

## “A Capable Woman is Fought all the Way”

### An interview with Dr. Zeina Saba Conducted by Myriam Sfair

**Myriam Sfair:** Dr. Saba, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and about your life before the war began?

**Zeina Saba:** I'm married, and an obstetrician and gynecologist. I studied in Boston in the US, then came back here to Lebanon to work just before the war, at Rizk hospital in Ashrafiyya. I have been there ever since. My husband is also a doctor, a neurologist, and we have one child, a son.

**MS:** What was your plan for your life before the war broke out? How did you envision your life unfolding?

**ZS:** I have always been ambitious, and so I focused a lot on my career. I was married for five years before I had my first and only child. I envisioned myself becoming a successful gynecologist, not just financially successful, but professionally as well. I wanted the respect any well-trained gynecologist expects to get. It was a challenge for me to [pursue my career] in Beirut, because the milieu is very difficult. People still do not accept a woman surgeon very readily; they do not trust a woman surgeon [as much as a male surgeon].

I am a graduate of the American University of Beirut Medical School, and I could have worked there, yet I chose a private clinic because it was very difficult at that time for me to work at AUB, since doctors who work at the American University Hospital are also expected to teach. I personally do not feel that I have the talent for or interest in teaching. I teach my patients how to take care of themselves, but I don't think I would be very good at teaching medical students. It's something you either have or don't, and I suppose I just lack the patience. I chose a professional career because I wanted to have control over my own time, rather than be someone's employee. My father was a professional, an engineer, so I guess I was influenced by him. I have been working at Rizk Hospital since 1972. During the war, I was living in Ras Beirut, but I often used to come and sleep at Rizk Hospital so as to be available when my patients needed me.

I consider myself to be a successful doctor, and I think that one of the key reasons for my success was that the men in my life helped and encouraged me a lot. My father always encouraged me to be a physician, and my husband has been extremely understanding; he didn't get upset when, during the war, I would have to leave him and my one-year old son in order to come to the hospital at night to attend to my patients. My moth-

er, on the other hand, was against my decision to become a doctor. She told me I should get married and have children, not pursue a challenging career.

In the beginning, I think that a lot of my patients refused me because of my gender. I have worked in the US and in Beirut, and, contrary to what most people think, the American woman prefers and trusts a woman gynecologist. Here, on the other hand, people think that because this is a fairly conservative country, women would rather go to women doctors, yet the actual situation is just the opposite. Lebanese women seem to be uncomfortable about being examined by a woman gynecologist, as if there is something sexual about it! This is a strange way to think, but unfortunately, some women seem to feel this way. I think that attitudes are gradually changing, however. When I was young and in college, beginning my medical training, I always followed the progress of other women doctors' careers to see how they were faring. I quickly saw that very few Lebanese women gynecologists succeeded while staying in Lebanon. Those who went to the US to specialize and then stayed there did very well, while women doctors who stayed in Lebanon were intimidated. I have never yet heard of a woman being a general surgeon in Lebanon. General surgery was my first choice, but my professors at AUB actively discouraged me, saying "who is going to visit you?! No patient will come to a woman for consultation!" I love surgery! When a doctor trains to be a surgeon in my field of specialization, he or she trains in both gynecology and obstetrics. My colleagues in the US are always surprised when they hear that I am still doing both gynecology and obstetrics, for in the US, they practice both for about five years, then they usually practice only gynecology, because it is less demanding, mentally and physically. The first few years after I came back to Lebanon from the US were discouraging. If I had stayed in Ras Beirut, at the AUH, where the milieu is different, I would have had a huge institution behind me, and people might have been more ready to accept me as a woman doctor if I had been on the AUB staff. Instead, I was working in Ashrafiyya at Rizk Hospital, starting my own private clinic, coming back new to the country after so many years in the States, wearing jeans, a pony tail and no make-up. Patients, I quickly discovered, prefer elderly professor-physicians and like to visit them for consultations, rather than coming to a young woman doctor with limited experience. When patients used to come to my clinic, they usually would look around and then ask me "Where's the doctor?" I soon found

