

“One Person Alone Cannot Defy an Entire System”

An Interview with Na'maat Ken'aan conducted by Myriam Sfair

When the Lebanese war broke out in 1975, Na'maat Ken'aan had already been married five years and was the mother of two daughters. Her third daughter was born during the war. Ken'aan had been working since 1960, the year she graduated from Beirut College for Women (now LAU). Later, she enrolled in the American University of Beirut, where she obtained her M.A. Later, Ken'aan was appointed Director General of the Ministry of Social Affairs, thus becoming the first Lebanese woman to hold such a high ministerial position.

Recalling her experiences and impressions of the war in its beginning stages, Ken'aan said that “when the war began, no one believed it was going to last that long. We thought it would be a short-lived conflict, like the 1958 crisis, and this idea kept us going. Every now and then the war used to stop and we assumed it had to end, yet it didn't. Looking back now, I wonder: had we been able to foresee the future, would we have been able to endure the war?”

“I was a risk-taker during the war. I lived in East Beirut and my parents lived in the West, and the idea of artificially dividing the country into these two parts was intolerable to me. It was not something affecting only me or directed against me personally, of course, but I could not accept the idea of not being able to see my family and friends, and I constantly struggled to overcome this situation. I used to go every weekend to the West, no matter how bad the situation was, so I risked my life a lot. Once, I crossed the barriers to go see my parents and while coming back the fighting became really terrible, so they had to close the barrier quickly. I was trapped inside; I couldn't go back and couldn't cross the barrier. I felt that it was the end, and that I was going to die. But fortunately, and as usual, my husband was waiting for me at the barrier. I started banging on the doors, hoping that they'd hear me, and I heard my husband say ‘Open up! That's my wife!’. I hate remembering that day; it was the worst day in my entire life. Then and there I realized that I was struggling for a futile cause, risking my life, the life of my husband and the future of my family for nothing. I knew I couldn't do anything to change the situation,

because one person alone cannot defy an entire system. Yet, I still didn't give up, and each weekend I continued to visit my parents. I knew I was risking my life yet I couldn't help it or resist it. The idea of Beirut's partition was really distressing to me; it almost became an obsession.

“The war period, though long, seemed to pass quickly. There were many things one could have done had there not been a war. Maybe I would have done my Ph.D. if we had been at peace all those years. Also, while we were trapped in our homes the rest of the world was progressing. So many conferences, seminars and events were taking place all over the world while we were stuck in our shelters. We could have improved our programs in the Ministry and done so many things if not for the war. Yet when the war ended, we Lebanese quickly picked up the pieces and started all over again.

“What affected me most during the war was that thousands of Lebanese immigrated, thus abandoning their country when it needed them most. It hurt to see how easily some Lebanese shed their nationalism. Many Lebanese people lack the attachment and love any citizen is supposed to feel towards his or her country. They never stopped to ask: to whom are we leaving our country? I hated listening to women saying ‘Thank God, we are leaving this country!’ Many Lebanese also took up new nationalities, as though their own nationality was an unpleasant burden they wanted to be rid of. I was profoundly hurt by these people and felt let down. I think that the Lebanese should have endured more. Furthermore, you could sense a lack of solidarity; everyone was striving only for him or herself. The Lebanese were selfish; all they cared about was saving their skins and that of their families; beyond that, they could not have cared less about their country. These things really affected me. I never left the country during the war, not even for a vacation. I was scared that if we left maybe we wouldn't be able to come back. My husband agreed with me, so we stayed and brought up our children here. The family is a child's ‘first school’, and my children grew up to love their country and not to fear the war. I believe in fate: when your time comes, you will die, whether you take risks or not.

“I also tried to preserve some sense of national solidarity through my work. Since the Muslims had left the East and

I unequivocally believed in myself and in the cause I was fighting for

gone to the West, I had to divide my time between the two sides. I never tolerated hearing anything bad spoken by one side against the other, and used to defend the Muslims when the East Beirutis complained and defend the Christians when the West Beirutis complained. I refused to accept this unnatural division in any sector, especially in my work, *i.e.*, the administration of the Ministry.

“During the war years, the Ministry of Social Affairs was among the very few government offices that continued to function. I had a very devoted staff of capable people who had similar ideas to mine and who didn’t fear the war. So, wherever I went they used to follow. Our department was in charge of emergency relief for war victims. The Prime Minister oversaw this program. I was in charge of distributing the goods and materials sent to us from other countries. Due to my work I had to visit the East and West of the city, and also roamed over all the Lebanese areas during the war. We worked very hard during the war catering to the needs of the people. It was an awful period; the government was weak and those working in the government even weaker. I used to project an aura of power, even though I had no one to back me up — not even the government. Even the citizens renounced the government because of its weakness. I defied the militias frequently, yet they always understood my point. I was really very fair in dealing with people during the war. I never sided with Christians against Muslims or with Easterners against Westerners. Once, a certain militia attacked one of our basements and took a lot of our supplies, so I threatened them by saying ‘I’ll report what you did to everyone and I’ll close down the supply distribution and go on strike!’. I suppose it was crazy of me to threaten the militias when I had no one to back me. Fortunately, that particular militia returned everything they stole. This experience strengthened my conviction that if you are honest and work with devotion everyone will eventually appreciate you and even those who are not honest cannot help but respect you.

