

A Tribute Women

By Samira Aghacy

Chairperson, Humanities Division, Lebanese American University

After twenty-five years of armed struggle against Israeli occupation, Lebanon has finally been liberated through the sacrifices of the Lebanese resistance and the Lebanese people. In this context, one could say that the role of women in the resistance cannot be underestimated. In a film entitled *Zahrat al-Kandoul* ("Women from South Lebanon") directed by May Masri and Jean Chamoun on the Lebanese resistance activist Khadija Herez, the latter tells us that there was no way women could have extricated themselves from the conflict. With the enemy at their doorsteps, Lebanese women had no choice but to act and react and be in the forefront of the resistance. As a result many women were injured, killed or arrested. Israeli soldiers were often seen in the villages rounding people up, breaking into houses in the middle of the night and turning their dogs on women and children, or hitting them with their guns. Accordingly, many others, like Khadija, became involved in the resistance. Far from being viewed as victims at the mercy of the invader, Lebanese women particularly women from the South refused this passive role and became intent on confronting Israeli aggression in various and manifold manners. The role of many women was developed primarily in areas of service and support to men fighters. For instance, some women gave sanctuary to men who had managed to escape captivity at the risk of their own lives. When the Israelis broke into a house looking for prisoners who had escaped, a young woman claimed that the man in the house was her fiancé, but when the enemy discovered the trick, the young woman was detained for one year. [See Munzer Jaber, "An_Nisaa...Aydan Nawaqes al-Huzuz fi al-Muqawama, *Nour*, 15 (Winter 2000), 26-31]. Other women staged demonstrations demanding the release of prisoners and the withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from Lebanese lands. Some women took it upon themselves to rouse people against the occupation and convince them to demonstrate against the occupation. In some villages, women went out into the streets armed with wooden kitchen spoons to confront troop carriers that had come to arrest the men. In some cases, they succeeded in stopping Israeli armed vehicles from entering their villages by confronting them with their own bodies or fighting them with stones and sand. Other women had individual fights with the enemy where one woman in a desperate attempt to protect her own children, stabbed a soldier to death; while others refused to succumb to intimidation or divulge information in return for the release of a father, brother or husband.

If the contribution of many women to the resistance came on the spur of the moment, a spontaneous reaction to a particular situation, others took part out of a strong sense of responsibility and conviction. As a matter of fact, the involvement of women has given the resistance force and momentum. Women were involved in a variety of missions including smuggling messages secretly to the press and other groups, making explosives, planting mines, and carrying bombs from one place to another. A few women went as far as to launch suicide attacks on enemy positions. Among those who opted for martyrdom is Yassar Mroueh who was killed in 1983 on a military mission in the Zrariyyeh village in South Lebanon. Sanaa Muhaydleh, Ibtissam Harb, Norma Abou Hassan were killed in suicide car bombs and Lola Aboud, Maryam Fakhreddine and Wafaa Noureddine died in suicide attacks on enemy troops. Other martyrs include Zahra Abou Assaf, Inaam Hamze, Yussra Ismail, and Fadwa Ghanem.

In their resistance to the Israeli occupation, women went through detention, interrogation, incarceration, solitary confinement, physical torture, and rape. At one point, the number of women prisoners in the Khiam prison reached 500. Many of them were detained without charge at a prison where human rights groups, including London-based Amnesty International, say there have been many cases of torture and ill-treatment. For instance, the prisoner Suha Bshara was detained in 1988 and was never tried. According to The Follow-up Committee to Support the Cause of the Prisoners, women were apprehended regardless of their physical state. Pregnant and lactating women were seized, while other women were detained in conjunction with their husbands and brothers. One prisoner, Najah Ullayq, was arrested with her 65 year-old mother and father. Another two sisters were detained with a four-year old child, while a third woman gave birth in prison, and the newborn baby was kept in the cell.



to Lebanese Resistance Fighters

At the time the Israeli troops finally began withdrawing from Lebanon, there were seven women prisoners in the Khiam prison including the journalist Cozette Ibrahim, Najwa Samhat, Asmahan Al-Khalil, Shamlakan Assaf, Samiha Srur, Sawsan Khazaal and Samira Atiyya. With the exception of Khadija Al-Asmar who was seventy years old, the ages of women prisoners ranged from fourteen to sixty-five. These women were subjected to rape attempts and to all forms of torture to the extent that many of them had to be rushed to hospital several times.

Suha Bshara was the most famous prisoner at Khiam where she spent ten years in detention, six of them in isolation for attempting to assassinate the Commander of the South Lebanon Army, Antoine Lahd. During the first months of her detention, she was deprived of blankets or mattress and was not permitted to bathe. She was given one meager meal a day, and the first time her family was allowed to see her was seven years later in 1995. In prison she was whipped, beaten and exposed to electric shocks. In order to force her to confess and reveal the names of those who collaborated with her, Suha was exposed to blackmail and was threatened with alleged danger to her mother. As a matter of fact, she was given the chance to meet her mother when the daughter was in chains and lying on the floor with a bag on her head, "the formal dress in prison" as the prisoners referred to it. (See interview with Suha Bshara, *Nahar Al-Shabab*, September 15, 1998). Nevertheless, her situation improved when she was transferred to a new cell with other women prisoners. In the new cell, she managed to form new friendships with other women. This collective solidarity sustained the individual women and created strong bonds between them. Even when Suha was finally released, the women friends she had left in prison remained very much in her mind. In an interview with the *Daily Star* (September 4, 1998), Suha asserts: "I'm still with mother Fatima and Intisar, and I hope that efforts by the resistance and people on the political and military levels will release them."

Another resistance fighter and one of the first women prisoners was Khadija Herez. She was dragged barefooted from her home where she was placed in a cell where there were no lavatories or electricity. In an interview with *Al-Raida*, she asserts that in prison "they work on weakening the nerves and breaking you." She was submitted to interrogation and torture for two weeks and was threatened with rape: "Of course when they threaten and your head is in a plastic bag and your hands are tied, you don't think, impossible, they won't rape me. Also because he would pull my shirt off." Other forms of torture perpetrated by the male torturers included being dragged and lifted by the hair, and beaten with "big army boots". She would also be beaten on the back of her head until she passed out. Then "he [the male torturer] would throw water on me, and he would talk dirty to me." (Fall/Winter 1998-1999, p. 45).

Despite the ordeals that many women have been subjected to, it is rather curious that this has not been reflected in the Lebanese media. In the press, news of the traumatic experiences of women in Israeli prisons have been marginalized and handled with timidity, hesitation and unease. As for television, it has been virtually overlooked. Perhaps this reluctance to deal with women in captivity is due to the sensitivity of the issue of rape and the negative repercussions of it on the woman herself. Nevertheless, it is clear that some women have started talking more freely about their ordeal in an attempt to overrun social boundaries that have left them alone to fend for themselves, and have privileged male fighters and kept them in the limelight. The sacrifices women were making when they opted for resistance are unbounded and should be recognized in the same manner that male resistance fighters have been recognized.

Now that our country has been liberated, we would like to pay tribute to women who have entered the male arena - having suffered from patriarchal hegemony in prison with male interrogators and torturers - and who regardless of the dire consequences have opted for arduous struggle in order to save their country.



*Prison
dress code:
in chains,
lying on the
floor, with
a plastic
bag on
one's head*