that, as long as there were no complications, the patients were satisfied with me. But if a patient would have to undergo a cesarean delivery, they would usually ask me the name of the surgeon I would be referring them to! They just didn't think that I, a woman, could be a capable surgeon; they automatically assumed I was some sort of a mid-wife. It was quite demoralizing, in the beginning, because every time I had to go to perform an operation, my patients always wanted a man to be present, whoever he was. Surgery and gynecology is an art, and it has nothing to do with the doctor's gender; men and women can both be good doctors. I recall that, when I was in medical school at AUB, the first time our class saw a cadaver, ten of my male colleagues fainted, but all three of the young women present, including me, did not faint!

Nowadays, there are more and more women gynecologists in Lebanon, and AUB is giving them support and privileges, and hence, the community's mentality towards them is gradually changing.

If I have been successful in my work, it is due to the fact that I have sacrificed a lot. I have only one child; I wasn't home often enough to become pregnant!

**MS:** How did the war affect your life and your career plans?

**ZS:** The war years were tough and challenging for me, but at the same time, they also helped me to launch my career. In a sense, I became the only gynecologist in Rizk Hospital, and I made myself very available to my patients. On the other hand, because of the war, many women left Ashrafiyya to flee to quieter areas, and I lost many of my patients. As the war progressed, it became the fashion, especially among upper class women, to leave the country to deliver their babies abroad. The Lebanese began to realize that their passport was almost worthless and those who had the means left so that their children would have an additional citizenship and a more valuable passport. So, my career as an obstetrician and gynecologist fluctuated along with the war and its events. Had these circumstances not taken place, I would have been fully booked all of the time, and my career would have progressed steadily and incrementally. Now, I feel that I am starting all over again, meeting new patients and establishing a clientele. I have a lot of foreign patients. Also, with the end of the war, a lot of Lebanese doctors are returning, including some gynecologists, so competition is increasing. The country is full of gynecologists now, and due to the small Lebanese population, work is becoming more and more scarce. This is an especially difficult time for the new doctors; people are used to their own doctors and don't want to try visiting a new, younger doctor, and this is sad for the young physicians who have worked so hard to get where they are.

I have a lot of younger patients, and I see a change in the mentality among the young Lebanese women. The new generation, these college girls, ask a lot of important questions and inquire about issues related to contraception and sexuality. These young women seem to feel more comfortable discussing their questions and concerns with a woman gynecologist. From my own experience, and from what I have heard from various patients, male doctors tend to ignore women's questions, especially those asked by young women; it seems they just don't have the time, or they don't take these girls seriously. I consider myself not only a physician, but also an educator of my patients. I want to enlighten my patients, give them information and advice on how to take care of themselves and assume responsibility for their sexuality.

**MS:** How did the experience of war affect you, positively and negatively, as a person?

**ZS:** I was giving much more of myself during the war. I had a lot to cope with, as a doctor, a wife and a mother. I had to balance between the needs of my son and the needs of my patients. Of course, my son was very distressed whenever I left under the shelling to attend to my patients. It was hard for me to go, yet my husband was very supportive all along, urging me to go and telling me that he will take care of our son. A few times, my son was sick and my husband had to take care of him alone while I was on duty. My husband always used to remind me that if I did not go and attend to my patients, even if there was shelling, I'd get a bad reputation for neglecting patients and then I'd be finished as a practicing physician. Moreover, he would remind me that I had taken an oath and that I was bound not to neglect any patient. He would say "You chose this profession, so now you must bear the consequences by working hard."

I don't regret being a doctor and studying so hard for so long, but there is only one thing that I wasn't able to do: spend more time with my son. I tried very hard to give him as much time as I could. The only consolation I have is that the reason I couldn't be there for him was because I was spending my time doing something equally important. However, I think I could have spent more time with him. I would hate to think that I did this for ambition only! Doctors must be prepared to shoulder the responsibilities of their medical career all the way, and if they are unable to do so, they should quit. For example, when I was at AUB, if there was a male patient to be examined by a female doctor, it was customary that she would ask one of her male colleagues to examine the male patient's genital organs. In my case, I refused to have someone else do my job. There was nothing to be embarrassed about, in my opinion; I was just doing my job as a physician. Many of my colleagues and pro-

fessors used to be shocked by my attitude, and I know that many people talked, for once I overheard them criticizing me, but who cares?

