

I Could Not Be as Much as Myself: A Woman and the War in Lebanon

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Francine was a 28-year old single woman, living with her mother and unmarried siblings in a village not far from Beirut. A Greek Orthodox, she was one of seven children. After completing her high school degree, she had taught for three years in a local elementary school before deciding to change careers and work in a financial institution. I became acquainted with her in 1994, and saw her almost daily for a number of months during that autumn, and frequently again during a subsequent visit to Lebanon in 1995. I interviewed Francine in 1994 as part of a larger project on women and war in Lebanon. To convey her voice to the greatest extent possible, I have provided an excerpt from an interview, and then follow this with discussions and comments about women's reactions to the long war in Lebanon. (Comments appearing within brackets are the author's explanatory remarks. Comments in parentheses are transliterations of Arabic.)

Suad Joseph: What do you feel has been the specific impact of the war upon you?

Francine: Mostly, I got behind in my education. I wanted to specialize, but things turned around against my ambition. It feels like freezing. Even if I did something other than what I wanted to now, I could not reach [where I want]. I would be lost. I would not be as much as myself. I did not feel the impact of the war socially, because my family stayed together. There was no distance between us. We were always talking, taking care of each other.

I also feared depending on any person who might come forward [as a potential husband]. I didn't know how to make decisions about my future. The same thing happened to all the youths. I feared meeting a man who might have one appearance and a different reality. The war made me realize that I had to take my relationships seriously.

SJ: What impact do you think that the war had on women younger than 25 years of age?

F: These girls got lost. They became disorderly (*faw-dawiyi*). They had no value for things. They are wild (*tayshareen*). Some began to see life as just appearances, rather than life as beautiful or life as character (*shakhsiyyi*). The girl acted as she wanted, did only what she wanted, accepted no advice. She thought that this was the generation of the present and thought her parents were backwards. These girls lost a lot. They lived a life of no character. They didn't care about themselves. Even if they feared something, they gave it no importance. They wanted a sexual life more than a social life based on good principles of being ladies in society.

SJ: What impact do you think the war has had on women between 25 and 50 years of age?

F: I can't give you much information about them. After the war, they began feeling that, because they were so constrained during the war, many no longer cared about their children. They ruined their houses. Other women took their children in under them. So, we have two kinds of mothers: the mother who gathered her children under her wing and took care of them. These mothers who did their obligations towards their children grow in the eyes of their children. The other mothers got lost, they got even more lost after the end of the war, and now they regret that they left their traditions.

SJ: What impact do you think that the war has had on women who are now over 50 years of age?

F: Instead of having her house full, this woman started getting involved in politics like men. She feels that society belongs to her and that she is able to participate. Some women, though, collapsed and could not be ladies of society.

SJ: What impact do you think the war had on men

younger than 25 years of age now?

F: Big disorder! (*fowda*). Those who were supposed to have an education to enlighten them about good things started to be negative (*salabiyyeen*). In his emergence, the youth was given bad things. The war stopped these youth. If you spoke to a young man in a reasonable way, he would not be convinced, would not listen. These young men lost their education. The one whose parents paid and sweated over him got more lost than the street boy (*ibn ash-shaari*). They blamed the war for everything they did that went wrong. They smoked, did drugs, stole. The good men were pulled in by the bad men.

SJ: What impact do you think the war had on men who are now between the ages of 25 and 50?

F: This is the big impact of the war. This man could not guarantee his future. His education stopped, his work stopped; he was frozen. His ambition was destroyed. They could not buy land, or build, or furnish a house. They could not make plans. They could not establish a family. This man started feeling he couldn't do anything. Even where there are jobs, he says "there is no job." If he wanted a family life, if he wanted to ask for a girl's hand, he started to be afraid of the good girls because he had seen so much. We are Eastern people. If a girl is raised in a good character, the good character was lost in the midst of the bad character. So, if a man tries for something once, twice, three times, he gives up. He no longer believes. He only wants to be free in himself. So the family broke down and family members separated.

