

“The emotional bond between the citizen and the land has disintegrated.”



**An interview with Wafa Hamzeh
Conducted by Ghena Ismail**

Ghena Ismail: Could you describe your life before the war began in 1975?

Wafa Hamzeh: I was still in school, a very ambitious girl, so eager to enter college and later the field of work! I was never influenced by the pressures which orient girls towards marriage, probably because my parents were open-minded, and of course, I was very persistent to continue in my studies. During the war, I went through an important change. I left my parents and went to live in Beirut on my own in order to study agriculture in the American University of Beirut. I did not think of stopping my education like so many people.

GI: How did the war and its related phenomenon affect you? Did it influence any of the decisions you made?

WH: I'm from Al-Bekaa valley, and I love village life a lot. Unfortunately, though, I was deprived of living in it because my parents lived in Beirut. However, when the war broke out we had to move back to Al-Bekaa. I lived there during my high school years only, as I had to go back to live in Beirut to enter the university. Nevertheless, during the short period I lived in Al-Bekaa, I was able to sense the beauty of life there. I felt that living in the rural areas made you go “back to your roots.” Consequently, I thought it would be nice to study something connected with the land and its original inhabitants. That feeling was enhanced when an instructor came to our class and gave us a lecture about agriculture and explained to us that it was a good major to study. Thus, I can say that war has indirectly helped me to take an important decision in my life.

GI: Did you face any opposition from your parents when you took this decision?

WH: I didn't face any real opposition, but my parents, just like any other parents, preferred to see me in a field that was more

promising, such as medicine or pharmacy. Since agriculture in our country is very poor and marginalized, my parents were worried that I might not find a decent job after graduation. Nevertheless, I was left to make my decision on my own without any interference.

GI: War affected you and your brother differently regarding education, for while you were determined to continue despite the difficult circumstances, your brother left school. Can you relate this to a gender difference in reaction to the war?

WH: Perhaps. A woman, whether single or married, is more stable in her nature. In addition, she has to follow the social and traditional customs which, very often, restrict her movement and freedom of choice. On the contrary, a man is free to take decisions regarding movement or any other issue. In this respect only, the reaction of women differed from that of men.

GI: Were the reactions of men and women during the war similar concerning the kind of responsibilities they held within the same family?

WH: The roles of a husband and wife, as I see them, were integrated. Both had bigger responsibilities during the war. As for the rural woman in particular, it can be said that the scope of her responsibilities widened due to several factors, such as the pressing financial need, the travel of her husband, and widowhood. In cases where women had to work, they discovered their skills in the field of labor. This is based on a study I've made and have discussed in many international conferences. Many conferences are examining the value of the rural woman in the protection of the environment and natural resources, as well as in the process of development. As we all know, the percentage of women-headed households has increased tremendously during the war. Women found themselves in charge of their families on their own for the first time in their lives.

GI: What did you do during the war years?

WH: In the beginning of the war I was still a high school student, as I told you. I was active, in the sense that I joined student clubs and the scouts team. Later, when I entered the university, I was involved in the student movements and was even an active member in one of the political parties. Now, of course, my activities in that political party have decreased, due to the new responsibilities I have towards my family. Moreover, I started to devote my efforts to my professional field. After the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, my parents left for Cyprus and made me go with them. However, I couldn't stand it for long, and I insisted on coming back to Beirut. I just couldn't imagine myself staying away from Beirut while

the war was on. After I graduated, I started to work in aid agencies on a voluntary basis. Also, I worked with a number of NGOs, such as the Family Planning Association, where I took care of issues related to rural women, and I also worked with organizations that were concerned with the environment. A turning point in my professional life was when I started to work in an agriculture publication for Arab women. I was the editorial secretary and the executive manager of this publication which was issued by the Arab Association. My devotion to this magazine was a main reason behind my staying in Lebanon in spite of all the difficult circumstances of the war. While working, I trained myself outside Lebanon in a number of European countries, such as Spain, Germany, and Italy. I taught at the American University of Beirut and worked in publications as well. Then I moved to the public sector. I felt that I should work and contribute to society. I didn't care about my personal gain. As a matter of fact, if I mention how much my salary is, you'll probably laugh! Contributing to society and working for the group were things that I believed in, because if you only work for yourself, you'll actually be doing nothing. This probably goes back to the way I was brought up. Hence, I started to teach at the Lebanese University as I felt there was a need there. Then I entered the Ministry of Agriculture where I worked in projects related to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). I acted as a coordinator, which is a role that almost doesn't exist in Lebanon. This role helped me a lot in gaining experience mixing with different people. In addition, I took care of the rural women's activities, as they were totally neglected. In Lebanon, unfortunately, attention is paid only to needy women who have a certain social problem such as displacement, poverty or widowhood. However, no one seems to notice women who have certain skills or abilities, in order to make use of what they have.

