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Women in Lebanon Tell Their Lives

Introduction: Oral History

Oral history as research approach emerges partly from nineteenth century European romantic nationalism, with its enthusiasm for folk-lore and folk-narrative, partly from journalistic investigation into social conditions, for instance Mayhew's study of the London poor (1861) or, much later, the radio journalist Studs Terkel's classic study of the Great Depression (1970). Another contributory influence was the turn taken by historians towards material conditions, social relations, culture and 'mentalities'. Ironically, anthropology contributed little to oral history in spite of its primary focus on pre-literate peoples. This was because anthropologists like Malinowski believed that 'primitive' peoples either had no history, or did not know it.¹



Paul Thompson in his introductory book on oral history explains why most historians reacted with distrust to a method associated from its beginnings with the desire to record - hence implicitly to change - marginality.² He shows how oral history developed differently in France, Britain, the United States and other parts of the world, but how it has always been characterized by an interest in the local, the marginal and the 'unvoiced'. The Popular Memory Group takes the problematics of oral history further, tackling the problem of the effect of 'official' history on popular memory and the interaction between the 'public' and the 'private', offering a critical guide-lines on how life stories should be recorded and 'read'.³ On a practical level, oral history is increasingly being used in Third World projects, whether in public health campaigns, fighting desertification, mobilizing deprived communities, or to preserve indigenous knowledge of natural environments.⁴ In some countries oral history is used in schools to awaken children to their social environment. On the academic level, oral narratives are increasingly being used in research concerned with refugees, migrants, and other marginals.⁵

Up to now oral history has not found a place in university

curricula in the Arab world. Several factors may explain this strange omission: most Arab universities are state-controlled, with social study curricula built on 'classic' Western texts, with little attention to recent critical trends. In courses on methodology, the survey is dominant. Critiques of Western epistemology such as those made in *Subaltern Studies* are not to be found on Arab university reading lists. It may also be that the hierarchy of the written over the oral may be stronger in the Arab region than in, say, India which also possesses both literate and oral traditions. How otherwise explain the neglect of orality by social scientists in the Arab region? In spite of an enormously rich verbal culture, we find no teaching or research in sociolinguistics, little research focussed on everyday speech, few folklore studies, and almost no life story recording.⁶

The particular relevance of oral history for *Al-Raida* is that it has been widely used in feminist research, based in the personal character of women's oppression, and in the fact that modern feminist theory has been centrally concerned with the relation between the individual experience and social relations. The perception that 'the personal is political' inspired women both to write autobiographies and to record other women's life stories. Life story work with working class women, women in national or ethnic struggles, marginal women (excluded castes, deviants, colored immigrants in 'white' societies) is producing a burgeoning, theoretically exciting literature.⁷ Dominated until recently by non-Arab researchers, Arab and Middle Eastern women's studies have avoided the personal and the subjective. Written autobiographies and memoirs by Arab women are increasing - among them Fadwa Tuqan, Fatima Mernissi, Ambara Salam Khalidy, Evelyn Accad, and Bothaina Shaaban. Yet though oral life story recordings with women would enrich not only 'women's studies', but also our understanding of history, social structure and culture, such work remains rare.

Why Life Stories, Why Lebanon?

Al-Raida's editorial committee has long wanted to publish an oral history issue, and it seemed appropriate to make this

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first attempt coincide with the Special Issue commemorating the founding twenty five years ago of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW). The problem that first faced us was choice of topic: what particular subject would be both appropriate for the Special Issue, and certain to be illumined by using oral history methods? The editorial committee discussed several possibilities - Lebanese pioneer women, the women's movement, women in the Civil War, gender ideology in popular culture - and finally decided to record and publish the life stories of a cross-section of women living in Lebanon. By shifting the focus from 'Lebanese women' to 'women living in Lebanon' we aimed to underline the pluralism and mobility of the people who live in this geo-political space.