SJ: What impact do you think that the war had on men over 50 years of age?

F: Most of these men who were affected were those who had a family. Especially the poor man — this man feared losing his family more than the man with money. This man came to have psychological problems. He is lost; he stays out of things even if they affect his own house.

SJ: Are women able to do things now that they did not do before the war?

F: Yes. There is a big difference in education and work.

Before there was little chance to work. Now, there is a lot of demand on our lives, and the woman is important. She works like any man. She is educated more than before. There is more awareness, more development, more participation of women. Women have done well; the woman is now at the level of the man.

SJ: How are women's relationships different with their husbands now as a result of the war?

F: Those who used to be calm and good, now if a little thing happens, it will create problems. They become angry quickly, become sexually distant, have no patience for each other. They "role-play" from the outside, but on the inside, they are distant. There is *nufur* (alienation, aversion). Men ran away from their homes; if a man has problems at home, he runs away from them. If a woman wants something, this easily creates a problem.

SJ: How are women's relationships with their children different as a result of the war?

F: There are two kinds of faces: The one fears for her children and protects her children to preserve the Lebanese family. She will sacrifice anything. The other women live only for themselves. They don't care if their son is on drugs or in a political party. This woman thinks only of herself, her desires, her life, even at the expense of others. She wants her life only.

SJ: How are women's relationships with their fathers different as a result of the war?

F: In Lebanon, the girl does not relate with her father; she does not express things to her father. Her freedom of expression is with her mother. Even if a daughter is speaking truth to her father, most fathers want their word to be enacted, even if it is at the expense of the daughter. The daughter has less value than the son. Even if the son is wrong and the daughter is right, they will believe that the son is right. For this reason, many daughters don't have much of a relationship with their fathers. The war increased this. The problem goes back to the character of the fathers. Some fathers treat children equally. Some fathers favor their daughters because daughters need more affection than boys. They need protection. The

father does this so as not to lose his daughter because a lot of things pull the daughter away from the father in Lebanon. So, some fathers take their daughters to be their friends so as not to lose them.

SJ: How are women's relationships with their mothers different as a result of the war?

F: The daughter wants to assert her character over her mother. She feels she understands more than the mother, especially if the mother is much older than her and if the period she lived in is very different than the daughter's period of time. If the daughter is educated, she won't accept her mother's word. If the mother tries to explain to the daughter something for her own good, the daughter won't accept unless she experiences it herself. If a mother wants to help her daughter to live in society, she will tire herself a lot. The war created a distance between daughters and mothers. There is no understanding between mothers and daughters now. The mother has experience in life, but she is rejected by her daughter.

SJ: How are women's relationships with their brothers different as a result of the war?

F: The brother is now more focused on himself than on his sister. It varies between those with lots of freedom and those without. Before the war, the brother had a lot of responsibility for his sister, now he thinks his sister is just like any other girl. He no longer feels for her. He is not responsible for her. If the brother gets married now, he has more concern for his wife than for his sister. He no longer has respect for his sister's word. He silences her. He gives no value to her presence, her education, or her culture. If the family used to feel for each other, love each other, a brother would not eat before feeding his sister. Now the brother says the piece of bread is not to be divided between him and his sister, but to be eaten by him alone — all of it. He is greedy. Some have respect for their sisters. There is equality between them, love, and they protect each other.

SJ: How are women's relationships with their sisters different as a result of the war?

F: It depends on the specific personalities. We are still in

the same situation of love, confidence, and caring in our family. I don't know about others. In our family, if a sister wants to do something, she won't do anything unless she asks her sister. We eat together, see each other. If we don't see each other every day, it is as if we have seen no one.

SJ: How are a girl's experiences in school different as a result of the war?

F: The disorder (*fowda*) affected the whole family and society, even in school. The child answers back to the teacher now. There is no character, even in relation to their obligations. There is no respect between students. Boys and girls would rather talk socially than study. They don't take studying seriously, so they fail even more.

