

On Women and War

■ Myriam Sfeir

IWSAW Staffer

This article is based on an interview conducted with Dr. Adnan Houballah, a psychoanalyst, who assisted patients during the Lebanese civil war.

Houballah begins his statement by defining the meaning of civil war from a psychoanalytical point of view, namely, in Freudian terms. He maintains, "Freudian analysis stipulates the existence of two fathers, the actual father and the imagined/symbolic father. The latter is the one who punishes, forgives, and represents the head of the family. Hence, when civil wars erupt, the basic thing that happens is the death of the imagined/symbolic father or the head of the family." This, according to Houballah, leads to a break up and society is divided into two camps, those opposing the war and those supporting it.

Houballah adds by explaining that during a war hate is projected onto an enemy and is transformed from the inside to the outside. This preserves the relationship with the father where there is consensus about concepts such as unity, nationalism and protecting the symbolic leader who is the father. Houballah admits that during civil war this is not the case. Civil war ignites internal conflicts between father and son, who enjoy a

love/hate relationship, and creates a fraternal war. He explains: "When discussing civil war the love/hate relationship becomes personal and subjective. When civil war breaks out, the aggression is projected internally towards killing the father. Step by step all institutions, mostly headed by men, start crumbling – namely, the president, the army, the government, etc. and chaos prevails." He continues: "Unlike males the daughter/girl has a pure relationship with the father. All she expects from him is love. He represents the giver. He is not a competitor except in extreme cases of neurosis. Hence war is never sisterly but fraternal."

Houballah then discusses the repercussions of the Lebanese civil war. He holds: "The civil war in Lebanon took its toll on both men and women tremendously." He argues that when discussing that war one has to admit that it was fought and initiated by men. Given that power was, and still is, mostly in the hands of men, 99 per cent of the perpetrators of the war were males. Women were the receptors of the negative effects of war. Despite the fact that women were immersed in the national struggle, only a small number of them were active in warfare. They were more or less bystanders active in the realm of the family. Houballah asserts:

"Women were responsible for sustaining the family, a role that involved a lot of self-sacrifice and courage."

During the Lebanese war, Houbballah maintains, women were highly insecure. They worried about the safety of their children and spouses, they feared being raped, they were anxious about the future and what it holds, and they spent sleepless nights questioning what had happened to their husbands and sons who were members of the militia. He admits: "Women's sole aim was to protect their children. They took protective measures to shield them from the war raging outside. Sometimes they took extreme precautions and that affected the children negatively. For example, mothers used to lock their children at home and forbid them from playing outside. This resulted in their having less space in which to play. Children, as a result, were affected negatively and they started suffering from phobias."

Women were put in a negative position as a result of the war. They were threatened by the war and lived in constant fear. Houbballah admits: "Men who were present in the battle fields had their weapons and that offered them protection. Women, on the other hand, were left defenseless; they had no guns and felt threatened in all aspects of their existence." That, Houbballah admits, made them more susceptible to psychological problems. Women realized that, due to the chaos, they were robbed of protection; hence, to overcome their anxieties, they took tranquilizers to calm themselves down.

According to Houbballah women consumed large quantities of anti-depressants, sleeping pills, and alcohol. "After a while they became addicted to them." Houbballah recounts: "During the war, tranquilizers were as available as bread. Many of my female patients consumed tranquilizers and sleeping pills as often as they drank water. Some of my patients used to take ten anti-depressant pills a day. It is well known that exceeding the prescribed dosage often leads to depression."

Men also had their anxieties. However, what worried them the most was being able to provide for their families. Houbballah maintains: "I treated men for depression as well. Men worried about economic failure, given that providing for one's family is a male prerogative." Houbballah then tries to explain the chaos that prevailed in war torn Lebanon: "A lot of ethical principles were shed by men in an attempt to uphold their image as the provider. Many men strived to earn money illegally to keep the cash flowing and satisfy their families' needs."

Houbballah then discusses rape phobia among women: "Women feared being raped and this phobia often

accompanied them throughout the war years. Yet, it is important to note that in war and peace rape is a threat women never eliminate and often think about." He admits that throughout the war he only attended to two or three rape cases and indicates that, during the Lebanese civil war, women were not used as instruments of war and rapes rarely occurred. He maintains that there was a consensus, an undisclosed pact among all the factions that women would not be targeted. The pact was honored and rapes rarely occurred. Houbballah explains: "Maybe this is because we are very conservative in nature. We Lebanese believe in the sanctity of the body and rape was forbidden, a red line that should not be crossed. Moreover, the war in Lebanon was a struggle for power not for ethnic cleansing."

Displacement also affected women tremendously and rendered them insecure. According to Houbballah one's house symbolizes one's body. Hence, losing one's house and being displaced is similar to the act of rape. He asserts: "The home is a safe haven for women, it offers them security. Being displaced several times, fleeing war torn areas with children, fretting about the safety of loved ones rendered women panicky and stressed. This constant anxiety throughout the war, which was relatively a long period, created a sense of futility. Women longed for peace and with every glimpse of hope came disappointment.

Houbballah explains that as a result of the war many of his patients opted to veil. "Many women sought refuge in the veil, it offered security and protection from danger, especially rape. Moreover, some women felt the need to contribute to the war by sacrificing themselves and covering their bodies. Houbballah recounts that many of his female patients decided to wear the veil after a massacre, a death in the family, or because of a dream. He adds: "Some of my patients, from one session to the other, would shift 180 degrees from a supposedly 'modern' women to a 'veiled' one."

Yet, Houbballah also attributes the somewhat 'liberal' demeanor of women to the war. According to him, "the war encouraged women to be religious, yet it also contributed to enhancing women's sexual freedom. It wiped out the values women were expected to uphold, namely chastity and virginity. The war weakened the hold fathers have on their daughters. By overthrowing the father figure and everything he represents, the war brought about sexual liberation. Houbballah ends his conversation by emphasizing "in all wars, the ill-effects last long after the use of arms has subsided. Hence, the current corruption and chaos we are witnessing are all due to the remnants of the war."