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To cite this article: Eggert, J. (2023). Revisiting Women's Roles in Conflict and Peace: Female Fighters During the Lebanese Civil War. *Al-Raida*, 47(1), 105-115.

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Article type: Article

Published online: 8 March 2023

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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## Revisiting Women's Roles in Conflict and Peace: Female Fighters during the Lebanese Civil War

Jennifer Eggert

### Abstract

Over 30 years after the formal end of the Lebanese Civil War, while the country is far from having one agreed upon narrative of why the war broke out and what it was fought over, there is a substantial amount of literature that focuses on reasons for and dynamics of the war. However, what is often missing in these analyses is a focus on the roles of women during the war. Overall, the general perspective—in academic circles, amongst the wider population, and in popular culture—seems to be that the conflict was not a women's war but that men were responsible for the fighting and destruction. This article questions this widespread narrative. Based on interviews conducted with former fighters, militants, and civil society actors, the article first discusses dominant narratives on men's and women's roles in conflict, followed by an overview of the methodology used in this paper. The article then sketches women's participation in the Civil War, arguing that women played active roles as militants in all of the militias, and that in nearly all of the groups, women's participation included armed combat. It outlines how a mix of individual factors, organizational characteristics, and contextual aspects, such as the security context and societal norms, led to women's inclusion as fighters in leftist, Christian, Palestinian, and Shi'a violent organizations during the war. Finally, the article examines women's experiences after the formal end of the war in 1990 and suggests that an honest grappling with the role of women during the war could help with a wider coming to terms with Lebanon's past and present.

**Keywords:** gender; Lebanese Civil War; Lebanon; militias; non-State political violence; women

### Challenging Dominant Narratives About Gender and War

It has been over 30 years since the formal end<sup>1</sup> of the Lebanese Civil War.<sup>2</sup> While the country is far from having one agreed upon narrative of why the war broke out and what it was fought over, there is a good amount of literature discussing reasons for and the dynamics of the war (see, for example, Fisk, 2001; Hanf, 2014; El Hazen, 2000; Hirst, 2011; Mackey 2006; Salibi, 1976; El-Solh 2004; Traboulsi, 2012). However, what is often missing in these analyses is a focus on the roles of women during the war. Overall, the general perspective—in academic circles, amongst the wider population, and in popular culture—seems to be that the conflict was not a women’s war but that men were responsible for the fighting and destruction (Cooke 1987; Karamé, 1995; Labaki, 2011; Shehadeh, 1999). Women are remembered for their roles as victims of the war, as peacemakers, and as those protecting their loved ones and keeping their families together (Foerch Saab, 2021, p. v).

This perspective on women’s roles during the war in Lebanon reflects broader assumptions about women’s experiences in most violent conflicts across the world. While armed conflict is usually seen as something men start, fuel, and sustain, women tend to be seen as victims or opponents of political violence (Henshaw, 2016).

However, if we take the time to look a bit closer and reflect on these gender stereotypes, it quickly becomes obvious that in most armed conflicts worldwide, both men and women are actively involved—as supporters, militants, fighters, and sometimes also leaders (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015; Parashar, 2014; Trisko Darden et al., 2019). The numbers are often higher in groups with more inclusive gender ideologies, but depending on the circumstances, even conservative and right-wing armed groups include female fighters (Cunningham, 2008; Eggert, 2015; Gowrinathan, 2022). Many of us working on gender and armed conflict and/or with former fighters know this, but the wider public is often not aware and continues to be surprised to see a woman fighting for a non-state armed organization.

When I started working on female fighters in non-state political violence in 2010, there were only a handful of academics working on the topic. Now, more than ten years later, that has changed. However, academic literature on the women who fought in the Lebanese Civil War is still rare. In 2015, when I started working on female militants and fighters during the war in Lebanon,

there were some (auto)biographies of former female fighters (Bechara, 2003; Duplan & Raulin, 2015; El Murr, 2014; Sneifer, 2006), several book chapters and journal articles (Karamé, 1995; Parkinson, 2013; Shehadeh, 1999; Sayigh, 1993), and three academic books that at least partially focused on women's roles as fighters and militants during the civil war (Abisaab, 2010; André-Dessornes, 2013; Peteet, 1991). Much of this literature focused on women in the Christian and Palestinian militias. What was missing was a comprehensive analysis examining all the main militias, looking at why women joined the various militias, and why they left and rejoined at various points throughout the war and in different parts of the country. I was intrigued by the prospect of having a comparative analysis of female fighters and militants in the civil war in Lebanon available.

