



Women and War in Lebanon

One of the characteristics of war is that it unbalances or destroys the social and mental structures of the people it affects. This imbalance can vary from a partial to a total change in norms, customs, and social roles. The ultimate impact depends on the intensity and duration of the war and on the nature of the social group it affects.

*War permits social actions that are usually considered immoral or are forbidden by law. In war the combatants kill, destroy, rob, and use many forms of violence; their justification is that they are directing these acts against an «enemy». Laws established to protect and preserve life are wiped out by «laws of destruction.» However, this situation is paradoxical because, along with these **laws of destruction**,» new pro-life «**laws of survival**» emerge, affirming the never-ending human ability to start life from scratch time after time all over again⁽¹⁾.*

But what interests us as feminists is the role women play in wars, and, in our case in particular, the role(s) Lebanese women have played in theirs.

Using the pronoun «theirs» is not really adequate because the war in Lebanon was neither initiated by women, nor encouraged by them. In fact it disregarded their existence altogether. Women had

no say when the war started, neither in its decision-making processes nor in efforts to achieve reconciliation. During the past ten years Lebanese men fought and used their guns and bombs against each other and «spoke a language from which they had eliminated women.»⁽²⁾

In general women have been victims, receiving blow after blow: their families scattered, their children made homeless, their sons, husbands, fathers or brothers killed. They have remained absent from the political scene and anguished spectators to the fighting. They have not questioned men's values nor their political ideas, nor their reasons for fighting the war, and, as in Northern Ireland, their only attempt to protest against violence and promote peace was nipped in the bud.

What women have achieved, however, is to hold together the collapsing structures of Lebanese society. They have patched up the lack of adequate social and medical services by volunteering to work in social welfare organizations both national and international, such as the Red Cross, the YWCA, the Child Welfare Association, The Child Care Association, Family Planning Association and various women's groups in the South, the

Mountains, the North and the Bekaa.⁽³⁾

They organized holiday camps for children in Lebanon and abroad, helped raise money for the handicapped and severely wounded and sent them for treatment abroad. They coordinated relief actions for refugees and displaced families by providing food rations, blankets, clothes, medical treatment and shelters. They also sponsored the revival of local arts and crafts such as lacework, embroidery, children's wear, flower making, pottery and local produces, such as jams, preserves, and orange blossom water, and organized impressive exhibits of these works.

Lebanese women have issued communiqués protesting against the violation of human rights.⁽⁴⁾ They have tried to appease the fighters by paying visits to refugee camps and military headquarters and putting flowers in the nozzles of guns. They attended international conferences where they presented Lebanon's problems.⁽⁵⁾

As in Argentina, Lebanese women have boldly organized demonstrations calling for an end to kidnappings.⁽⁶⁾ They blocked the passageways dividing the two sides of the capital, organized all night sit-ins and stormed into the local TV station to interrupt the news in order to have their demands broadcast.⁽⁷⁾ In the literary sphere the voices of Lebanese women writers, poets and journalists have not stopped. Some have gained international recognition and admiration;⁽⁸⁾ others are much admired, listened to and read locally, such as: Sonia Beyrouti - May Menassa - Marie-Therese Arbid - Irene Mosalli, Claire Gebeily.

Thus, Lebanese women have done their work diligently and courageously, daring the daily hazards of crossing points, sniper bullets, and militia checkpoints. They have nurtured men and children without having anyone to nurture them back. Many have suffered physical and mental strains, the long-term effects of which cannot be measured now, but can be guessed as serious.

These remarkable women have managed till now

to restore a semblance of peace amidst the chaos of war and to bring back warmth whenever they had the opportunity (**Nadia Tueni; Femmes de mon Pays, vous, qui dans le chaos retrouvez le durable**). But deep down in my heart when I look back at this decade of suffering and hardships a revolted voice springs up from within me asking: «What will the future generations think of us when we have robbed them of their childhood and adolescence? Will they blame us for not permitting a (Lebanese) Lysistrata to raise her voice and shout, «Stop the Killing now?» Will they understand our helplessness in front of this drama that has surpassed and yet engulfed us? Will they forgive us for still hoping that the war will end one day and that the men will give up the fight?

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References:

- (1) Gaston Bouthoul, **Mentalites**, Collection Que Sais-Je Paris. 1980.
- (2) Read Interview with Aziza el Hibri, p.(17).
- (3) Articles about Women's contribution during the war have appeared in the following issues of *Al - Raida*:
No. 13 (August 1980) Women as Peace Makers .
No. 15 (February 1981) Lyna Elias - Pioneer - p. 2.
No. 21 (August 1982) Stop the Arms Race P. 8.
No. 22 (November 1982) Peace Notes p. 2 - 3.
No. 25 (August 1983) National Conference of Lebanese Women's Council p. 9.
No. 26 (November 1983) a Silent Protest: Lebanese Women Sit-in p. 14.
- (4) On 8/12/83 a coalition of women's organizations in Lebanon called for a press conference, asking for the revival of the league for Human Rights in Lebanon and the coordination of its work with the International League of Human Rights.
- (5) See *Al - Raida*, No. 15 (February 81), pp. 8 - 9.
- (6) The President of the Lebanese Section of WILPE (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) Anissa Najjar, has been named chair person of the committee of the detained and kidnapped people. (Peace and Freedom Newsletter, vol. 44, no. 8, August 84).
- (7) 7 - 10 July 1984.
- (8) **Andree Chedid** (*Al Raida* No. 27 - 28 p.24) - **Nadia Tueni** (*Al - Raida* No. 25 p.6) - **Etel Adnan** (This issue p.13).
Evelyn Accad (*Al - Raida* No. 27 - 29 and this issue p. 14).