

Young Women in Post-War Lebanon

Interviews conducted by Ghena Ismail

Since the end of the Lebanese war in 1990, many books and articles have been published by scholars and journalists explaining the roots and repercussions of the war. The causes of war are still not clear to most people, not even the most sophisticated and well-educated. Obviously, they cannot be any clearer to individuals whose births coincided with the beginning of the war. Young women born during the period 1974-1976, who first opened their eyes to see their country in ruins, could not comprehend what the real cause of the war was; they did not have any active role in it. Their only role was that of recipients of the negative consequences of the war. In order to understand how war influenced these young women's views, attitudes, and behaviors, I carried out interviews with ten female university graduates and students in various branches of the following universities: Lebanese American University, American University of Beirut, Lebanese University, and Beirut Arab University.

Reema, born in 1974, is a Sunni Muslim Palestinian girl who has just finished a B.A. in Political Science at A.U.B. For the last two years of her education, Reema has received financial aid from the university. Reema's family consists of four children, two girls and two boys, of whom she is the eldest. Concerning war's influence on her views of national and confessional identity, Reema says that her national identity is a problem with or without a war. However, the situation was, of course, worse during the war. As a group, Palestinians were persecuted, and hence had to hide their national identity. Regarding her perception of Lebanon's role in the region and in the world, she carelessly shrugs her shoulders and says, "they say it's going to replace Hong Kong as the center of trade, but I don't care."

With respect to women's reactions to war, Reema believes that women's responses to the crisis took place mainly in their homes. Men, on the other hand, either participated in the war or were busy finding the economic means to enable their families to survive. As for sustaining Lebanese society, Reema thinks that neither men nor women played a significant role. "Each was more concerned about the members of his or her own family." Reema estimates that many women must have abandoned their jobs during the war because they were primarily concerned with protecting their families. "Now that the war is over and there is more safety, women are able to put their children in day-care centers, and hence, are going back to work."

If Reema could sit with young girls from Somalia, Chechenia or the former Yugoslavia, she would advise them to be trained in self-defense because women, according to Reema, are pri-

mary victims of violence. She would also encourage women to participate in decision-making and in the rehabilitation of their nations after war. "Women's participation can be very beneficial, since I view women as less obsessed with power than men. Moreover, being more sensitive to their family's needs, they can consider the nation's needs better than a man."

As for the obstacles Reema faces as a woman, she says that she has a double problem since she is a Palestinian woman. Reema's greatest satisfaction in her field would be to feel that she is performing well and that she is not marginal. "Accomplishing things for women would definitely satisfy me a lot." Her hope for Lebanese society focuses on awareness campaigns concerning various issues, and the best she can hope for the Lebanese women is that they start viewing themselves, and being viewed by others, as human beings. Finally, Reema does not foresee that the situation in Lebanon will be much better in ten years.

Yasmine, born in 1976, is a Sunni Muslim Lebanese girl who has just finished her first year of business at Beirut Arab University. Her family consists of six children, of whom she is the fifth. During the war, her father worked in Kuwait in order to support their family.

Yasmine asserts that war had a great influence on her. "First of all, during the war I lost my house, as did many people. Second, my sister was born retarded due to the shock my mother received when the house was bombarded during her pregnancy. Third, our financial status deteriorated. Fourth, people in the West no longer respect me and they view me as a "terrorist". Due to all of this, I no longer feel secure and I feel rather disappointed since I had to give up many dreams because of our financial difficulties." Yasmine doesn't deny that during the war she sympathized most with the Lebanese belonging to her sect. However, she asserts that she views herself mainly as a Lebanese. Concerning the war's influence on her views of Lebanon's regional and international role, Yasmine felt that Lebanon was weak and didn't know how to defend itself. "What we as Lebanese did to ourselves and to our country was very backward and shocking!"

Yasmine does not think that women's reactions or roles during the war were necessarily different from those of men. "Many women entered political parties and tried to defend their communities. In fact, women and men played an equally significant role during the war." As for the war's overall influence on women, Yasmine believes it was positive as it encouraged women to become stronger and more enlightened about their capacities and their rights.

