

Ilham Kallab: Women and War in Lebanon Goethe Institute 10 - 5 - 84 Beirut

Early this year, Dr. Ilham Kallab Professor of Sociology at the Lebanese University and author of studies on women and children,⁽¹⁾ gave a conference (in French) on Women and War in Lebanon.

Although only an «introduction» to the subject, (to use the words of the author), this conference includes many interesting observations about the role Lebanese women played during the last 10 years of war.

What we present here is an abridged and translated version of a 12 page, unpublished text.

Many debates and disputes have taken place around the participation of the Lebanese woman in war. Her absence from the battle-field, as well as her lack of participation in the reconciliation processes, have been evoked as well as her timid attempts to be a pacifying factor. Some privileged women had the chance to publish, to speak and to be heard, but they remained a minority.

What interests us here is to answer a series of questions: Where was the Lebanese woman in this war? Did she have a proper typical behavior, a voice all for her own? What could she do amidst this violence that others had decided and created and that she had to submit to? Has there been a new definition of her insertion in national life and of her role as a citizen? Or has she only been a victim that lived through the war with sensations of the futility of life and death, of insecurity, fear and impotence?

One should consider these questions and many more when one looks at women and war in Lebanon. But first of all let's look briefly at Lebanese women before the war.

Before the war, many Lebanese women had produced good literary and artistic works. A rapid and steady evolution characterized the march of women towards controlling their own destiny and their right to speak for themselves. In almost every field a feminine voice arose, affirming itself as a human voice, one transcending the habitual masculine/feminine dichotomy. Testimonies of a new life to come appeared and women started to rid themselves of their historical hang ups. They began to find more realistic ways of dealing with their work, their lives and their creative talents.... All dreams were permitted.... Everything women produced in literature, art, science, education, economy etc..., heralded the coming of a real liberation and evolution..., until the war came.

With the war a kind of blockage happened paralysing the sensitivities of men and women alike. A fall in creativity started to be increasingly felt as each year passed. Patience, which is necessary for every creative work, started wearing thin. A certain «mental anemia» started characterizing everything that was written and produced.

Few people, I believe, are proud of their production during those years of war for we projected a certain perfection and we only got the average.

In sum, if the literary and artistic productions before the war were the result of a leap forward, those during the war were the fruit of a profound split between the creator's personal plight and his/her desire to be a good citizen. Before the war everything was promising and qualitative; during the war things arrived to a stalemate and lost their universality.

Moreover, women have suffered from the war by the mere fact of their gender and more specifically in their roles as wives, daughters, and mothers. As wives their fate was affected by that of their men,

as mothers their function as «givers of life» was deeply perturbed by being continuously subjected to death, to fanaticism and to insecurity.

Thus we can say that a new categorization of women emerged during the war. Women could no more be divided into professional women versus housewives, nor into rich versus poor (although being rich permitted many to escape the country and live abroad). All women from all regions and socio-economic classes suffered, for war was all-embracing.

However, if we want to divide women into certain categories according to what they did and how they performed during the war, the following divisions emerge:

a) **Women who maintained a more or less normal rhythm of life.**

These women, who will not be mentioned in history books, maintained the normalcy of everyday living by performing humble and repetitious tasks (fetching water, bread etc...)⁽²⁾ They calmly and patiently wove (and are still weaving) the history of a bleeding country by a strong and continuous faith in life.

b) **Women who wanted to participate in war or war-related activities.**

By being nurses, first-aiders and social workers, or by fighting in the militias.

This second category of women, who fought the battles with men is definitely a minority. Their rarity propelled them in the public eye, and they are «used» for publicity purposes. As for the first category it is only a crystalization of a woman's traditional role; the man makes war and the woman heals the wounded. These women are necessary, they do not bother anyone; they do not decide anything, they repair.

c) **Women heads of households.**

This phenomenon appeared mainly during the war because many men were obliged to live away from their families, either as fighters or as migrant workers (Gulf countries mainly). Women found themselves the main authority figure in the family, they had to make decisions alone and

take on the double responsibility of being a mother and a father at the same time. This event was beneficial for women. It also changed the image of masculinity and power in the eyes of children. The image of a strong and protective male started thinning down when children saw the mother in control. Moreover, no one could be superior to bombs and shelling, which were the supreme commanding power.

d) **Widows,**

We now have in Lebanon what could be described as «the widowhood of war», which is an alarming and acute problem. These women, whose husbands died, found themselves suddenly without any moral or material support, after having mainly depended on their men. Moreover, family law in Lebanon deals with widows as minors, thus irresponsible for their children's future. It imposes a male tutor or guardian to take care of the children's wealth and education. And it is only by permission from a civil or religious tutor that a woman can become responsible for her children. This law applies to all religious faiths.

e) **Displaced women**

The war has resulted in the displacement of many families, either from one part of a city to another or from one region to another. This change of residence meant an adaptation to new customs and a change of old ones. It also meant that women bore the main brunt of this change, whether it was negative or positive. Economic hardships, due to loss of jobs, houses or land, pushed women to work outside the house to earn money. So, even if the decision to work was brought up because of economic reasons, this increase in the percentage of working women had a noticeable effect on society as a whole.

References:

- (1) «Hiya Tatbukh, Huwa Yakra'», (The Image of Woman in Children Schoolbooks in Lebanon) published by the Institute For Women's Studies in the Arab World, BUC, Beirut 1983.
- (2) See Juliette Haddad's testimony p. 8.