“The war affected me positively; my experience grew, and with it, my personality and contacts. Due to my responsibilities during the war, I had to adopt a mode of dealing with people in an honest and respectful manner. I’m very glad that I was appreciated for the work I did. My name came up several times when they wanted to choose ministers, not because I’m a woman, but

because I’m hard-working. My husband used to worry a lot about me, yet he knew that it was my will and I was acting according to my own will and convictions, and he knew that he couldn’t change me. Throughout my life I always chose to do things correctly and give them my fullest effort. During the war, my primary focus was on my humanitarian obligation towards the people. I never thought of ambition or power. Being Director General of the Ministry was never an incentive to make me work harder. I did so for humanitarian reasons and because I unequivocally believed in myself and in the cause I was fighting for. In my opinion, the job does not make the person; on the contrary, each person molds the job he or she is handling according to their personality, goals and values. If a weak and unqualified person attains a very high position he or she will ruin it, and the job and position will become worthless. I have never changed my style of work or my way of dealing with people since I started working until now. No matter how small the job I had, I was proud of it and tried to make the most out of it. Whenever I got promoted I worked with the same attitude and knew that my post was growing and I was doing it with a lot of hard work and dedication. I always felt [at the Ministry] that I was part of a big family. In my opinion one will never succeed unless one adopts this attitude.

“Women definitely did not risk their lives during the war like men. But maybe they did something even more important: they tended to the family and protected it. Of course, many women left the country with their children. In my opinion, women affect their families and husbands a lot. If they are brave and decide to stay in a country at war, their children will enjoy their support during the difficult war period. However, if a woman is weak, she’ll complain constantly so that her husband will send her and the children abroad, leaving him behind to cope with everything alone. The war led to a lot of divorces because so many women and children left and when the husbands wanted them to come back, they refused.

“In general, before the war Lebanon was a leader for all the other Arab countries in terms of culture, education, and economics. This may have been a contributing cause of the outbreak of the war, since there was a lot of envy and jealousy. In my opinion, we Lebanese learned a good lesson after the war, and that is that no one else will help us or save us but ourselves.

We should have more confidence and solidarity and work harder to improve our country. As long as your country is strong and has power, everyone respects you, yet the minute something goes wrong everyone becomes your enemy. The Lebanese are natural leaders, yet the pronounced individuality in this country is what is retarding Lebanon's overall improvement. Everything private is important (*e.g.*, companies, enterprises, *etc.*) while everything public is bad because we don't have a dedication to our nationality and our country. Nationality and love of one's country is reduced to mere commerce. The "profit motive" way of thinking is very prominent and it appeared on a larger scale during the war, thus making the most of one's position (in terms of accruing money and prestige) is the only aim. After all those years of war, we should realize the importance of our country and work hard to defend it and protect it. We should think of our country first and only later of other things.

"In the Lebanese war, as in any crisis situation, there were gains and losses. The primary gain for the Lebanese woman is that she found her place alongside men in the workplace. The losses, unfortunately, are more numerous. Many women lost their husbands, brothers, parents and children. Many are handicapped due to the war. Many are homeless and displaced. Women suffered a lot, as did all Lebanese citizens. Women felt more shattered and the losses affected them more deeply because they used to stay at home, whereas the husbands had their work to think of. Women usually worry and suffer more than men. We should have learned from our war experience and now we should pick up the pieces and strive to bring up a generation that appreciates the country. We should try to encourage solidarity between our fellow citizens and between all the sects and religions in Lebanon.

"If I could sit and talk with women in other war-torn countries, I would tell them that the most important thing is solidarity among the family members. These women should encourage their children to love each other and to love one's country the most. Also, these women should teach their children to be patient and strong, for no war ever lasted forever. Nothing lasts forever, and the important characteristic one has to have is the will to survive and the perseverance to endure.

"In spite of all that I and other Lebanese have been through, I can say that I have many satisfactions. My greatest satisfaction is that I'm appreciated for what I do and I'm considered a successful administrator in the ministry. I should work hard to be

"If she truly wants to, the Lebanese woman is able to work alongside her male partners in any field."

successful, for my failure will affect all my women colleagues. I thus have an obligation to pave the way for the women who will follow me so that they can also become Director General. I also feel an obligation towards the Lebanese Government, which should help other women in their climb. Whenever I see a woman in administration, I always encourage her and push her to fight for what she wants. Yet women colleagues of mine never did that for me. Rather, they seemed to be jealous — which is, of course, a human trait. Although I've always worked in the same domain, each time I was promoted I improved my department. In fact, the last department I was in charge of before taking my current position now requires four employees to replace me! I derive a lot of joy from planning things and I have considerable initiative; whenever I come up with an idea or plan, I start dreaming about it at night and executing it during the day.

"If she truly wants to, the Lebanese woman is able to work alongside her male partners in any field. The Lebanese woman has a role these days in the Parliament, and I hope she'll also have an increasing role in the ministries. Women play a crucial role in contributing to the family income. You can even find a number of women in the Lebanese armed forces nowadays. Lebanon really needs its women, and Lebanese women have to fight for what they want. Both women and men must support each other in the hard fight to regain our leading role not only in the Arab World but internationally."