### **Researching Female Militants and Fighters in the Lebanese Civil War**

Based on my family history, I know how difficult it can be for survivors of war (be they victims or perpetrators of violence—or both) to open up and speak about their experiences. I was not entirely sure if former fighters and militia members would be willing to speak to me about their involvement in the war, but I had a few contacts through colleagues and friends and decided to give it a go.

I chose a comparative approach because I often find comparative studies to be particularly insightful. They allow you to look beyond a single case to compare and contrast between and within different cases. Focusing on the many militias involved in the Lebanese Civil War allowed me to do just that.

My analysis mainly focused on seven militias affiliated with the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah), the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Lebanese Kataeb Party (Kataeb), the Lebanese Forces (LF), and the Amal Movement (Amal). I also interviewed members of the Communist Action Organization (CAO), the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), Tanzim, and the National Liberal Party (NLP). However, I did not reach sufficiently high numbers of interviews with former members of these four groups to be able to include them in the main analysis. I tried to interview former members of Hezbollah, but unfortunately this was not successful. Nevertheless, almost all key non-state actors in the war were included, including members of the

two main camps at the beginning of the war, the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) and the Lebanese Front (LFr).

In total, I conducted 64 interviews with 69 male and female former fighters, party members, researchers, civil society members, and journalists. The data from the interviews was complemented by an analysis of the (auto)biographies of former female fighters with the LCP, Kataeb/LF, the Guardians of the Cedar, and the LF (Bechara, 2003; Duplan & Raulin, 2015; El Murr, 2014; Sneifer, 2006).

Many, if not most, researchers working on female fighters in non-state armed groups use interviews as their main form of data collection. This is because many non-state armed groups do not have archives or lost them during the fighting. As much as the post-war amnesty law in Lebanon has been criticized (Saadeh, 2021), it largely facilitated my research on the war, because most of the people I spoke with did not have to worry about possible repercussions of sharing memories from their past. This was only different for those groups that were still fighting in Syria (such as Hezbollah and the SSNP) or against Israel (again, Hezbollah, but also the Palestinian militias) because of the related sensitivities and the fact that the amnesty law obviously did not include other states. I believe that the relatively long time between the end of the war and the time of the interviews (25 years) was also an advantage, in the sense that people had had time to reflect on their involvement in the war. The sudden death of two planned interviewees stressed the importance of speaking with survivors of the war while they were still alive and able to share their stories.

### **Examining Women's Participation in the Lebanese Civil War**

The findings of my research challenged the notion that the Lebanese Civil War was not a women's war. Despite how persistent narratives to the contrary continue to be, my research showed that women were involved in all the main militias involved in the war.

The most important factor leading to women's involvement in the militias was their insistence to be included. It is unlikely that women would have been included as fighters had it not been for their insistence to fully participate in the war. The involvement of women as fighters was a bottom-up process. Unlike in other conflict contexts across the world (Alison, 2009; Eager, 2008;

Katto, 2014; Parashar, 2009), coercion did not play a role. Instead, the women joined the militias out of conviction and because they believed in the cause the militia was fighting for.

The assumption that men participate in violent political movements for political reasons whereas women join for personal reasons has long dominated the literature on involvement in political violence (see, for example, Jacques & Taylor, 2008; O'Rourke, 2009). However, my research found that during the war in Lebanon, male and female fighters were largely motivated by the same factors. The main reasons for both men's and women's involvement in the war were context-related pressures, including perceived injustice and a tightening security situation. In the case of the leftist militias (such as the LCP or the CAO), both men and women saw their involvement in the militias as participation in "the Revolution," fighting for a new politico-economic order against Christian Maronite dominance of the State, and for Palestinian rights in Lebanon and the region. Men and women in the Christian militias (including notably Kataeb), on the other hand, were fighting to maintain the politico-economic system of the time, preserve Maronite privileges, and limit the activities of armed Palestinian organizations on Lebanese soil. A numeric minority in the largely Muslim Middle East, they perceived their participation in the Civil War as a fight for survival. As for Amal, the main motivation of women (and men) of the organization was the fight against Israel—an external invader considered a "true enemy" who was to be fought "by all means" and with whom any collaboration was impermissible, supported by a framing of the conflict in religious terms.<sup>3</sup> To sum up, the former leftist fighters I spoke to saw their fight during the war as a "Revolution"; Christian fighters described it as a "fight for survival"; and Amal fighters saw it as a religious struggle against "the true enemy" that had to be fought "by all means." While these narratives carry different connotations, what they have in common is that each of them interprets the nature of the fight in a way that warrants the inclusion of women in their own specific way. A revolution, a fight for survival, and a fight against the true enemy all require all segments of society to be involved—including women.

