

The Effects of War on Women in Lebanon

Paper presented by Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr
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Le Centre d'Etudes Arab pour le Developmnet (CEAD)/The Arab Center for Studies on Development organized a one week Conference entitled Pour Le Liban/For The Lebanon. The Conference covered a variety of topics and the works of a prominent Lebanese film producer, composer, economist, politician and researcher. Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr, Director of the Institute for women's Studies in the Arab World, Beirut University college presented the paper on the Effect of the War on Women and Children. Below is the chapter concerning the effect of war on women .

Everytime the issue of war comes up I remember Red Buttlar (Clark Gable) in the Classic *Gone with the Wind* warning the men at Tara against going to war. He tells them "when the war is over you will all ask yourselves why you fought it?" He also explained to them that the main accomplishment of wars is destruction and loss of lives.

Later as the movie unfolds, we witness Scarlet O'Hara cutting the drapes to sow her dress, spending her days painfully washing and cooking, cunningly maintaining whatever is left of the estate, giving destitute soldiers something to eat and a place to stay for the night, killing to save her family's life and property, caring for the sick, and teaching the children to read. And the punch that few might have noticed

is when her sister laments: "Why did this war happen, Why?"

The Lebanese woman, like Scarlet O'Hara radiated with life and beauty before the war. During the war and in a similar manner, she struggled to remain afloat, living under harsh circumstances and in the most destructive and discouraging conditions, without as much as a notice to her opinion about the political, military or economic mainstreams of war-society. But like Scarlet O'Hara, the Lebanese woman saved the most precious things in life: the family and her integrity and consequently her country, her Tara.

The comparison of *Gone With The Wind* with the History of the war in Lebanon, and Tara with the condition of the country or Scarlet with the Lebanese woman is not meant to be comic. It is far from being a visual description of the war of Lebanon or of its people notably the women, but it provides an idea of what the women went through and how they coped.

When we speak of war and society and when we decide to concentrate on women being half of the population and an integral segment of society we are incumbered with conceptual and practical variables. It is complex and we therefore must divide our issue into parts and the parts into chapters. The first part can comprise the Effects of the War on Women with chapters analyzing psychological effects, stress syndromes as well as economic, political, employment, education, health, infrastructure, environment,

child care, social customs, humanitarian activities, legal and human rights, not to mention gender relations. The second part involves the Coping Strategies, both intentional and unintentional. The chapters of this part would represent the actual developments and unfoldings of Part I.

Hence, the situation is paradoxical because, along with the laws of destruction, new pro-life laws of survival emerge, affirming the never-ending human ability to start from scratch time after time all over again (1). The involvement of the women of Lebanon in the laws of destruction was practically inexistent. They did not initiate the war nor encouraged it. In fact it disregarded their existence altogether. Women had no say when the war started, neither in the decision-making processes nor in the efforts to achieve reconciliation. Their roles were that of a recipient of the consequences and the outcomes of the war on one hand, and maker and manufacturer of the laws of survival on the other hand.

EFFECTS OF THE WAR ON WOMEN:

In very simple terms, the war made life extremely difficult not to mention dangerous. It caused at least partial destruction of the country's infrastructure. In addition to loss of safety and security, basic domestic facilities were most hardly hit. Hence, food supplies had to be secured in

very hazardous conditions, water supply, electricity and their safety measures were barely available. Sending the children to school became a daily ordeal for the parents as well as the children. And the list goes on. Women being the basic managers of domestic and family affairs were under tremendous pressure and had to rely on primitive and other resourceful means to secure their needs. "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, the war-torn environment(2)"

Another major effect on the women was the absence of men and husbands. Hence, a majority of the men went off to battle, and many died leaving widows with families to sustain. Others migrated to work overseas in the Gulf, Africa, Europe and the Americas in order to financially sustain their families. Women were suddenly heads of families, with little if any previous experience or preparation. With inflation rising to 300 percent in the mid-80s (reaching 1,000 percent in 1992) in the midst of the war, financial resources became scarce. Many women had to leave their home and secure jobs. Consequently, Lebanese urban cities witnessed an increase in female Labor force participation. In a sample survey conducted in 1990 in Beirut and including women from the various parts and religious groups of the city the main reason for working was financial and economic need. Eventually, women were establishing private business enterprises and climbing up the ladder of corporate hierarchy.