Life stories are a contested form within the social sciences, just as oral history is within history. Critics of life stories have accused them of not telling us enough about history; of artificiality and lack of focus; of over-emphasizing the individual 'I'; and of exploiting marginal women.⁸ It is obvious that life stories are not going to give us answers to specific questions that historians may have about past events, or anthropologists about contemporary structures and processes. But this kind of criticism emerges from a scientific and hierarchical approach to social research, one that draws a firm boundary between the public/political and personal/domestic, defining history as 'events' or 'facts', and minimizing both the relevance of the personal and the agency of the individual.

Oral and feminist historians, however, have argued that a total perspective on history, society and culture has to include the personal, the subjective, and the domestic.⁹ Historian/feminist theorist Joan Scott has demonstrated how the history of working class movements in 19th century Britain and France cannot be fully understood without reference to gender ideology.¹⁰ Italian historian Luisa Passerini used the life stories of male and female Italian workers to demonstrate the need to understand working class culture in order fully to understand politics and history.¹¹ These studies point to the necessity of exploring a series of intersections - between structure and culture, between the individual and society, between the political and the domestic/personal, between different levels within the 'self' - that life stories by their nature illumine.

Even life stories that do not directly speak to particular questions always tell us something important, as much through what is suppressed or 'forgotten' as what is voiced. Though the autonomy they give the speaker is never total, yet it is certainly greater than the question-and-answer format allows, however 'unstructured'. Its orality makes the life story closer to popular culture than more constrained kinds of social data. Further, the oral life story has value through the way it tends to express collective, historically-transmitted character stereotypes.¹² The orality of the life

story demarcates it from the written autobiography, making it less likely to form a developmental narrative of a singular 'I', and much more likely to testify to the situation of a collectivity with which the speaker identifies her/himself.¹³

We chose Lebanon as field for *Al-Raida's* first exercise in oral history work because of its ease of access, and because of our familiarity with it as residents and researchers. But given IWSAW's Arab scope we believe there should be an extension of this experiment to other Arab world areas, perhaps in collaboration with researchers working on oral narratives elsewhere.

In life story work, there is always the choice to be made between opposite strategies, that of maximizing or minimizing the number of speakers, with negative and positive consequences in either case. Some of the most interesting life story work has been done with a single speaker, as in the celebrated *I, Rigoberto*.¹⁴ Here the aim is not to represent a given collectivity but, through interpersonal intimacy, to gain in depth of understanding and interpretation. At the other extreme, when a researcher aims to portray a whole collectivity - whether a population, community, class or movement - representativity and comprehensiveness become vital aims, leading to a strategy of including as many 'types' as possible. Of course large samples reduce the time researchers can spend with individual speakers, lessening the chances of a true collaboration. This in turn may affect the quality of recall, what is told and what is not told, interpretation and 'writing up'.

At *Al-Raida*, we decided to opt for the maximum number of speakers, based on our perception of Lebanon as terrain for a very heterogeneous population, whether in terms of origin, class, sect, residence, occupation, or relationship to the state. We adopted the principle that choice of speakers should be based on categories of women that we - the research team - could identify from our own everyday knowledge. Hence our care to include noncitizens, recent citizens, foreign wives, and disadvantaged citizens; peripheral regions such as the Beqa' and the Israeli-occupied South as well as Greater Beirut; and 'ordinary' housewives as well as the professionals and self-employed workers to be found in such abundance.

Beyond the aim to represent social heterogeneity, fluctuation in Lebanon's recent history made it useful to vary the ages of our speakers. They are distributed roughly equally between those over fifty; those aged from thirty five to fifty; and those aged between twenty and thirty five. The childhood memories of the oldest speakers go back to French Mandate Lebanon, those of middle-aged speakers to early independence, while the youngest give us children's memories of the Israeli invasion of 1982. Another principle of selection was to choose less well-known women rather than those already locally famous through the press and

television chat-shows. Without asking speakers about their religion, we aimed not to omit or under-represent any of Lebanon's communities. Of course space limitation means that many occupational categories are un- or under-represented; we have only two of the hundreds of women who work in the state or municipal administration, only one of thousands of teachers.

