

Vulnerability of Women in the Lebanese Wars

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For a man going to war, home, land and honor all become deposited in the last glimpse of the faces he left behind, among them, women's faces. Cloaked with courage and patience, these women draw upon their reservoir of nurture and sacrifice and turn the back lines into living veins. They protect their homes and children and secure food and shelter. Some leave the domestic sphere to participate in organized support groups that satisfy community needs such as first aid, distribution of food and supplies, securing communication between different regions, providing warning signals against the enemy, etc. Others may enlist themselves in the military service as nurses in field hospitals, drivers, cable and telephone operators ... But never, except for a few exceptions, if any, was a woman serving in the army given a gun and a post next to a soldier on the front. The general notion is that women are too vulnerable to withstand the pressure of real combat.

In the Lebanon wars, women did not engage in actual combat. However, they did not have a choice, because, war invaded their homes and transformed their yards, balconies and roofs into battle field frontiers. The streets, which were once imaginary battle fields on which kids fought their fictitious wars, became danger zones where death awaited every living soul. Heavy artillery was used within the residential areas. Random shelling and bombardment erupted unexpectedly and indiscriminately. There was no

water, no electricity, and no fuel. The closest to engaging in actual combat was women's struggle to survive behind barricades of destructible walls and with hands bare from any arms. How resilient are women in the face of these extremely stressful conditions?

Research has shown over and over again that there is a relationship between mental disorders and environmental and psycho-social stressors. Women are reported to develop depression 1.5 to 2 times more than men. (1) Typically, women at risk for depression were, more often than not married, working and had three or more children. (2) Meeting the role demands of a career-woman, a wife and a mother at a time when a woman is torn between the two needs of actualizing herself and fulfilling society's expectations could be quite stressful for many especially underprivileged socio-economic groups. Were men to be exposed to the same stressors as women the ratio would have possibly been different. Would this ratio also differ in times of war?

Wars as they struck Lebanon were, among other things, a phenomenon worthy of scientific investigation regarding their impact on the lives of the Lebanese. Since its creation in 1980, the Psychiatry, Psychology and Research Service in St. George Hospital, Beirut has actively studied the effects of war on mental health. In an attempt to probe the relationship between war events and mental

disorders a sample of subjects from several Lebanese communities (differentially exposed to the wars) was randomly selected. (3) The subjects interviewed ranged in age between 18 and 65 and lived in Lebanon throughout the wars. House damage, physical injuries and kidnapping were the specific war events which were identified as war scores for each individual by means of the War Event Questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose. (4) Subjects were also asked if a close person had been exposed to any of these events and/or whether they witnessed it themselves or experienced it through someone else. The identification of war events for each individual was followed by a diagnostic Interview Schedule (5) which screened the psychological symptoms developed by the individual.

The investigators were clinical psychologists with at least a Master's degree especially trained to use the instruments. The analysis of the collected data was carried out in the most difficult circumstances. Though frustrating, power failures, concern over the safety of meeting places, securing gas for generators and working in inconvenient shelters did not deter the research team from meeting its objectives.

At least 35% of the population surveyed have developed depression experiencing some of the following symptoms: depressed mood, insomnia (or hypersomnia), decrease (or

increase) in appetite, fatigue or loss of energy), inability to concentrate, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, diminished interest or pleasure) in almost all activities most of the time and recurrent thoughts of death and suicidal ideation.

In this population, females report depression 1.5 times more frequently than men. However, this difference did not hold when war scores were taken into consideration. In other words, males and females who were equally exposed to war events reported depression equally. Thus, there were no gender differences in depression when war events were equally experienced by males and females.⁽⁶⁾

The data also revealed that 10.3% of the population had Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).⁽³⁾ In PTSD, a traumatic event or catastrophe such as natural disasters, combat, seeing a loved one hurt or observing another person killed may cause recurrent recollection and dreaming of the event, a tendency to be easily startled, intense psychological distress at exposure to

events that symbolize or resemble the original traumatic ones, inability to think about or recall an important aspect of the trauma, diminished interest in significant activities, feelings of detachment and estrangement from others, difficulty falling or staying asleep, irritability, difficulty in concentrating, restricted range of feelings and a sense of a foreshortened future. Most of these subjects (85%) had this PTSD secondary to exposure to war events rather than any other trauma. Again both men and women were equally affected by PTSD.⁽⁷⁾

The studies indicate that both sexes are equally affected by the consequences of the war. Men do not seem to be more tolerant of the stressors of war and they break down as frequently as women do. This finding is not representative of Lebanese men and women in general, and further research is being undertaken. However, we can conclude that the Lebanese woman is not as vulnerable as expected. Facing threats to survival, witnessing killing

and bloodshed, bearing human and physical losses make her no susceptible to mental disorders than the Lebanese male.

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