SJ: Is the Lebanese Government acting differently towards women as a result of the war?

F: The disorder happened because the state broke. The state is focusing on things that are not important. The state now has nothing to offer the woman or child. The state isn't giving the woman her rights. The state is everything; if it doesn't offer education for a woman, there is a problem. Without the support of the state, the woman cannot do anything.

SJ: Do women have more freedoms now, after the war?

F: The woman has big freedoms now — freedom of opinion, freedom of expression; freedom to do whatever she likes, in her work, in her home. The biggest freedom is in her home. The woman takes life just like that, '*al-ghafli* (haphazardly), as if a person comes to this life only to please herself and leave. The woman now forgets her responsibilities, even if they are more important than her personal things. She puts them to one side so that she can live happily. This freedom made more problems for women. The social freedom is different from work freedom. The social freedom is that the woman takes her boyfriend, and even gets pregnant while single and then marries. She takes life as natural. Some think that this is an advance. They forget their character and even forget themselves.

SJ: Do women work at different jobs since the war?

F: Yes, of course. We are in a period of education and culture. A woman is more educated now, she carries more responsibilities at work, and at a higher level. There is more opening for work for women now.

SJ: Should there be more women in government?

F: I see that the woman is successful in lots of things. So, a woman can join the government. A woman is learning like a man, she holds responsibilities like a man. So why should she not be head of state or a member of parliament? But here in Lebanon, they say a woman cannot exert her presence like a man in politics. They say that politics is only for men. I think that a woman can be head of the state.

SJ: Should women serve in the military?

F: Women in the military is a good idea. This would create a national feeling among women. It would get the woman prepared for her responsibility towards her country. The woman has less courage for battle, though. Some women did do battle in the war, but only a small percent. I accept for a woman to fight in a war, but I have not found them to be as courageous as men in fighting. It is good for a woman to fear for her country like she fears for her children. Her country is her right. It belongs to her like it belongs to the man — Lebanon, the nation, the family.

SJ: Should women serve as police?

F: I don't like it for myself. I don't know much about it. It is still in the beginning; this is the first year we see women as police. We don't have much of an idea about it yet. This is a service to the country, it is playing a role for the system, for the country. It is good that a woman does this, but I don't like it for myself. But I do like military service, like [the position of] inspector. It is the public aspect of the traffic police that I don't like, working in the streets.

SJ: How have women's responsibilities changed since the war?

F: A woman has no feelings for responsibility. She is dis-

tant from the family. She is more focused on herself than on her family and husband. This creates problems and divorces. There are divisions in society; there is a lack of responsibility on women's part.

Interpretation and Commentary

Francine expressed views that were frequently reiterated by other women and men I interviewed as part of this research project. While there were a diversity of views expressed by respondents to each question, Francine's opinions were commonly held, particularly among the women I interviewed in this village. A striking paradox emerges from Francine's responses. On the one hand, she experiences greater freedom for women, greater opportunities at home, at work, and in society. She supports women's greater economic and political participation, even to the extent of women's active participation in the military. She sees that many women are succeeding in all arenas of life. Yet, she feels that women, in general, have not lived up to the responsibilities entailed by these new freedoms. Women, in her view, are now more concerned with themselves and the satisfaction of their own personal pleasures. As a result, families in general, and children in particular, have suffered. Francine does not have much kinder words for men. Men have failed their families, their wives, their sisters, their daughters. Much of these failures she attributes to the after-effects of the war. Yet, in her own world, Francine feels safe, still woven into the fabric of her caring family.

These paradoxes were repeatedly voiced in the interviews I carried out in 1994 and 1995. Most women felt themselves cared for in their own, immediate families, and felt that their own families had remained intact. Yet they felt that family life in general had deteriorated in Lebanon and that men and women were failing to fulfill their familial and social responsibilities. Despite this, many saw the aftermath of the war as a time of great opportunities and yearned for a political leadership to support the basic values of Lebanese family and social life while continuing to offer new opportunities and rights for women.