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During ten years of war in Lebanon, women, except for a few who fought with militias, played no major role either in the politics of the country or in its military destiny.

However they did play an indisputable role in the preservation of the social structure.

Violence threatened to tear apart the structure of society everywhere. In villages, towns, and cities, women helped to maintain a certain coherence, and sometimes even to restructure the network of social relations. Some examples from everyday life illustrate this:

1. The damage inflicted by the war brought us back to an **elementary level of needs**. Much time and energy was channelled into finding water, bread, and light (electricity often being non-existent).

These tasks became the woman's lot... her traditional role. The constraints of war seemed to revive and reinforce traditional practice.

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However, the urgency of the war and the determination to face it gave these traditional tasks a new meaning.

Women from the same building, who before the war barely said hello to each other, started gathering around water points. As weeks passed, they developed stronger ties, some leading to solid friendships.

When bread was scarce, women reverted to traditional ways of baking it, like Sabriyyeh who started making Lebanese mountain bread on an iron board using old newspapers as fuel, or Sitt Hind who baked shortbreads on her gas stove.

It was difficult to satisfy even life's elementary needs but the extremity of the situation channelled women's inventiveness and initiative. They adapted traditional methods meant for a different era and environment to the war-torn city environment.

2. But life does not depend on bread and water alone! The fact that schools have remained operating despite the long years of violence is due mainly to... women.

The instinctive reaction of a mother is to gather her children around her in times of danger. This was the initial response of mothers at the beginning of the war.

In October 1975, all schools in Beirut were closed, but in November one school opened after few women teachers decided to perform their duties as well as was possible. The school soon swarmed with children who came from everywhere, children of all ages, even the very young.

What was the motive of the parents? It was a refusal to «bury» the children in a «mouse-hole» at home, as slaves to TV and card-playing all day long.

Lebanese women preferred the permanent anguish and risk of sending their children to school rather than keeping them at home with an illusion of security. School means an opening up to a possible new and different future and an affirmation of the will to believe in that future.

3. In another refusal to be crushed, Lebanese women have expressed superbly a constant concern to be beautifully groomed.

Whatever anguish or insecurity they have felt during the last ten years of war, the women of Lebanon have kept their «will to please and be pleasant» intact. The care women have given to their clothes and beauty implies more than «coquetterie». It signals a will to resist, a desire to stand up and to live. I'm deliberately ignoring the financial factor in being dressed up to concentrate on the psychological one. The psychological attitude of Lebanese women during those long and difficult years has been a refusal to bow to despair, to the atmosphere of violence and to issues of basic survival.

4. One is not subjected to a violent situation for such a long time without suffering negative consequences, especially when violence defies individual as well as communal commonsense. Interpretations of the reasons for this war and its various episodes abound and clash. For most, there was no chance of looking at events from an objective perspective or of explaining them rationally. Life and experience were lived on emotional levels, and led to a multiplicity of reactions and a tendency to escapism. People were often left with the illusion of an answer, of protection, of compensation.

This **retreat of rationalism** hit women as well as men. However despite the cliché of women being more emotional than men, Lebanese women seem to have proved more resistant to the irrational. They have been more «rooted in life» and in closer contact with the realities of everyday life. In my opinion, a major sign of the rejection of the irrational has been the refusal to resort to violence.

5. «One of the effects of war is to crystallize latent

aggression, one of the necessary components of every social reality. This polarizes and hardens the gap between friends and enemies... Everything that comes from the enemy is bad and everything that we are is good»⁽¹⁾.

Women have tried to counter-balance this atmosphere of hatred by manifesting a pro-life attitude. Their main worry, in the midst of continuous outbursts of violence, has been to care for life, to firmly refuse violence and its sterile logic.

When we found ourselves, all these diverse families of one building, in a shelter, the men would express their feelings of fright and anger against «the others» in verbal violence. But a moment would always come when a woman would raise her voice to answer back and declare that both «over there» and «over here», all those who were dying were human beings. They were sons of mothers like them who would be crying against death and because of it. Hating and killing were no solutions for either side, and the women said so...

Despite this atmosphere of insecurity and impermanence, nurses and social workers never ceased giving their help and care without discrimination or favouritism. Many eye-witness accounts attest to that.

The same applied to school staff and teachers in multi-confessional schools.

I conclude that the woman of Lebanon who found herself concerned with the service of life in a crucial way affirmed herself deliberately as a guardian of life and preserver of its quality. Starting by securing life's elementary needs, water and bread, she moved on to preserve life's more sophisticated reality.. social relations.

In this context of death and ugliness, of fear and violence and of unending hostilities, the Lebanese women's traditional role took on a very «modern» and valuable dimension.

Day after day and with stubborn tenacity the women of Lebanon tried their best to «exorcise fear», to maintain the will to live and to renew hopes for the future of brotherhood and peace.

(1) Gaston Bouthoul, «Les Mentalités,» **Collection Que Sais je?** PUF 1966, pp. 50 - 51.

Also from the same author, «Les Guerres, Elements de Polemologie», Payot ed. 1951.