role of women as mothers. Mothers played a pivoted role in keeping the family together and more so during duress. The great responsibilities and duties that motherhood imposes on women often deter them or conflict with their desire for self fulfillment in other spheres of life. A question which is being debated by women all over the world was posed: is motherhood now a handicap to progress since many modern women would like to combine motherhood and a career.

In Lebanon co-existence and tolerance among the various religious communities and sects had always set an example to the rest of the world. However, confessionalism was used during the war as a tool to try to disintegrate the country and break Lebanon into statelets. To solve this problem it was suggested that education particularly civic education and mixed marriages may put an end to confessionalism.

What then was the status and role of women during the war? Women took the initiative and played a major role in the rehabilitation of the country. It was women who managed to locate housing or found jobs for their unemployed husbands and adult children. In most cases women themselves took part-time jobs to enable them to sustain their families especially when the husband or father was killed and the woman found herself the sole breadwinner in the family. Women's main task however, remained vigil by restoring confidence to their shattered families providing comfort in most uncomfortable circumstances.

The paper presented on women and work, stated that women represent 18.4% of the Lebanese work force, indicating that one woman to every four men has a job, excluding the domestic service in the rural areas. The majority of working women are below 25 and single. Only 9% are married. According to the author the majority of women do not consider that exercising a profession is a necessary option but an answer to an economic need. Professional women are confined to a limited number who are offered junior posts. A large number of Lebanese women work in services (56.4%); industry (20%) and agriculture (23.6%). The majority are exploited and do not benefit from social security nor are they protected by the Lebanese Labour Law as they often fail to be registered.

In political participation women were totally absent in the executive branch of the government. Women do not occupy key posts and are therefore absent from participating in decision making positions. There is only one woman ambassador, 18 consuls and not a single member of parliament in Lebanon. However, women are widely represented in public schools and hospitals. Women's participation in political parties is limited to their student years at universities. Few join syndicates and the majority leave such activities once they are married.

Speaking of family and society, it was pointed out that marriage is the aspiration of most young Lebanese girls. Once married having children becomes an overall duty. For married women the war posed problems of survival on two levels:

1. Survival caused by the economic crisis;

2. Physical and emotional survival caused by security problems. Many husbands were forced to leave their wives behind. This meant physical and emotional separation from their spouses which in turn invited both parties to look for consolation or company outside wedlock. Economic needs also drove many women to take up prostitution for a living.

To sum up the main point of this conference, it was evident from the papers presented that Lebanese women were witness to war. They were active in all walks of life but not in warfare. Their courage, endurance, responsibilities and work are taken for granted. However, when the call came for this conference Lebanese women were given the chance to be heard, they broke the barriers of demarcation lines, sectarianism, confessionalism, political parties and slogans, to meet, discuss and present their experiences concluding with a set of resolutions and recommendations.

We would like to mention here that two of the speakers namely Mrs. Irene Lorfing, a sociologist, is a former IWSAW staff member, and Maitre Laure Moughaizel has collaborated with the Institute in the Basic Living Skills Project. The Institute has also published a book by Mt. Moughaizel entitled **Women and Law in Lebanon**.

Maha Samara



Ilham Kallab, Zeinab Raja Makki, Laure Moghaizel and Yoland Khoury.

Recommendations made at the Paris Conference

1. Refusal of Lebanese Women to allow religious affiliations to interfere with their loyalty to the state.
2. Condemnation of Lebanese women to the use of religious differences as a political weapon in preventing co-existence and tolerance among the Lebanese communication.
3. Confirmation of Lebanese women to help encourage and arouse national and civic consciousness among the people.
4. Utmost consideration should be given to the living and economic hardships facing the population as a direct result of 13 years of war.
5. Confirming the awareness of the participants to the danger of dislocation and demographic segregation on the social fabric and unity of the Lebanese State.
6. Protecting and promoting a Lebanese national culture instead of a religious confessional culture.
7. Calling on Lebanese Women to help break the demarcation lines and other manifestations of division in the country.
8. Calling for the immediate implementation of law and order in the country.
9. Belief in the sacred right of the individual to exercise his religion and freedom of thought, speech and writing without harassment and intimidation.
10. Promoting awareness of Lebanese women to their role in society as peace makers for the peace to come.