Although we aimed not to intervene in the telling of the life stories, we agreed to put one question at the end: "How do you view Lebanon as a place for women to live in?" Though all the life stories carried implicit answers to this question, yet asking it brought explicit responses that indicated, first, the degree to which women reflect on gender conditions, and compare them between the different countries they know from periods of migration, travel, or television. It also revealed an extreme diversity of perspectives. But, more significantly, responses showed that for many women attachment to Lebanon, or desire for its reform, took priority over gender conditions.

Most recordings were carried out in the speaker's home, often with family members or friends present. Narrators were invited to use whatever language they preferred. Translating and transcription were carried out by the researcher who did the recording. The transcripts were discussed by editor and researcher in an effort to find English equivalents that preserve speakers' meanings and style, and to clarify unclear points. When speakers used English or French in the middle of Arabic we tried to convey this linguistic pluralism, using " " to indicate where such language switches have been made. Space limits constrained us to make cuts, in some cases substantial ones. We apologize to any speaker who feels her story has been deformed. Three speakers asked to see their transcripts before publication, and were able to do so.¹⁵

Lebanon as Space for Women

Here I try to outline characteristics - structural and cultural - that give Lebanon its specificity as context for women's lives. I shall not attempt an historical background - there are many excellent sources.¹⁶ What I shall focus on is not Lebanon's history, political system or culture in the formal sense, but rather on the people who inhabit Lebanon, their heterogeneity in terms of origin, status vis-a-vis the state, class, region of residence, and community; and how this heterogeneity interacts with gender. I shall also try to indicate some aspects of the politico-legal and economic system that affect women's lives.

Underlying - and sometimes at odds with - its Arabicity, Lebanon has always been an area to which people have migrated. They have come from everywhere, primarily the Arab hinterland, but also other parts of the Ottoman empire, and both western and eastern Europe.¹⁷ Lebanon's geographical position brought early penetration by Western

traders and Christian missionaries, adding to the plurality of cultural institutions and influences. It is also an area *from* which people have migrated to every corner of the world, producing a diaspora comparable to that of Greeks, Armenians, Jews and Palestinians.¹⁸ Migration has had various demographic and cultural consequences, in terms of citizenship, marriage, continuing contact, eventual return.¹⁹ A relatively large sector of the population has lived abroad, has relatives in the diaspora, and speaks more than one language. Further, the population contains a substantial number whose citizenship is recent; in addition, Lebanon contains a large, multi-racial, multi-class, ex-patriate sector, including around 350,000 Palestinian refugees, as well as non-Arab workers. These noncitizens occupy specific niches in the economy and class/sect structure.

Since Independence (1943), population mobility has also taken the form of rural-to-urban migration, with Beirut growing to absorb around half the resident population, a process greatly speeded up by Israeli attacks against the South. Already well established before the Civil War, mobility was immensely increased by the years of fighting, during which it is estimated that more than 800,000 people left Lebanon, sometimes permanently, but often to return with new perspectives, new skills and children educated abroad. The cultural effects of such frequent and varied displacements have not been studied; what is undoubted is the mass nature of this movement, whether voluntary or coercive, which has left few families in Lebanon untouched.

Any discussion of Lebanon as context for women must foreground the upheavals and military conflicts that have occurred since Independence. During the last twenty five years there have been three Israeli invasions, the occupation of a large part of South Lebanon, and continual attacks on civilian as well as military targets. In addition, there have been all the battles that preceded and followed the 'Two Year War' (1975/6), and that continued even after the Ta'ef Accords (1989). The whole period has been filled with displacement, loss of life, and the destruction of property and infrastructure. Women have been part of this multiple conflict not only as victims, they have also participated as fighters, party activists, and peace-makers - in Beirut on 30 November, 1986, women from both sides tried to cross the 'Green Line' in an effort to end fighting. After 1982, women also organized a movement to liberate the 'arrested and disappeared'. There is still no general picture of how this longdrawn out conflict affected women and gender, though some of their varied experiences were recorded in a special issue of *Al-Raida* on the war.²⁰

