

“The War was Unforgivable”

An interview with Maitre Laure Moghaizel Conducted by Hania Osseiran

Hania Osseiran: Could you describe your overall life situation before the war began in 1975?

Laure Moghaizel: I was born in 1929, married in 1953, and when the war started, I had already had my five children and was practicing law. I started my elementary education in Jounieh, then continued in Aley. My father was an important law officer, and due to his work, we were constantly moving from one area to the other. I was born in Hasbayeh, so, as you can see, we lived all over Lebanon. So the slogan “united Lebanon” is not just a slogan; it means a lot to me. We actually experienced it. We lived in Jounieh, Aley, and Baalbeck. I received my secondary education in the Aley National School where we received a secular, progressive Arab education. Then we moved to Beirut and I continued my studies at the Besancon which was considered one of the best schools at the time. We were aware of the social difference between us and the other students, and that was an incentive for us to excel in our studies. I continued my studies at the University of Saint Joseph at the Institute of Oriental Studies and got my degree in philosophy in Arabic, and later studied Law at the same university. I met my late husband Joseph during a national students’ demonstration, and this demonstration continued all through our life together.

HO: What was your vision or plan for your life before the outbreak of war? How did you expect your life would unfold?

LM: Obviously, I was well-established in my life when the war started, socially, politically and on the personal level. I had already chosen the public domain as a career and I had already been involved in the women’s movement. Before meeting Joseph, during my first year of Law School in 1949, I had already met with the pioneers of the women’s movement, like Laure Tabet, Mirvat Ibrahim, and Najla Saab. I had already committed myself to law and to women’s issues in particular. In 1948, I established The Women’s Party inside the Phalangist Party in an atmosphere which was not very encouraging of

women’s issues. I was the Secretary General. The Phalangist party was a youth party at that time. I left the Phalangist Party in 1958, and this was perhaps the only ideological change in my life, due to the fact that I did not approve of some of their nationalistic views and especially their confessional ideas.

When I left the Phalange party, I established, along with my late husband Joseph, Emile Bitar and Bassam El-Jisr, The National Progressive Movement and later the Democratic Party, which was established with Fouad Butros and others. Later, we founded the United Reformation Front of Lebanon with Najeeb Abu Haidar. All of this was before the war. So, as you can see, I had already developed my solid principles and had a strong conviction in what I was working for, and I have maintained my principles and convictions throughout my life,

although with difficulty. The war in 1975 was a shock for all of us, but we maintained our beliefs and principles. During the war, we formed several other movements, such as the Non-Violence Movement and the Human Rights Association.

HO: What did you do during the war years? Did you spend most of your time in Lebanon?

LM: Definitely; we remained in Lebanon throughout the war. We as individuals and as a party were against the war for all reasons. Until today, I permit myself to judge people by their view of

the war, because the war was unforgivable. First, as individuals, we carried on our normal life activities, and that is due to Joseph’s attitude. He was optimistic by nature, and believed in the individual. We continued, during the war, attending to our careers and we kept on sending the children to school. We stayed in Beirut, living on the “greenline” on the 6th floor (which is the roof), with five children. We believed that staying in one’s home is a form of resistance against the war.

Our commitment to public life and our belief in a united country and in human rights helped us overcome fear and kept us going. My concern was with the country as a whole, so we undertook several efforts, like the Peace March on the 6th of May with Beirut University College (now L.A.U.). We were twenty-two persons from different regions. We formed a movement with the Labor Union and the handicapped, and we supported the Labor Union demonstrations, in addition to organizing a sit-in in front of Parliament, where we covered the walls



Laure Moghaizel receives an award for her outstanding service to Lebanon from Lebanese First Lady Mona Al-Hrawi

along the greenline with the UNESCO poster calling for peace. We initiated another campaign, which we called "The Document of Civil Peace", and we collected 70,000 signatures from Lebanese citizens who were against the war. We were a group of people working together, like Nawaf Salam, Iman Khalifeh, Hani Feghali and many others. I can't say we stopped the war, but even though we were a minority, it helped us overcome the war.