If Yasmine were to give advice to young girls from Somalia, the former Yugoslavia or Chechenia, she would advise them to be strong and not to be shaken by war, for war is only a temporary state. The biggest challenge Yasmine faces as a girl are the traditions of her society, which try to control her whenever she wants to do anything. However, she asserts that this doesn't weaken her. "I can and should always defy the unfair rules." Yasmine says that the way she sees herself in ten years depends on her country. If it improves, she would see herself in a very good position in her field of work. As for the future of Lebanese society, she hopes that discrimination based on gender will be completely eliminated. However, Yasmine doesn't expect her hopes to be realized since she doesn't trust the intentions of the people in power.

Mona, born in 1976, is Greek Orthodox Lebanese girl whose family consists of one boy and two girls, of whom she is the youngest. She is studying education at L.A.U. with the help of financial aid. Mona believes that war certainly influenced her parents' behavior towards her. "They were very protective; they didn't want us to go out and preferred that our friends visited us in our homes." Mona denies that the war had any significant influence on her national and confessional identity. However, she says that when she went to East Beirut, her friends were very surprised that she was able to live in West Beirut among the Muslims. As for Lebanon's regional role, Mona believes that it has almost no role. "The great powers have been able to abuse Lebanon through creating rifts between people and encouraging sectarianism."

Mona thinks that women's reactions to war were different from those of men. "My mother, unlike my father, used to get so afraid, that after the war she had depression three times." In regard to women's roles, Mona says that their roles during war were confined mainly to their homes. "It is men who played the leading role during the war, for it is they who resisted, fought and worked for the country." The words of advice Mona would give to young girls from Somalia, Chechenia, or the former Yugoslavia are that they should be strong and not let the war affect their education. "Even if they can't go to school, teachers should still gather the students anywhere and teach them." The biggest challenge Mona faces as a girl is overcoming the way society views her, especially when she loves. Her hope for the Lebanese society is that people become more loving towards one another and to get rid of their sectarian mentality.

Lina, born in 1973, is a Greek Orthodox Lebanese girl. She earned a B.A. in Business Administration from A.U.B. last year. Since then, she worked in a company which she recently left. Her family consists of three children, two boys and one girl; she is the middle child. As for the war's influence on her life, Lina

says that her parents were certainly over-protective. She went nowhere except to school, and up until today, she hasn't seen any part of Lebanon except Beirut. Regarding her national identity, it wasn't the least bit affected by war. She has always been very patriotic. Being a Christian living in West Beirut was not a problem for Lina. "I never felt afraid. As a family, we interacted with people from different sects and I never felt that we were threatened." Concerning the war's influence on Lebanon's regional and international role, Lina says, "I always felt that Lebanon had no real role. For every decision it makes, it has to take permission from 'outside', not only from one country, but from many countries."

Lina believes that women and men played an equally important role in sustaining Lebanese society during the war years. "As for me, both of my parents worked at A.U.B. to improve our living conditions and ensure our education in the best university in Lebanon." As for the war's influence on women's role, Lina says "Women have definitely learned to depend on themselves more due to the loss of their husbands or due to the great inflation in prices which has made men incapable of supporting his family alone. However, at work, men still take the more important positions and are paid more than women for the same job. In the government, we're still not seeing many women."

If Lina could sit with young girls from Somalia, Chechenia, or the former Yugoslavia, she would advise them to fight for what they want and inform the world about their problems so that they can receive some sort of help.

The biggest challenges Lina faces as a girl is to be able to behave the way she likes regardless of what society might think of her. "I want to be able to decide what's convenient for myself." When I asked Lina where she sees herself in ten years, she laughed, saying, "I can't even say where I will be tomorrow. In general, I imagine that I will still be in Lebanon, for I don't like to leave Lebanon. I hope to be in an important position, having a nice family with at least three children." Lina's hope for the future of Lebanese society is that everything improves, people learn to care more for one another, and that they develop a stronger sense of belonging to their country instead of having everyone care only about his/her family or sect. Also, Lina hopes that women continue their struggle towards liberation. Finally, Lina affirms that "in year 2005 women will certainly have a greater influence."