Like Palestine with which its history is closely tied, Lebanon's geographical position made it a gateway for multiple cultures, ideologies and fashions, adding to its pre-modern cultural heterogeneity. Catholic Europe and Protestant America established important teaching institutions here and, as elsewhere, women were

particularly targeted by foreign missionary and educational activity. Lebanon's three decades under French Mandate was a formative period during which its boundaries were enlarged, its legal system established, and the outline of a sectarian state system laid down. France also left a strong imprint on language and culture. Yet Lebanon was also from the late 19th century the historical site of the Nahda, an Arabic cultural renaissance; and Arabism has been a mainstream ideological current contesting westernizing tendencies. A third language (English) and culture (American) have become increasingly powerful through globalizing institutions to which they are allied - US-style business, American universities, satellite TV, communication technologies. Other languages and cultures exist besides the 'big three', based in immigrant communities (eg. the Armenian), returned emigrants, and foreign cultural institutes with their local 'circles' (see Esther Qamar, this issue).

But though Lebanon has been characterized as 'multicultural' and 'open', this has not worked towards a 'globalization' of gender. With gender norms embedded within mobilizing notions such as 'authenticity' and 'identity', authoritarian tendencies have focused around women, setting limits to their 'individualization' that only the very determined escape. Though these limits are variable rather than fixed, breaching them may lead to family violence against women that the legal system condones. The importance of family - a recurrent theme in the life stories as in social science writing about Lebanon - necessarily implicates gender, since it is in family settings that the hierarchies of age and gender are performed and absorbed, with family 'honor' a value that ranks families socially while unifying them discursively. With rapid sociocultural change, gender norms are re-drafted as symbols of cultural authenticity and national identity, that is as values that have to be preserved.

Social science writing often assumes that the education of women leads automatically to expansion in their employment, but the two trends need to be looked at separately. In Lebanon, until recently, not all educated women worked, and most working women were not highly educated. The majority of university-educated women either married immediately after graduation, or worked briefly until marriage; after marriage they often took up social work or personal vocations. The model family remained that of the single male wage-earner and the *sitt-fil beit* ('lady-in-the house'), a formula underwritten by controlled rents and tax evasion. This was so in spite of the 'pioneer women' who worked as teachers and doctors in the Arab world, or migrated alone to North America.²¹ It was only with the post-Civil War rise in standards and costs of living that middle and lower-middle class households felt the necessity of more than one salary (see Nasima Yusif, this issue). At another class level, unschooled women worked because of need, mainly in agriculture, house-cleaning, or

industry (see Sukna Khal, Adele Kerbaj, Mary Abu Kalam, Alia Fattah, Jeannette Martinez, 'Umm Hadeer', this issue). Yet high levels of education and employment for women in Lebanon have not yet had a radicalizing effect on gender norms.

Women's early visibility in social life, business, the arts, professional and manual labor, contrasts oddly with their almost total absence from the Lebanese political arena. On the one hand we have the early enfranchisement of women (1953), constitutional equality and a democratic political system; on the other, a striking absence of women from politics and upper levels of the state even compared with other Arab countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, where women have become Cabinet Ministers, heads of departments, judges, ambassadors, and members of Parliament. In Lebanon there have been only four women deputies since independence, all linked by family to the political elite. This is a paradox that Lebanese women have different 'takes' on, with some believing that women shouldn't compete with men in the public arena; others that family comes first; others that women themselves are to blame if they don't activate their rights (see Hiba Kawas, this issue). Yet others are beginning to compete (see Nasima Yusif, this issue). The veterans of the women's movement continue to work for the greater participation of women in politics and, as with employment, this situation may be changing. At the recent municipal elections (August 1998), several women candidates presented themselves, and between mayors, councillors and *mukhtaras*, one hundred and twenty one were elected.