GI: Why do you think that the role of rural woman in Lebanon was neglected?

WH: The reasons for this neglect as I see them are as follows: First; no one is aware of the importance of the role the rural women play. Second, there is a general neglect of the developmental aspect in the rural areas. You notice that there are a lot of architectural reconstruction projects in Beirut, whereas very few projects are carried out in the rural areas. Third, if you go back to history, you'll discover that the importance that has been given to women's issues in general is very recent. Fourth, few women are in decision-making positions. If we had more women in such positions, things would be more likely to change, because a woman is certainly more sensitive to the problems of other women. Now we are trying to change this and bring more women into the Ministry. Although I'm in a senior position, there are not many other women. Perhaps the last two years were better. If you go back to earlier times, you won't find female agriculture instructors, for example.

GI: Why did you move to the public sector? Did you find work-

ing in it more productive?

WH: No, not necessarily. However, when you work in the private sector, you will be working for a certain institute or organization. Actually, working in the public sector was a turning point in my life. There, I met my husband, who is the Dean of the Department of Agriculture in the Lebanese University. Since my husband and I were in the same field, we were very supportive of each other. A woman needs to have her husband's support, because if she doesn't, she'll either have endless problems with him, or she'll have to quit work. As for me, it was essential that my husband be open-minded and accept my work, because I wasn't willing to stay at home. It is not that I'm against fulfilling the roles of a wife and a mother; a woman can play a double role in society. If we're looking for integration, we should neither ask a woman to quit her work and stay at home nor encourage her to work and forget completely about her family. In this way only will we advance. I, for instance, have always thought that I would have to stay at home for a certain period of time after I had a baby. However, what happened was that I only stayed at home during the maternity leave.

GI: How did you manage?

WH: I got help from my family, and I was able to go back to work after three months. During my pregnancy, I didn't stop working at all. I even recall that on the day of my delivery, we had a press conference in the Ministry of Agriculture. After the conference was over, I called my mother and told her that I was going to go to the hospital. My mother told me: 'I have just seen you on the T.V!' I always remember this incident, and I feel good about it. Being able to perform two roles at the same time is just great. However, it is often at the expense of something else.

GI: At the expense of what, in your case?

WH: My personal comfort. My daily program is really tiring. I go to work at 8:00 a.m., I come home at 3:00 or 4:00 p.m., and I stay working at home until 10:00 p.m. This is the case with most of the women who work, especially if they have children and aren't upper-class. A lower-class woman who is definitely working for the sake of money will not hire a baby-sitter, for instance. After all, we're all working for money. It's true that I don't earn a good income from my work at the Ministry, but I work as a consultant on many projects which are financially more rewarding. When working, you need to be satisfied financially as well as spiritually in order to be able to continue.

GI: Do you have time to see your daughter and sit with her everyday?

WH: Of course I do. In fact, my daughter is supposed to be with me right now, but I have sent her to her grandmother's house for the sake of this interview. Everyday, when I come back at 3:00 or 4:00, I stay with her unless I have some urgent work to do. If even for one day I don't give my daughter enough attention, I feel very guilty. I guess this is the case with

all working mothers. When their children make any mistake, they immediately blame themselves for it. However, I personally believe that a working mother is capable of bringing up her children in a better way since she is more experienced. Moreover, a non-working mother doesn't necessarily give her child full-time attention, either.

GI: In your field of work, have you ever faced any obstacles as a woman?