**MS:** In your view, did women, in general, react to the war differently than men? Can you give some examples from your own experience?

**ZS:** They definitely reacted differently! Women have the ability to tolerate more than men can. They have the tenacity and ability to endure through suffering. I know of several women who lost their children during the war, and I know that they have coped with this awful loss much better than their husbands. During the war, many more men than women were taking drugs and tranquilizers and becoming alcoholics. This is a general, overall impression I have, from talking with colleagues, patients, friends and family. Although there are hysterical women, you can also find hysterical men, and to me, the latter is much more pathetic. Women in Lebanon in particular have not been given credit for anything. Women always have to excuse their gender, for example, "I am a woman surgeon — sorry for that! I'm going to perform the delivery and administer the medication!" My lawyer is a woman and I chose her because she is a woman. She is brilliant! There are many brilliant professional women in Lebanon; women are honest and they treat you sincerely. However, you also have a group of women who are very silly and superficial. Their sole aim in life seems to be to meet as many people as possible in one day, go out to a popular restaurant, where they can be seen by all, play cards, and gossip.

**MS:** Did the war change your views about yourself and your capabilities as a woman? Did it influence the way you view gender roles for yourself and others?

**ZS:** The war changed a lot of my views. I saw what Lebanese people do in dire circumstances and how they act. Lebanese always view themselves as smart if they don't pay their income tax, smart in cheating the government, and according to them, the smartest one of all is he who packs up and leaves the country. My husband and I could have left anytime, for we had so many offers to go back to the US, yet we agreed on staying in our country, and not leaving it when it needed us the most. We thought of leaving only if things got better. I only considered leaving for the sake of my son, who is my only child. I thought it was unfair to put him through all of this while we had the means to leave. Yet, my husband used to tell me that our son is like all the other Lebanese children who have to cope with the war. I came to Lebanon when I was nine months pregnant to deliver my son here, for I wanted him to be a Lebanese citizen.

I also thought about my elderly parents, whom I could not leave behind, in addition to my relatives, friends and patients. During the Israeli invasion in 1982, I stayed for three months without seeing my husband or son, for he couldn't leave AUH, where he was chairman of the neurology department. Whenever the situation cooled down, we hoped it would be for good, yet [the war] never ended, and we never left. Our decision to stay here was not entirely due to our love of our country; I had been very lonely in the US, for my family and friends here are very important to me. In the US, everyone is so busy all the time, and even though I had a lot of friends there, no one has time to be there for you when you need them. Once I got really sick while I was in the States, and no one asked about me or came to visit me. All my friends sent me "get well" cards and that was it. I felt so alone! I had only my husband to take care of me, so I decided to go back to Lebanon, to my family and friends.

**MS:** How did the war affect your views on national and confessional identity, your views on power and powerlessness, and your views on Lebanon's role in the region and in the world?

**ZS:** In Lebanon, the right people have never been recognized or given a chance. Although there were families that produced politicians generation after generation, most of them were unfit. Rarely do you find people in power who have national pride. You can't help but respect a person who values his national pride. Our politicians' sole aim is to make money out of their positions. There is corruption to the point that it is nauseating, and to tell you the truth, I am not very proud of being a Lebanese any more. I used to be, and I used to defend my country before those who criticized it, but now I'm shy to do so, for those Lebanese in high positions are corrupted. Imagine — I once saw, on the main highway, a patrol car of the internal security, and one of the officers in the car opened his window and tossed out an empty can of cola! So, what can one expect from the citizens when they see something like that!? If those tasked with taking care of the citizens and the environment can act like that, what more is there to expect? On the other hand, you can still meet a lot of people for whom one can have great admiration, yet these people are in the minority. People in power here are useless. In my opinion, we are not improving. Improvement never occurred, neither before the war nor after it. Yet, before the war, corruption did not seem to be as prevalent and obvious. Now, people in power don't give a damn about the citizens, and they forbid expressions of personal opinion.