HO: How did the experience of the war affect you (positively and negatively) as a person and as a professional?

LM: It affected me from the national point of view, for if I want to sum up my life and Joseph's life, I will sum it up with one word: commitment. We are and were committed to the public welfare. But the war did not alter my beliefs at all, to the contrary, they only became stronger. On the personal level, we lost a daughter during the war. You are going to think that this is the reason I cannot forgive anyone who participated in the war. Of course, I cannot forgive because we, the Lebanese, killed our own children. During the war, while hiding on the stairs, I used to write for *Al-Nahar* [Lebanon's largest daily newspaper] and sometimes I would make public announcements on the radio, *Sowt al-Watan* [Voice of the Nation], saying that we, the Lebanese people, are killing our own children; whenever one child is killed, we kill another one in retaliation and both of them are our children.

Our daughter was killed on the stairs of our building. I don't believe that the mothers of the war can ever forgive those who participated in the war. They cannot forgive, not only for patriotic reasons, but also for humanitarian reasons. Such atrocious deeds must be accounted for in history; there must be a public referendum about it. Religious forgiveness is something else. My daughter had a doctorate from the Sorbonne in Linguistics, and had come to spend Christmas vacation in Beirut. This is an example of the thousands of parents who had their children killed during the war, which is against the laws of nature, to have children die before their parents.

I had a close friend whose son was killed during the war while fighting with one of the parties. I used to tell her, 'at least you can console yourself knowing he died fighting for a cause which he believed in'. This was a problem we faced while raising our children. We felt as though the war was eroding all of the principles we raised them to believe in. They had to question principles such as nationalism, confessionalism, and secularism, due to the contradictions that prevailed at the time. I would have been more deeply hurt had any of my children committed themselves to a certain faction; I would have felt that all my dedication and effort had been wasted. I remember, during the year 1958,* we organized a movement against the incidents of that year. I recall that one of the decisions we took in that movement was not to give our children names that indicate a particular sect, and that is why I gave all my children neutral, Arab names. I believe that my strong attachment to and con-

viction in these principles helped me overcome and survive the terrible war we passed through. Three weeks after my daughter Jana's death, I had a meeting to prepare for the handicapped demonstration, and I attended it. I believe one has to be committed to certain principles, like God, beauty, and the arts, in order to overcome the personal miseries one is bound to pass through in life.

HO: How did the war experience influence your views on national and confessional identity? Your views on power and powerlessness? Your views on Lebanon's role in the region and the world?

LM: Definitely, the war did not affect my views on nationalism or confessionalism, otherwise, I would have given up a long time ago. But I believe that confessionalism is deeply rooted in people's minds now, much more so than before the war, taking as a measure the civil code. Before the war, we prepared a project for an optional civil law, which was adopted by Mr. August Bakhos, a parliamentarian. Mr. Bakhos had the courage to present it to the Parliament once, and then it was kept in a drawer thereafter. Now it is much more difficult to achieve any progress with respect to this issue. It is not only my opinion, but Joseph, too, felt the same way during his appointment in the cabinet. He believed that applying a civil law nowadays, even if it is an optional law, is much more difficult than it was before the war.

Powerlessness is not an outcome of the war. As activists in the NGOs, we were always made to feel as if we were asking for charity from the government, and the government feels as if they are the donors. One feels there is a state of powerlessness towards the legislative power; for example, the issue of the nationality of children. We were working, through the Association of Human Rights, for the right of Lebanese women married to foreigners to give the Lebanese nationality to their children, at least after the husband passes away. The first reaction from the government was, "we don't want to encourage the settlement of foreigners in Lebanon." In the last meeting with the Minister of Justice, I explained that we are also against the settlement of foreigners in the country, and that we, too, care for the good of Lebanon.

I feel very sorry about the current regional and international role that Lebanon is playing, although I believe in the individual and this belief is the basis for my political views and non-violent thought. During the international conferences before the war, we used to feel that we derived our strength from our country. Now, we no longer feel that strength. To the contrary, we feel we are representing a sick and weak country. We are no longer highly regarded, we lost some of our image.