Wafaa, born in 1974, is a Sunni Muslim Jordanian girl. She is repeating the first year of law at Beirut Arab University. Her family consists of four female children, of whom she is the eldest. Wafaa left Lebanon with her family for Oman in 1979. They came back three years ago. Although Wafaa didn't live the war, she believes that women's behavior during the war was

more responsible than that of men, and that women played a more important role in sustaining Lebanese society. Regarding the war's influence on women's role, Wafaa thinks that it was positive. "In addition to the fact that the number of working women increased during the war due to dire financial need, the Lebanese woman in general became more mature than other women. This is because she had to deal with difficult circumstances which hardened her, unlike women who live abroad. We lived a luxurious life in which we didn't have to think or worry about anything. However, these changes didn't affect the power structure of the Lebanese society. In the family, it is still the man who makes the final decision. In work and in the government, the man is still more influential."

The biggest challenge Wafaa faces as a woman is to prove that women can be better than men and make their own decisions. After ten years, Wafaa sees herself being responsible for a family, having two children and still fighting to reach her goals. She adds, though, that if she found that her family needed her, she might quit her work. As for her hopes for Lebanese society, she says, "I hope that classes and class struggle are abolished, along with sectarianism. As for women, I hope that we'll have more female parliamentarians and that women in turn will have a greater influence." In ten years, she believes that the situation will definitely be better for the Lebanese women because more and more women are getting educated.

Minerva, born in 1975, is a Shi'ite Muslim Lebanese girl. She has finished the first year of interior design at the Lebanese University. Her family consists of six children, three boys and three girls, of whom she is the third. As for the war's influence on her views of Lebanon's role, Minerva feels that Lebanon was one of the weakest countries; however, this doesn't affect the way she views herself as a Lebanese.

Minerva believes that men definitely faced more difficulties during the war, since they were more concerned about defending their country. As regards the war's influence on women's role, Minerva thinks it was positive. "The man learned to depend more on his wife, as he needed her help. Suddenly, women became entrusted with more tasks within their families and had to make more decisions on their own." However, Minerva doesn't think that this has brought about a significant change in the power structure of the Lebanese society. "Man is still the decisive power in the family. In work and in government as well, he is certainly more dominant."

If Minerva had the chance to sit with young women from Somalia, Chechenia or the former Yugoslavia, she would advise them to hold on to their countries and never think of leaving them, no matter what happens. Minerva's biggest challenge is to reach an important position in the field of interior design. In ten years, Minerva sees herself continuing her education,

working and happily married but without children "I don't want to have children before I assert myself in society. By the time I'm ready, I will not have more than two children." Regarding her hopes for Lebanese society she says, "I hope that sectarian discrimination shall be eliminated so that we'll have a more united country." As for the Lebanese women, Minerva hopes that they continue their struggle to assert themselves in society and reach the most important positions. In the year 2005, Minerva believes that the situation might be better, but she doesn't think that by then women will have accomplished all that they look forward to. "There will certainly be more women in the government, but the number of women will still not be equal to that of men."

Hala is a Sunni Muslim Palestinian girl. Her family consists of five children, three girls and two boys, of whom she is the second. Hala has finished the first year of Business in L.A.U. She was born in Abu-Dhabi, and has been living in Lebanon for only four years.

In Abu-Dhabi, Hala never cared about people's sects. "I'm a Sunni; however, I never was aware of the differences between Sunni and Shi'a before I came to Lebanon." As for the war's influence on Lebanon's role, Hala feels that Lebanon was a toy in the hands of foreign countries, and that war has caused a decrease in Lebanon's tourist activity. Hala believes that women's role, although limited within their families, was more important in sustaining the Lebanese society. "Although men fought during the war, they were not fighting as Lebanese. Most of them were fighting as members of a certain political party or religious group." As for the war's influence on women's role, Hala views it as positive. "During the war, many women had to work due to either the loss of their husbands or the pressing financial need." Concerning the power structure of the Lebanese society, Hala doesn't think it has changed. "From the families I know, the woman is still man's follower. She is expected to know how to please her husband in order to avoid problems."