WH: No, not really. Perhaps, there were times when a committee was established and I was the only female participant. I could feel then that I was treated differently. For instance, men were telling me when I wanted to talk, 'Oh, you have the right to talk since you are a minority'. I often replied that I wanted to talk because I was always present with them and neither because I was a woman nor because I was a minority.

GI: Has war had any effect on your views of yourself and your capabilities as a woman?

WH: It had a rather positive effect. I, like most of the Lebanese women, felt that I was capable of accomplishing great things and that my role during the war shouldn't be marginal. As I said earlier, during the war, most of the women in Lebanon had the opportunity to discover a lot of their skills and hence felt that they were more self-reliant. Since women are more responsible for the family, they often had to deal with their children's needs and problems.

GI: Does this mean that you consider women's role in sustaining Lebanese society during war to be more important?

WH: No, not at all. I believe that women and men's roles are integrated, rather than simply equal. Everyone has a different role, especially in our society, which is an Eastern one. Men and women played an equally important role in sustaining the Lebanese society. Moreover, the difficult war experience brought spouses closer to one another. This is perhaps due to the strong family bonds we have in our society.

GI: According to you, what is the difference between integrated roles and equal ones?

WH: Oh, there is a big difference! Saying that I want to be equal to men is degrading. Why should I look at man as if he were a perfect figure with whom I want to identify?

GI: Usually what is meant by being equal to a man is having equal rights and opportunities with him. Don't you think that being equal to man in this respect is necessary?

WH: "Equivalence of opportunities" is a better term to use when referring to opportunities. Perhaps the term "equality" applies with respect to the issue of rights. However, when speaking about distribution of roles, "integration of roles" is a better term to use. A woman should be given the opportunity to educate herself. However, we shouldn't force her to do that. At times, she might be incapable. However, when she is capable,

she should definitely be given the opportunity. Overall, I'm for women's liberation. However, I'm against the approach of some women's groups who consider men as their targets and start complaining that men are the cause of all of their suffering. We should always remember that our problem is not with the man. Our problem has a lot of social and historical background. I know women who attended a lot of lectures and went back home filled with antagonism against their husbands.

GI: How did war influence your national and confessional identity?

WH: War has enhanced my conviction that a human being has a value by him/herself. He/she should be judged by his/her actions rather than by his/her sect. Unfortunately, though, this is not the case in our country where we have 17 different sects. Each of these sects has a great authority and value in the lives of the Lebanese people. This, I believe, is a major problem, and if we were able to solve it, we would solve many of our problems including those related to women. A woman will definitely be more able to participate in decision-making process if the person's qualifications, and not one's sect, gender or any other factor, are given top priority.

GI: As both a woman and a professional, how do you view the post-war period?

WH: The war has been over for only five years. If what happened in our country had happened somewhere else, it would have devastated the society. The strength of our family bonds has definitely saved us. As for post-war women, they are much more aware of their rights than before. Just note the activities that were carried out in preparation for the Beijing Conference. These activities are a healthy sign that Lebanon has started to get over the war's impact. In previous conferences, we were too busy to mount such efforts. The NGOs, for instance, focused their efforts during the war on relief. Now, one can notice the shift in the NGOs' efforts towards developmental projects. Today, you can feel that the people have a greater sense of stability and security. They no longer have to worry about how to hide or protect themselves and their families from the bombs. However, I have to say that a new problem has arisen: an economic problem. We have a big economic class gap. One study shows that almost one third of Lebanese society lives below the poverty line. Before the war we had what is called a "middle class". Now, it is almost non-existent. Today, most of the society's members fall into one of two categories: very rich or very poor. This economic situation is really frustrating. There should be a well-devised developmental plan to solve this problem. The current reconstruction projects that are being carried out are great, of course; however, they don't solve our human problems which are just as important, if not more so.

GI: What about the rural woman? How do you view her role in the post-war period?