In the traditional rural villages, young girls becoming ripe for marriage according to social customs also suffered from the absence of



appropriate male suitors. The consequence proved to be a positive development for them for they resorted to seeking higher education. Consequently, gender division of student approached a 1 to 1 ratio in the universities and increased furthermore in secondary schools which were usually characterized by a significant drop-out of female students approaching the traditional age of marriage.(3)

COPING STRATEGIES

The most tragic effect of the war on rural Lebanese women was displacement. Over 700,000 Lebanese were forced to move away from their towns and villages of origin and settled haphazardly in the capital, its suburbs and Mount Lebanon.(4) These women were fortunately approached by grass root organizations and NGOs like our Institute, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World to



the collapsing structures of the Lebanese society. They patched up the lack of adequate social and medical services by volunteering to work in social welfare organizations both national and international, such as the Red Cross, the YWCA, The Child Welfare Association, The Child Care Association, Family Planning Association, Catholic Relief Services, Near East School of Theology, Terre des Hommes, The United Nations Development Program, and various women's groups in the South, Mountain, the North and the Bekaa(5)

They coordinated relief actions for refugees and displaced families by providing food rations, blankets, clothes, medical treatment and shelter. The able women even travelled overseas to collect help, funding and to stay up-to-date with educational developments and other sustainable development programmes.

Lebanese women also protested war activities by sending communiques which were all left unanswered. Peace marches organized by individual and women's groups were shrewdly dismantled by angry war-profiteering politicians.

Women resumed schools at the beginning of the war in 1975, after a long period of closure. Hence, in November 1975, one school opened after few women teachers decided to perform their duties as well as possible. The school soon swarmed with children and other schools followed suit.

Women also form the majority of school teacher. As a Professor in a University, a trainer of pre-school teachers and a consultant for schools in the country and the region I am proud to confirm the gigantic, super-human diligence of the women to

help them sustain their families and integrate them in the labor force. Based on intensive market research to insure the relevance and need for these skills, displaced semi-literate women were subjected to training workshops. They were taught embroidery, knitting, operating factory machines and other similar skills. The workshops were complimented with instructions in basic living skills in home management, child care, family planning, health, nutrition,

environment, law and legal rights from a kit produced by the Institute. Finally, the Institute helped them secure jobs and market their products. Thus far at least 500 to 1,000 women have benefited from this project in a short time of 3 years.

As far as military conflicts were concerned, Lebanese women reserved the largest portion of humanitarian and medical, first aid assistance. What women achieved was to hold together

keep schools and classes going against all security odds, to maintain a respectable and advanced level of education and to deal with all traumatic situations and reactions of children and students caused by war conditions.

Probably the greatest achievement of Lebanese women is inside their homes. Their determination to provide all the necessary physical needs, they insured that children, especially those at vulnerable ages had a home to return to. Many women would tell tales of how they saved their husbands, children and relatives from swaying under the influence of fraudulent and destructive circumstances and people around them. Despite the absence of law and order, civil codes of behavior were maintained to the best possible level. It is true that chaos did produce some anomie or alienation from accepted norms and values by releasing latent aggression in adults as well as children, but generally speaking, the situation could be much worse.

Women's sacrifices and strict attention to family needs saved the family structure in Lebanon. The family is the most powerful and important social unit in Middle Eastern society. Therefore, by saving it the Lebanese women saved the country and its future.

My mind becomes crowded with all the relevant details, actions, achievements, resourcefulness of Lebanese women and how they survived the war. The list of achievements they performed is long. They sustained an entire country on the constant brinks of collapse in a never-ending and ever-increasing state of chaos and anarchy. And in the process they lost loved ones, homes and personal opportunities. They did all of this in a predominantly patriarchal society that values men more than women. Yet the Scarlet O'Haras of Lebanon proved themselves well in

their countries and in the International community.

In post war Lebanon, the women are reaching political posts only recently three women became members of the newly elected Parliament. They are raising their voices to have the Lebanese government ratify the convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women, are getting directly involved in the worldwide and natural campaign for a cleaner, and safer environment, and they promise to ratify discriminating legislation curtailing women's civil rights notably to conduct business transactions without the required endorsement of a man. In an interview conducted with at least one of the female deputies, they were determined to have major involvement in decisions concerning national and international affairs such as the return of the displaced to their homes, the retreat of foreign forces from Lebanon, the preservation and improvement of the educational system, the battle against a soaring inflation and an acute economic crisis, and other national issues.

Some may contribute the

development and mobility of Lebanese women in the government, the labor force, the economy, education and health to the war, thus having created a gap for women to fill by virtue of men's absence. But the women themselves have historically been demanding a share in the country's development and have therefore been preparing, achieving higher education in all fields, traditional, and non-traditional and struggling to reach high positions in society by whatever means possible and grabbing every opportunity •

(1) Gaston Bouthoul, *Mentalities*, Collection Que Sais-Je Paris, 1980, Wafa Stephan, *Al-Raida*, Editorial, November 1, 1984, No. 30.

(2) Juliette Haddad, sociologist, *Al-Raida*, November 1, 1984, No. 34.

(3) Hanania, *Women and Education in Lebanon*, monograph by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1980.

(4) Iskandar and Baroudi, 1984.

(5) *Al-Raida*, August 1980 "Women as Peace Makers".