For many Lebanese feminists, among them the late Laure Moghaizel, the main instrument for reproducing gender norms in Lebanon is a political system which gives control of personal status affairs to religious/sectarian courts.²² This system both reproduces sectarian communities by pressuring members to marry within them (civil marriage doesn't exist in Lebanon), and deprives them of any alternative court of appeal. Though different in detail, the family codes of all the sects are biased against women (see Raqiya Osseiran, this issue).

It is ironic to recall that, earlier in this century, Beirut was a centre of Arab feminist journals and women's movements, in common with Damascus and Cairo.²³ Educated Lebanese women like Mai Ziadeh and Julia Dimeshkieh took part in the Nahda. Others were educators, nationalists and feminists.²⁴ Several published memoirs, notably that of Ambara Salam Khalidy, point to the interweaving of nationalist and feminist motivations among pre-Independence women activists. Some historians say that the Lebanese women's movement was at its peak just before and just after Independence. Though its history has not yet been researched, we may speculate that among several factors inhibiting its growth have been: i) the rapid expansion of commercial, intellectual, and aesthetic

professions for women; and ii) the appeal of alternative collective frameworks – political parties, sectarian institutions, NGOs – that compete for women's public energies. The appeal of these alternative frameworks can be felt in Khadija Herez's life story (this issue), and in Dalal Bizri's study of Hizbollah women.²⁵

Narrators and Narratives

This editorial cannot comment comprehensively on the life stories presented here, they are too varied and too rich. I shall limit myself to a few general observations. To begin with, let me note the multiple internal differences they illuminate.

The age spread of our speakers is not perfect but it does include women from almost every decade since World War I, with a slight majority born after 1963. In terms of class, though a large group of speakers is positioned somewhere in the middle (8), a larger number (10) were born in poverty, and have worked and scraped to achieve a minimally decent standard. One of our speakers is destitute ('Marie'), and two others can be described as 'poor'. At the other end of the scale we have six speakers who can tentatively be classified as 'wealthy'. Of course such class-classification is crude, since some important elements are invisible (eg. connections). One point that emerges with relative clarity is the link between class and urban/rural residence. Most of the poorest speakers come from, and still live in, rural areas. The wealthy and upwardly mobile 'middle' are mainly Beirutis; if not born there, they have moved there for purposes of education and work.

In terms of regional distribution, we recorded with women who originate in the North, the South, the Shouf mountains, Saida, Tripoli, the Beqa'. Only six speakers were born in Beirut though eighteen are currently living there. This pattern is even visible in a single life story: as a newly graduated teacher, Raqiya Osseiran was first sent to the deep South, to Bint Jbeil; later she was transferred to her home-town, Saida; and later still, after marriage to a state official, her work shifted to Beirut. Association between Beirut and a successful career is evident in several of professional women's stories, for example that of fashion designer Loulwa Abdel Baki, musician Hiba Kawas, iconographer Lena Kelekian, urbanist Maha Yehia, and surgeon-to-be Dalal Aziz.

Sectarian affiliation was a problem for us. On principle we needed to achieve a rough sectarian balance, yet on principle we were unwilling to endorse Lebanese sectarianism even minimally by asking speakers what sect they belonged to. What is interesting, however, is the absence of sectarian references from speech. Thus, though several of the life stories are impregnated with religious feeling, only two or three make clear reference to religious

affiliation, beliefs, or practices. This does not mean, of course, that they are not practicers. Rather it should be interpreted as a result of the politicization of sect in Lebanon, so that people suppress such references, whether from discretion or from political principle. A few of the speakers indicated beliefs that might be called 'theosophical', suggesting a desire to transcend sectarian politics. Yet others – Nada Moghaizel Nasr, Loulwa Abdel Baki, Sylvana Lakkis – expressed a reformist nationalism that is explicitly anti-sectarian.