WH: In the field of education for agriculture, the percentage of women's enrollment has increased. Moreover, a lot of the female agriculture students are going for a Master's degree. In this period the number of colleges for agriculture has increased. Before the war, agriculture was taught only at the A.U.B. and at the Lebanese University. Now, agriculture is additionally taught at Kaslik University and Saint Joseph University. On the practical level, though, the percentage of agricultural workers, including women, has decreased. This is due to several factors. First, the emotional bond between the citizen and his land has disintegrated. The citizen no longer feels attached to his/her land. Second, concerning the women, in particular, they prefer secretarial to agricultural work. In addition to the fact that secretarial work is perceived as being more prestigious and less demanding, there is a great discrimination between male and female workers in the field of agriculture. The female worker is made to work for longer hours, yet she is paid less. Whereas the male worker earns a daily salary of 12000 L.L., the female earns a daily wage of 6000-7000 L.L. only for the same kind of work. Third, agriculture in general is facing a lot of problems right now. One has to bear in mind that during the war years and immediately after the end of war, there was no governmental support. It is only recently, *i.e.*, over the last two years, that the Government has started to give attention to agriculture. The Minister in charge right now is making a lot of efforts to support the farmer. He has set an agricultural calendar which determines the seasons for exporting and importing agricultural crops in order to protect the national production. However, this attention, as I have earlier said, is very recent. What was happening in the past years was a pity. Lebanon is potentially a rich country if only we know how to exploit the diversity of our crops. Also, we shouldn't forget the forests which have been neglected for so long. Can you imagine that only six percent of the forests in Lebanon are being farmed today? So, we have a lot of natural treasures of which we can make great use. It is a pity to see the farmer converting his land to a building area. In the past, Al-Bekaa valley was all green, now there are still green areas, of course, but one can also see the building projects which have started. In the mountains, you can see the forests diminishing, the trees are removed and the gardens are converted into touristic compounds.

GI: How do you think this problem can be solved? Obviously, the ordinary citizen, upon finding that his land is not generating a decent income for him, will automatically think of converting his land to another source of investment that will ensure him a decent living.

WH: Of course. The Government, however, should take measures to protect the farmer and encourage him to take care of his land. It can do this in different ways. It can orient the farmer towards types of agriculture which are profitable. It can also establish cooperatives and give loans to farmers. Moreover, the Government should enhance the role of women in the process of guidance, which is almost non-existent at the present

time. The woman should be involved in agricultural and other developmental projects. They shouldn't restrict themselves to traditional roles such as sewing. Sewing is important, of course, but obviously not all women should be involved in sewing.

GI: Since you are one of the few Lebanese women in a decision-making position, what have you done and what are you trying to do in order to advance the role of other women in the field of agriculture?

WH: In the Ministry of Agriculture, we are trying to establish a special unit for rural women. Working on this project was initially part of preparing for the Beijing Conference. The FAO in co-operation with ESCWA has set the idea for a project on which a network of seventeen Arab countries have worked. It was suggested to prepare a basic paper on the role of the rural woman in agriculture. I was the coordinator of this project in Lebanon. Starting from this point, we collected the information I have mentioned during the interview (regarding the lack of women's participation in the decision-making process, the developmental projects and the procedure of guidance as well.) We discovered that the rural woman plays a significant role. However, she is not adequately remunerated. The rural woman herself doesn't realize the importance of her role. We collected all the needed information and prepared a regional report about the rural woman. Finally, we handed in this report to the conference in the name of the FAO. So, now I can say that we have seen the drawbacks and shortcomings we have. We need to strengthen the role of the institutions which take care of the rural woman. Consequently, we decided to establish a unit for the rural woman in the Ministry of Agriculture. The main role of this unit would be to coordinate the work of all the units in the Ministry of Agriculture and to integrate women into all the agricultural projects. This unit shall also be responsible for coordinating the efforts of all the NGOs and all the other ministries. I'm working on this project right now. There are also other projects in the ministry. One of them is based on the project which was carried out by the FAO. In the beginning, we will form a small network that consists of a number of countries. The role of this network will be to orient the activities of the rural women in these countries and to get all the organizations, governmental and non-governmental alike, concerned with the rural woman involved. In this way, we will be able to assess the value of the rural woman's work, know about her problems and try to find solutions to them. There is also another project that is being carried out along with the World Bank. This project is related to education, rehabilitation and modernization, and it is being financed by IFAD, an organization concerned with the rural women in all parts of Lebanon. A unit related to this project should be established in the Ministry, and I'm planning to work on this project. We will establish a division for the rural woman, which will in turn support the unit and perform outreach in different parts of Lebanon. Once this project is implemented, we will have accomplished something. We have already talked to Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr, Director of the

Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World and told her that we wanted an "executive agent" to implement the project in coordination with us as a unit. In this way, we will be benefiting from the wide experience of the NGOs because the ministries have just started to regain their past strength.