In addition to motivations that were shared by both men and women, there were also some gender-specific reasons. These included, for example, the women who joined the militias because they saw their participation as an act of gender liberation and an opportunity to free themselves from societal restrictions placed on them as women. However, only a small minority

of interviewees mentioned women's liberation as a motivational factor. The vast majority joined the fight for the same reasons as men. Non-violent political activism was a common route into participation in combat. Women who had been involved in non-violent political activism alongside the men did not see why they should not also fight when the war broke out.

The militias that (at least officially) believed in women's rights and gender equality responded with the least resistance to the women's calls to be included as fighters. This included, for example, the LCP, PFLP, and the CAO, which had the highest percentages of female fighters. Militias with a more ambiguous position on women's roles in political spaces, such as Kataeb, Fatah, and Amal saw a lower level of female involvement. However, female participation in combat was rendered possible even in militias whose gender ideology and leadership were not entirely in favor of women joining the armed fight due to external security pressures; ideological positions on the role of women in the war were at least temporarily overridden when the security context seemed to warrant it. This can be seen clearly when considering fluctuations in women's participation in combat over time. For example, in left militias, women's involvement was particularly high when the war first broke out in 1975, to decline again after the first round of fighting came to an end in 1976, and then rose again in 1982 when the Israeli army invaded. Similar trends could be observed for the other militias—although the turning points differed, because the militias' and communities' interpretation of the conflict did as well (for details, see Eggert, 2021).

Overall, the percentage of female fighters (even in the militias of the far left) in Lebanon was considerably lower than in other violent conflicts worldwide (see, for example, Henshaw, 2016). This was due to relatively high levels of societal opposition to female participation in the war, which remained in place throughout much of the war.

### **Transitioning from War to Peace: Men's and Women's Experiences**

No war lasts forever, and in Lebanon too, in 1990, over fifteen years after the outbreak of the fighting in 1975, the Civil War was declared to have ended. This time it was more than just another period of calm between episodes of heavy fighting. This time, the war really was over. Or was it? Several of the people I interviewed saw continuity rather than a clear-cut rupture, a sentiment that is also expressed by some researchers of recent Lebanese history (see, for example, Traboulsi, 2012). Indeed, many of the grievances that caused the war remain unaddressed, and

the supposed “end” of the war has been followed by several outbreaks of violence, including one full-fledged international war (Hirst, 2011; Traboulsi, 2012).

Either way, all the militias except for Hezbollah were dissolved and, like all people of Lebanon, the former fighters had to rebuild their lives and reinvent themselves as members of a society in peace time. Many were deeply disillusioned. Regardless of which faction they had belonged to, they had all seen their fight as a struggle for a better society. They had risked their lives for it, and seen comrades, friends and relatives die—but for what? The better society they had hoped for never came. Instead, they witnessed politicians and former militia leaders benefit from the post-war order. When I interviewed him in 2016, one former LCP fighter expressed his frustration as follows:

The leaders of the militias are still in power. To make peace, you have to pay a price. They didn't. They have been in power all the time for the last 26 years. Their own people, they throw them away [and tell them]: “find your way.” (Eggert, 2021, p. 128)

It is a general phenomenon that, once the fighting stops, female fighters give up their military—and often also political—roles. They were allowed to participate when their support was direly needed, but afterwards their continued involvement in politics is often not wanted (Alison, 2003; Gayer, 2012). This was also the experience of the female fighters who had given their all during the war. While some women faced gender-specific challenges (for example, some interviewees believed that it was harder for them to get married, because people were afraid of them), others thought that it was easier for women to reintegrate, as they could focus on a clearly defined role in their lives as homemakers, wives, and mothers. Considering the dominant narrative in Lebanese society that women were victims and not perpetrators of political violence, it is unlikely that many questions about what exactly the women were involved in during the war years were asked. While this must have made it easier to forget (or, rather, repress) these memories, it also made it harder to deal with this part of the women's—and their country's—past (see, for example, Foerch Saab, 2021).