The biggest challenge Hala faces in her life right now is to be able to enjoy her youth in spite of her father's restrictions. "I want to live my youth according to my own principles. I don't want to act like an old person from now until I'm old. In the future, when I love someone I want to be able to go out with him without feeling afraid."

In ten years, Hala hopes that she'll succeed in co-ordinating between her work and her family, be married to a man she loves, have children and be living a luxurious life in a civilized society. "These are my hopes, but I don't like to be very optimistic about them so as not to be disappointed later." Regarding her future hopes for Lebanese society, Hala wants Lebanon to become more advanced and to overcome many of

the misconceptions it has, especially those related to women and sectarianism. Also, she wants women to have more rights, and thus, a greater role. "In the year 2005, I definitely see the woman playing a more important role than she does now. After all, no society can progress with half of its members paralyzed. Moreover, the coming generation is certainly more educated and enlightened."

Najwa, born in 1974, is a Druze Lebanese. Her family consists of three girls, of whom she is the second. She has just finished her second year of Business at L.A.U. and she works at the college in order to have financial aid. Najwa left Lebanon with her family when Israel invaded in 1982. They stayed in Nigeria until 1987; hence, they lived the war in 1989, during the "war

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of liberation" led by General Aoun.

Najwa asserts that, during that war, the sect meant nothing to her. "I cared the most for the people who were suffering most, regardless of their sect. During the war of liberation, my heart was with the people of Beirut." As for women's reaction during the war, Najwa explains, "from what I saw, the man was stronger. While the women were screaming, the men went out to see what was going on." She laughs and adds, "But I liked to go out." In respect to women's role, Najwa says, "I wasn't here for most of the war period, but I don't feel that women did anything." As for the war's influence on women's role, Najwa thinks it was positive. "More women started to work, especially those whose husbands had died. Also, you no longer feel that girls are as eager to get married as they were in the past. Now, the girl gives priority to educating herself." Najwa doesn't know whether the power structure within the family has been altered as a result of war; however, she asserts that, "I don't think that the issue is an issue of power. In my family, for example, although the final decision is my father's, my mother always gives her opinion. However, she refrains from allowing us to do anything if my father doesn't approve of it. She prefers that he bears the responsibility. Yet, in other families I know, the mother doesn't even give her opinion. The decision is entirely the father's. I imagine that this was the state before and after war."

Najwa's biggest challenge as a girl is to be able to prove her-

self through her career. "Here, I get really annoyed by the inferior way the girl is looked upon, and hence I have made up my mind to go for a Master's degree." Najwa's greatest satisfaction in the future will be her feeling of success in her work and the fact she is helping her husband.

Najwa sees herself in ten years as having an important position in the field of her specialty, happily married and a mother of four children. As for her hopes for the Lebanese society and the Lebanese women, Najwa hopes that women will have a more effective role instead of only talking and chanting slogans. However, I don't like to see the woman neglecting her family, for the family is very important. As for Najwa's expectations for women's situation in the year 2005, she says, "definitely, women will have progressed. First of all, we have become more open-minded. Second, the new generation is not blindly obeying their parents; it is rather obvious that the parent's authority has diminished. The new generation should grab this opportunity to correct some of the misconceptions of their elders. However, the youths shouldn't forget about morality. Many of them are doing so, and this is something that has to be dealt with."

Sana, born in 1975, is a displaced Shi'ite Muslim Lebanese who has finished her second year of Communication Arts at L.A.U. and works in the college to receive financial aid. Her family consists of seven children, four elder girls and three younger boys.

Sana's family has been displaced for nineteen years. Before the war, they used to live on Arax St. in East Beirut; then they came and took over an empty house in El-Sanayea. "After the war was over, five years ago, the land lord made us move from the 1st floor to the 2nd floor. Nevertheless, we're not going to move out. How can we leave when our house on Arax St. is still taken over by a different family?!" Sana doesn't feel that the experience of displacement has affected her or made her feel afraid or insecure. "We're not the only people who were living in other people's houses during the war. Many other people did the same thing. This was very normal during the war." As for the war's influence on Sana, it was great. "I feel afraid of staying at home alone. I even feel afraid to stay at work alone. All the time, I feel that something terrible might happen. My parents try to help me to stop being afraid, but fear has become part of my nature." As for the war's influence on Sana's identity she says, "I grew to hate any person who is biased in favor of his/her own sect." Concerning Lebanon's role, Sana feels it became weak, and that it now has no important role. "When a Lebanese travels abroad, people don't look at him highly. They see him as coming from a country of constant wars and problems"