As noted earlier, Lebanon's population shows an extreme degree of variation of status vis-a-vis the state. Beyond the simple dichotomy of citizens/noncitizens, there are variations within the citizenry (eg. between longterm and recent citizens), as well as within the noncitizen category, differentiated along racial, class and status lines.²⁶ Our sample shows some of this variety, containing a Palestinian refugee, three citizens whose parents or grandparents migrated to Lebanon, and two who have become Lebanese through marriage. Discrimination within the citizen category is underlined by the story of Sylvana Lakkis. Victim of polio, it was only through persistence that she managed to exercise her rights to education and work.

These life stories illustrate the indirectness of relationship between personal stories and history. Two speakers, Raqiya Osseiran and Esther Qamar, briefly recall French Mandate days, and the demonstrations surrounding Independence. The war years are present in most narratives, but they only dominate two: Umm Ragheb's, who has lost sons and nephews, and Khadija Herez's, for whom war meant activism, imprisonment and family rupture. For others, war brought destruction of home (Jeannette Martinez), displacement inside Lebanon, or a move abroad. For others again, it meant exposure to shells or kidnapping by militias, or daily danger. A few hardly mention the war. We would surely be wrong to infer that such omission means not having been affected by it. More likely it is due to avoidance of a painful subject, a form of 'forgetting'.

The age stretch of our speakers produced pictures of historic change in childhood, professional opportunity, marriage, and housework, as history interacts with region and class. The most striking finding to emerge from these comparisons is the immense difference made to girls' lives by being born in an urban or a rural milieu. Esther Qamar, Raqiya Osseiran, and Bushra Haffar, city girls, all achieved high levels of education, though born before 1920. Women from villages – Myassar Ismail (born 1935), Adele Kerbaj (1937), Khadija Herez (1942), Nasima Yusif (1947) – give wonderful descriptions of growing up in the country, but all were either prevented from going to school, or had their education cut short by marriage. The growing importance of education is evident from those younger speakers who remember little of their childhoods except study (eg. Dalal Aziz, Maha Yehia). Age comparisons show increasing

freedom for women to enter 'male' professions - Vasso Salam (born 1948) was at first refused admission to the Architecture Department at the American University of Beirut. Dalal Aziz (born 1972) was able to study surgery at the American University Hospital. It is significant that almost all speakers in 'unconventional' professions - work in human rights, art, film-making, fashion, music, urbanism, sports - were born after 1960. All are from urban backgrounds, and most are unmarried. Housework plays little or no part in their lives.

Ambition for education emerges as one of the unifying themes of this set of life stories. Most of the speakers who didn't go to school expressed a still-bitter regret (especially Myassar Ismail, Jeannette Martinez, and Alia Fattah). Memorable descriptions are given by Myassar and Khadija Herez of listening outside the classroom while their brothers learn inside. Speakers who were lucky or bright enough to 'complete their education' emphasize its subjective importance: Bushra Haffar who got through university while giving birth to children, still dreams of a PhD. Reem Haddad links education to independence, a supreme value for her. For Sylvana Lakkis, education in Czechoslovakia was the breakthrough in discovering her rights. Nada Moghaizel Nasr finds working in education (training teachers) a perfect amalgam of giving to society and learning more herself. Several speakers - Maha Yehia, Hiba Kawas, Rania Stephan - are still engaged in complex educational and work trajectories.

The generational structuring of the sample similarly enables an historical perspective regarding the work women did and do. Women's productivity has clearly been high through the whole period covered, whether in formal employment, in voluntary work, in paid labor outside the home, in money-saving labor inside the home, or in work not primarily aimed at income-earning ('hobbies'). What changes is the kind of work society allows women to do, and the part played by work in a woman's life and sense of 'self'. Work formerly considered unsuitable for women has opened up to them. For many of the younger women in this collection, their work is part of their identity. "My life began when I started working" (Mirella Abdel Sater). "For me, work is not a transitional period, it *is* my life"(Maha Yehia). But this degree of commitment must meet head on a societal conception of woman that identifies her with childbearing; a conception that allows women to work, but only temporarily, and only in kinds of work that don't interfere with her ultimate vocation. Women forced by necessity to work are all women born in rural areas, deprived of schooling. Two were orphans. No surprise there! Yet though their work never supersedes family relations, they may express pride in being providers (Jeannette Martinez, Alia Fattah), or enjoyment in the work itself (Adele Kerbaj), or identification with a prestigious institution (Mary Abu Kalam).