HO: Did women, more so than men, play an important role in preserving and sustaining Lebanese society during the war years?

LM: Women did not participate in the hostilities, not because they are less violent, but due to the absence of women in both the government and the militias. They didn't refuse the war as such, but they were not in decision-making positions. Did women suffer more than men? I do not believe so. But definitely, they faced many difficulties in maintaining and providing for the basic needs of their families and daily life. I believe that life was more of a burden for women who lost their husbands and had to assume the financial responsibility, especially women who were not prepared or vocationally trained to do so. Moreover, we should not forget the responsibility of caring for the handicapped. As a result of this terrible war, it was usually women who took care of this. In addition, women don't have the upper hand in family decisions nor do they have financial independence. But women had one privilege during the war: they were rarely kidnapped. Is it because she is *harim* (protected, forbidden)? Or is it a matter of honor? Or was it because women are considered second class citizens? It would be interesting to study this one day and find out.

In other countries, such as Europe and America during World War II, war forced women to go into industry, which caused an alteration in their lives; it had an impact. But in Lebanon, maybe because it was a civil war and both men and women were hiding under the stairs, most men did not participate in the war. The war had an impact on the economic aspect of women's lives; there has been an increase in the percentage of working women due to dire economic need. We have an increase in the number of women in universities, but I don't think that is necessarily a result of the war. However, I don't see any improvement in the way society looks at women. Women were powerless, and still are, in all domains: in the trade unions, in the municipalities, in politics, even in the family. As long as the Personal Status Code is not altered, women will remain in a subordinate position. But now, due to women's growing economic independence, the situation within the family may change with time.

From the legal point of view, there was no improvement in women's status due to the war. We started working on a program in 1949 to ratify the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Before the war, we amended several laws, such as equality in inheritance, the right to choose one's nationality upon marriage, and so forth; but, the situation remained stagnant. It was only after the war ceased that we resumed the work and were successful in amending three laws.

HO: As a woman and as a professional, how do you view the post-war period? Socially, politically and economically speaking, have women made gains or suffered losses since 1990?

LM: If we want to see where women made gains, there is no doubt that there is a change in the political power structure. We now have women representing us in the Parliament, although their penetration came about in a traditional way, *i.e.*, the

women deputies in the Parliament are representing either a brother or a husband. But we can say that the road has been paved for others to follow. Women's political role is still weak; we still do not find many women in political parties or in syndicates, neither during the war nor after it. We don't find women in municipalities because there have been no local-level elections since the 1960s. It is not women as such that are in a weak position, but rather, all those outside the political arena, the intellectuals, the workers and the students. So, from the political point of view, there is little hope for improvement. We have to work on different fronts to increase the level of participation.

From the economic side, there is an increase in the percentage of working women. There is an increase in the level of participation of women in the public sector, for example, the percentage of women lawyers and judges has increased. Is it due to the war? I do not think so. There are other reasons, too; maybe fewer men choose to be judges now, due to the low wages.

HO: How would you evaluate the performance and policies of the Lebanese Government in your field of expertise since the end of the war? If you could give a word of advice to the executive and legislative branches of the Lebanese Government, what would it be?

LM: The government is more than ignoring the situation, the government is in a state of hostility. To start with, not even once has the modification of any law concerning the improvement of women's status been issued with a decree from the legislative power or out of logical conviction. It was always due to tremendous efforts and persistence, in addition to the constant distribution of memoranda. It is an unacceptable situation! One example is women's legal and public testimony. Until now, some notaries still do not accept the testimony of women. I was told that a *mukhtar* (leader) in one of the wards of Beirut has underlined the words "male witness" on government forms in red, and does not accept a women's testimony, although there is no law to support such a mentality! We put so much effort into presenting the case for women's rights with all the logical reasons and necessary documents, in addition to making a comparison between our laws and the laws of other countries, even Arab countries. Still, you feel government officials are only willing to discuss the situation because of the respect they have for the personal relationship that exists between us, not out of conviction, nor out of any sense of duty and responsibility to women, half the citizens of this country.

* In the year 1958, Lebanon witnessed a brief civil war between Christians and Muslims.