**MS:** Do you think that women, more so than men, played an important role in preserving and sustaining Lebanese society during the war years?

**ZS:** No, not more than the men. Here, you have to define the Lebanese person. It has nothing to do with gender. Many women didn't panic during the war, and they stayed in the country and "stuck it out", even those who could afford to leave often stayed. Some women sent their children out and stayed here with their husbands, refusing to sacrifice their children for a hopeless cause, and I understand them.

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

**ZS:** The right people, whether men or women, are never given a chance. Even though we have some women in the Lebanese Parliament, they all got there by inheritance, through a brother or father or husband. A capable woman is fought all the way. It is a male-centered society. If a capable woman excels in her field and succeeds against all odds, then, in my opinion, she has made a great achievement. Each year you see more and more women on the staff at the American University Hospital. In my time (twenty years ago), it was unheard of. But in many other fields, the status of women has not changed at all, although people try to give you the impression that it has.

**MS:** If you could sit and talk with the women of the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and Chechenia, what words of wisdom would you give them about surviving war and dealing with the aftermath of war?

**ZS:** I would tell them that they should stick to their husbands and children, and give them the moral and physical support needed. Don't leave your country! Dealing with the aftermath of war is difficult. What can you tell a woman who has lost a child in the war? In such a case, there are no "words of wisdom." The love of country can compensate partially, but never totally, for such personal losses.

**MS:** What are the biggest obstacles you face as a woman in your field?

**ZS:** The main obstacle I faced was being intimidated about what people said about me. The only thing that changed, over time, was my own self-confidence, which grew with the passage of years. Before, I used to be overly careful with my patients, and I was always scared of saying the wrong thing, for I wanted them to like me and to trust me. Now, however, I no longer care so much. There is a general impression that I am strict and unsmiling. But that is not true; I am very kind to my patients and give them all the time they need during consulta-

tions. Patients used to come and tell me "my neighbor told me to do this, my friend told me to do that," and in the beginning, I was patient with them, and told them not to listen to neighbors and friends, but after a while, I got fed up and informed those ladies to go see their neighbors for medical consultations instead of coming to see me. I didn't study for nothing! Moreover, I have a reputation for being frank and honest with my patients. I tell them clearly and straightforwardly what they are suffering from, and don't hold back anything. Hiding things from a patient is very unprofessional, in my view. If one of my patients has cancer, I tell her right away; I hate to mislead my patients. I treat them as mature individuals capable of handling anything I tell them. Initially, I used to be quite affected by what people said about me, but now I could not care less. What I am sure of is that I have never neglected a patient. I don't lie to them if their child dies; I don't tell them the child was already dead in the womb. I admit that sometimes we are late or that it was due to a misjudgment. My patients appreciate my honesty and know I am telling the truth.

**MS:** What are the greatest satisfactions you experience in your work?

**ZS:** Satisfactions come from solving a problem or a complication, such as infertility. Many times I have solved problems without medical intervention or effort, because all that the patient needed was some loving care, encouragement and a boost to her self-confidence. Many of my patients unable to conceive suffer psychological abuse from their husbands. All I do is try to understand them and advise them not to concentrate on getting pregnant. Women here face a lot of sexual problems due to psychological abuse from husbands who accuse them of being frigid, unfeeling and worthless. All I do in such cases is give these women back their needed self-confidence.

**MS:** What are your hopes for the future of Lebanese society, and for Lebanese women in particular? How do you see the situation for Lebanese women in the year 2005?

**ZS:** Lebanese women should fight for their rights. They shouldn't be intimidated. Unfortunately, I'm not optimistic; I think we still need a lot of time to improve. No one else is going to fight for our rights, so we should put all of our personal effort into achieving our goals. I know many professional women who are capable in their careers, and had they only been in positions of power, they would have improved the lot of women.