As for women's reaction to war, it certainly was different from

that of men, according to Sana. "When we used to escape bombardments and stayed in the shelter, my mother didn't dare to leave the shelter at all, but my father went out. Also, my mother, sisters and I broke down more often than my father did. My father tried to calm us down. This was the case in most of the families I knew." In respect to women's role during the war, Sana says that it was mainly that of keeping their families together. Hence, fewer women went to work during the war."

If Sana were to sit with young girls from Somalia, Chechenia, or the former Yugoslavia, she would advise them not to give up or neglect their future. "Women have to continue their education and work and learn to depend more upon themselves." Sana never felt that being a girl was an obstacle in her way, "I act the way I like and I don't care about society. My parents

"Women became stronger and more mature"

always trusted me and gave me total freedom."

In ten years, Sana sees herself in an important position, married and the mother of four children. What she hopes for Lebanese society is to live in peace, never to have wars again, and that the Lebanese women progress in their movement and become more capable of making their own decisions. In the year 2005, Sana expects things to be better because right now she can see that there is "a trend toward improvement."

Rabab, born in 1974, is a Greek Orthodox Lebanese girl who has just received a B.A. in Communication Arts-Journalism from L.A.U. Rabab's family consists of five children, four girls and one boy, of whom she is the eldest.

Despite the war, Rabab always felt proud to be a Lebanese. "I never felt ashamed of my identity, maybe because I lived abroad and wasn't really aware of what was going on in Lebanon. I hadn't the least idea about the Lebanese people's sickening behavior. When I came back, I was shocked to find that most of the Lebanese workers steal and most of the community is accustomed to lying. Nevertheless, I don't blame the Lebanese entirely. After all, they have been through such an ordeal." Rabab affirms that the war has strengthened her patriotism. "I didn't become sectarian, perhaps because I didn't live here during the war. Yet, I can understand why the Lebanese people are sectarian."

As for women's role in sustaining the Lebanese society, Rabab thinks it was more important than that of men. "Men fought, but unfortunately they accomplished nothing. In contrast, women

did a great job by being responsible for bringing up the new generation." Concerning the war's influence on women's role, Rabab thinks it was positive. "Women became stronger and more mature. Being subject to the hardships of war, women were forced to consider matters which they hadn't considered before. Today, after the war is over, we find many women calling for their rights." Rabab does not think, however, that this change in women's role has led to an alteration in the social or political power structure. "We still have a very long way to go before we can have a non-patriarchal society."

Among the biggest obstacles Rabab faces as a woman is the viability of being financially independent. "Since I'm not allowed by my parents to travel abroad to work, I can't see how it would be possible for me to make money in this country." Another obstacle Rabab faces as a woman is the viability of living alone. She asserts, however, that "one day I'm going to live alone regardless of what my parents or society would think." In order for the Lebanese society to improve, Rabab hopes that all the laws concerning women will be changed and that civil laws will be improved and established to protect women's rights. "Civil laws are the only solution for the injustice done to women. Also, I hope that our society overcomes many of the misconceptions it has. We, as Lebanese, appear to be very civilized. Yet, I believe that we're still very backward in our thinking." In year 2005, Rabab expects an improvement on the legal level since she knows of many people who are working hard to improve women's status through legislation. However, she doesn't expect much on the social level. "Up until today, there are many women who are not even aware of their poor situation!"

As we all know, Lebanese women, except in a few cases, did not engage in actual combat during the war. The majority, though, believed that women's role was equally important to that of men if not more important. Some of the girls questioned the value of fighting and had to wonder if it did the country any good. As for war's influence on women's role, most of the young women believed that war has set a new course for women. They held more responsibilities, both inside and outside the home. It is in the hands of us young women to carry this progress a step further, to improve the status of women on the political, economical and social levels. This is yet to be seen.