It could not be expected that single-session life story recordings would yield the frankness about sexuality that we find in Brazilian Women Speak.²⁷ It is quite understandable that speaking 'for the record' should impose self-censorship. Given prevalent speech norms, it is noteworthy that some speakers expose the failings of husbands (eg. Raqiya Osseiran, 'Umm Hadeer', Marie), or difficulties of relationships (Rania Stephan). Marie's verbal promiscuity forms a marked contrast to a general suppression of sexual reference, underlining a 'good'/'bad' dichotomization of women prevalent in so many societies and periods. One senses that for most women here gender problems are too complex an issue to broach within the limited chronological format of a single-session life story.

The question of Lebanon as context for women aroused very different responses. A rather large segment - mainly older speakers - responded primarily as nationals, foregrounding their attachment to Lebanon and their preference for living here rather than anywhere else, evoking social warmth and family solidarity. Younger speakers are noticeably more ambivalent and critical: Mirella Abdel Sater dissociates herself from people who continually downgrade Lebanon, but admits that to be Lebanese is no privilege. Maha Yehia deplores the extent of poverty and squalor. Vasso Salam praises the warmth of Lebanese social life, but attacks post-war destruction of habitat and environment. Loulwa Abdel Baki inveighs against the current Lebanese scene, which she sees as characterized by corruption and unconcern for the country's future. Nada Moghaizel Nasr similarly emphasizes concern for Lebanon; her evocation of the phrase 'balad/walad' (the country is like one's child) points to an interesting assimilation between maternalism and nationalism. Sylvana Lakkis's is a rare voice noting that handicapped women bear a double burden. For what is striking in most of these critiques is that gender plays so little part in them. Women speak less from a consciousness of inequality as women than from their dissatisfaction as Lebanese citizens with the state of the country. Perhaps it is true to say that while gender-based experience pervades all these life stories, their narrators speak to us primarily as social beings, as embedded in a society and region going through political, social and cultural upheavals that make gender problems secondary.

Conclusion: Assessing the Experience

One of the most interesting aspects of this project was its unfamiliarity for researchers and speakers alike. The five-member research team - Myriam, Ghena, Zeina, Dania, and Michelle - are either journalists or social science graduates, trained to formulate questions that probe some particular aspect of 'social reality'. It went against the grain of their training to confront a 'subject' without a list of questions. For the speakers, too, telling their own life story was

difficult. A minority were comfortable with the life story concept, but most asked specific questions as guides. And for most, the main difficulty was not where to begin, but how to continue, how to move from one episode or 'landmark' to another. They got stuck, expressed fear of being 'boring', or of leaving out something important, or not getting things in the right (ie. chronological) order. This problem in fact masked another, the selection of material: what in their lives was important, what was interesting, what was worthy to be told to readers of *Al-Raida*? Reem Haddad locates one reason for such fears when she talks about 'modesty' training; and other speakers note the unaccustomed nature of speaking about themselves. Particularly for women, rules of discourse repress speech about 'self' (hence the tendency of many older women to use 'we' rather than 'I'). Between the mundane stories that people tell in family and neighborhood settings and a story to be recorded and published there lies a formidable hierarchical boundary which is not easy to cross. Another problem is the way exposure to newsprint and television has stamped the question-and-answer format on popular consciousness, encouraging the expression of 'opinions' but discouraging reflection on the 'self'. It is for this reason that the life stories mostly took the form of conversations - and we have reproduced them this way - rather than monologues. It is much to the credit of the researchers that they showed patience and persistence, and succeeded in eliciting a fine set of narratives. The speakers are equally to be congratulated on their sincerity, cooperation, and effort of recall.