### **From War to Peace: For Gender Justice and Anti-Sectarianism in Lebanon**

Indeed, in addition to the women's personal stories of transition from war to post-war, their experiences during and after the armed conflict also raises the bigger question of what it

means for a society to completely sideline the active participation of thousands of women in the civil war. What does it mean for memory and peacebuilding work when we exclusively view women as victims or opponents of war and men as perpetrators? Is it possible to fully grapple with the reasons for a war and the reasons for societal divides if the experiences of all people who participated in it are not considered? What difference could a full engagement with all of men's and women's roles in the war play for how we view gender roles in Lebanese society? Would addressing women's involvement in the war open opportunities to also revisit their contribution to the Lebanon of today? Could it help reinforce the message that weakness and strength are neither exclusively male nor female characteristics, and that men and women have capabilities that go beyond dominant gender stereotypes? If women were able to fight in the Civil War, have they not proven that they are capable of holding senior political and public roles after the war? If women were ready to give their life for their society, how can the same society deny them full enjoyment of their rights? Over 30 years after the end of the war, the percentage of women's involvement in formal Lebanese politics remains notoriously low (El-Hage, 2022; Mounzer, 2022) and they continue to be deprived of some of their basic rights, such as passing on their citizenship to their children (HRW, 2018). Could an honest engagement with women's roles in the war help change the minds of at least some of those who continue to block women's full participation and rights in Lebanese society?

Patriarchy in Lebanon is tied in with sectarianism in multiple ways (Geha, 2019; El-Hage, 2015). The same sectarian leaders that uphold the current political system prevent women from enjoying their full rights. Sectarianism victimizes all women while attempting to divide them. Could a focus on women's roles during the war and after help us to challenge that? After all, the women in all the various militias, regardless of their backgrounds (communist, socialist, Christian, Sunni, Shi'a, Druze, Lebanese, Palestinian, secular, religious) were essentially fighting for the same reason: because they wanted justice and freedom for their respective communities. Could acknowledging this commonality across political and sectarian divides help re-shift the focus on what people have in common rather than the things that divide them—a sentiment that was so vividly expressed by the October Revolution in 2019 and its focus on the principle of "*kellon yaani kellon*"<sup>4</sup> (Ayoub, 2019), which the country seems so direly to need? Maybe re-centering the

experiences of women during the Civil War (and after) can help rekindle the debate about conflict and peace in Lebanon? Not because women are “better people” and not because they are “inherently more peaceful” but because addressing the taboo of women’s participation in the War would mean that we are one step further to an honest grappling with the country’s past.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The war is usually considered to have ended in 1990, with the Taif Agreement which set out a path towards an end of the armed conflict being signed and ratified in October/November 1989, and the militias (other than Hezbollah) not being dissolved until 1991. Many of the grievances that had led to the outbreak of the war in 1975 were not addressed, which has led some (see, for example, Traboulsi, 2012) to claim that the war “never really ended.”

<sup>2</sup> Although usually referred to as one war, the period of 1975 to 1990 (and beyond) consisted of rounds of fighting, followed by calmer periods in much of the country. This inconsistent nature of the war has led some to speak of *wars* in the plural instead. There is also disagreement over the term *civil war*, due to the central role of international actors throughout the period of the war. I am part of those who believe that most civil wars include international actors and that using the term *civil war* does not deny this fact.

<sup>3</sup> Expressions in quotation marks in this section are quotes from the interview material generated during my field research in Lebanon.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase “*kellon yaani kellon*” (or “all of them means all of them” in English) was used by protesters during the October Revolution to express their opposition to all political leaders that are part of the establishment in Lebanon. It was a powerful expression of the hope for a state and society based on egalitarian citizenship rather than the exploitation of sectarian and class divides.

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