GI: Obviously, you have big responsibilities. How do you feel as a woman who has achieved so much at such a young age?

WH: In fact, I don't feel satisfied with what I have achieved. I even blame myself very often. Yesterday, for instance, while I was at work, a colleague was reading the newspaper and told me that a man who was only 33 years old was appointed as a General Manager for a big establishment. I became curious to see his c.v., which was presented in the newspaper. When I went through it, I found out that he has many degrees and a lot of experience. He also has two or three patents. When I read this, I felt really dissatisfied with what I have achieved!

GI: Do you believe a woman can make it solely on her own, without anyone's support in our country?

WH: Definitely. We have many examples of Lebanese women who have made it on their own. Of course, on the political level, we don't have access to many positions. We do not have any women ministers which is very shameful and ridiculous. Potentially speaking, we have many Lebanese women who are qualified to occupy important positions in the Government.

GI: If you could give a word of advice to the Executive and Legislative branches of the Lebanese Government, what would it be?

WH: I'm in no position to give the Government a word of advice. However, if I was to hope that the Government would take a certain measure, it would be strengthening the role of its institutions and recruiting qualified people.

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

WH: The most important thing is to have the will to continue and not be affected by the war. Women should bear in mind that war is temporary. When it comes to an end, only the strong people will appear. Hence, people shouldn't assume a passive role during the war. A person is only strengthened when he/she works and gets him/herself involved in life.

GI: How do you foresee the situation in Lebanon in 2005?

WH: I hope that our country overcomes the war effects. We cannot go on using the war as an excuse for our faults. We should design a plan that maintains a balanced development in all parts of Lebanon. Every necessary action should be taken. Unfortunately, what is happening right now is that we are not improving. We are going backwards in different aspects. The anarchy which was present during the war became part of the

ruling system after the war, and it extended into the institutions which should be strengthened now, because they play a crucial role.

GI: Does this lack of organization apply to agriculture as well?

WH: Yes. Despite the attention the government is giving to the field of agriculture right now, you can't yet sense real improvement.

GI: These are your hopes for the Lebanese society in general, do you have any hopes for the Lebanese women in particular?

WH: The woman, as a member of this society, is inevitably affected by whatever changes occur in it. However, as I said earlier, the woman has taken an important step by starting to ask for her rights. Now the woman should strengthen herself and become integrated within the society. I hope that after two years, I'll find more women participating in general lectures and not in those that are strictly about women. Then, I can say that the woman has really succeeded. If we're willing to be in decision-making positions, we cannot isolate ourselves from politics. A woman should widen the scope of her interests. We should have women in different fields. A woman should never isolate or remove herself from her major field to work exclusively with other women.

GI: Does this mean that you are not impressed by the activities of women's institutes and organizations such as lectures, seminars and awareness campaigns?

WH: No, of course I am impressed. But, what I mean is that these activities alone are insufficient. Along with these awareness campaigns, action has to be taken. Lebanon up until now has not signed the international agreement for the abolition of all forms of discrimination against women. There are a lot of considerations which make our society cautious when dealing with women's liberation.

GI: What is a possible solution to this problem, according to you? Is establishing a civil law a good solution?

WH: A civil law is a good solution, but it can't replace the current laws. If a civil law was enacted, it should be elective, at least for the time being. In the future, I'm not sure what scope we'll have for change. After all, we have seventeen sects, each one of which is authoritative.

GI: You have expressed your hopes concerning the future of the Lebanese society, to what extent do you expect your hopes to correspond with reality after ten years?

WH: Of course, we will not have a civil law, but certainly we will have accomplished great things. Why not? We are an open society. We will not have overcome all the war effects by then, of course. I still can't see the Lebanese people treating one another in a dignified and civilized manner. But, these things take time, as you know. I hope that things will change for the best.