Given the end of the boundary between 'public' and 'private', I'd like to thank all those who made the task of editing this issue of *Al-Raida* so memorable - narrators, researchers, everyone in *Al-Raida* office, Mr Nabil Najjar and the LAU photography group, Zouheir at Technopress, and the indefatigable Myriam.

End Notes

- 1 Anthropologists' neglect of indigenous oral histories is changing, partly as a result of Vansina's work in Africa: Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (New York: Routledge, 1965).
- 2 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 1978) provides an historical overview and comprehensive lists of classic texts, including Mayhew's *London Labor and the London Poor* (1861), and Studs Terkel's *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970).
- 3 "Oral histories are complex cultural products involving interrelations ... between private memories and public representations, between past experiences and present situations": The PMG theorize speakers as 'social individuals', who "speak out of particular positions in the complex of social relations characteristic or particular societies at particular historical times": Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory: theory, politics, method" in Richard Johnson et al. eds., *Making Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p 241.
- 4 See Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, *Listening for a Change: Oral History and Development* (London: Panos Publications Ltd, 1993).

- 5 Eg. Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).
- 6 There are of course exceptions: Hilma Granqvist made scrupulous use of oral recordings in her studies of Palestinian peasants in the 1930s. Scholars who have studied beduin groups have given recorded speech centrality. In the Palestinian field, oral history recording is increasingly being used as a form of struggle against 'silencing'. There has also been growth in work on Arab folk-tales, informal narratives, and life stories (much of it done by women scholars).
- 7 Some useful readings: Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham, *Dutiful Daughters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); Susan Geiger "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content", *Signs* vol 11 no 2, 1986; The Personal Narrative Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989).
- 8 See discussion of the life story in Rosemary Sayigh, "Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical and Methodological Issues", in Deniz Kandiyoti ed., *Gendering the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p 156.
- 9 See Kumkum Sanghari and Sudesh Vaid eds., *Recasting Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); also Jo Stanley, "Including the Feelings: Personal Political Testimony and Self-Disclosure", *Oral History*, vol 24 no 1, 1996.
- 10 Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- 11 Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- 12 See Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, p 19-63.
- 13 Because of its orality, the life story resembles the 'testimonio' as genre particularly suited to the recording of experiences of marginality: see John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio" in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson eds., *De/Colonizing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
- 14 Rigoberta Menchu with Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, *I Rigoberta: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984).
- 15 It was interesting to find that changes made were often away from orality towards a more formal, written style.
- 16 Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988).
- 17 Among them Turkmen, Armenians, white Russians, Poles, Kurds, Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis.
- 18 See Albert Hourani ed., *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992).
- 19 Migration from Lebanon has been mainly to the United States, Latin America, Canada and Africa, but also since the Civil War to Europe and Australia.
- 20 *Al-Raida*, vol XII, nos 70 and 71, 1995.
- 21 Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), reviewed in *Al-Raida* vol XV, no 82, Summer 1998.
- 22 Laure Moghaizal, *Al-Mar'a fi al-Tashri' al-Lubnani* (Beirut: IWSAW, 1985).
- 23 See Thomas Philipp's list of magazines in "Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt", Julia Beck and Nikki Keddie eds., *Women in the Middle Eastern Women* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Out of 15 magazines listed, nine were published in 'Syria'.
- 24 On outstanding Lebanese women, see Shereen Khairallah, *Sisters of Men* (Beirut: IWSAW, 1996).
- 25 Dalal Bizri, *L'ombre et son double: femmes islamistes libanaises et modernes* (Beyrouth: CERMO, 1995). See also Yolla Polity-Sharara, "Women and Politics in Lebanon", *Khamsin* no 6, 1978.
- 26 Status differences within the noncitizen category include: refugees, immigrant workers, voluntary ex-patriates, foreign wives. Conditions of work or of naturalization differ between them.
- 27 Daphne Patai, *Brazilian Women Speak* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).