

The Role of Lebanese Women in Consolidating Peace during the Civil War

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«Our daughter was killed on the stairs of our building... Three weeks after my daughter Jana's death, I had a meeting to prepare for the handicapped demonstration, and I attended it. ... I can't say we stopped the war, but even though we were a minority, it helped us overcome the war». Despite her tragedy, Laure Moghaizel, was one of the backbones of the peacebuilding movement.



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April 2020 will mark the 45th anniversary of the Lebanese civil war, one of the longest and most devastating wars of the twentieth century. A war that gravely scarred us physically and emotionally, given its brutality and absurdity.

Amidst this terrible war, women emerged as heroines, forced to assume new roles within the family, the community, and the public sphere. They were persistently mending and re-stitching the fragile social fabric left tattered and torn by massacres, rapes, snipers, car-bombs, shelling, and displacement. While the men were gone – off fighting, detained, displaced, disappeared, or dead – women became the heads of households, the carers, the nurses, the supply distributors, the negotiators, and the peace initiators, to mention a few.

Lebanese women actively tried to tame the war's fury by participating in non-violent peace movements such as marches, hunger strikes, sit-ins, humanitarian work, reconciliation ceremonies, and prayer meetings. They volunteered and worked in national and international organizations where they organized holiday camps for children in Lebanon and abroad, helped raise money for the handicapped and severely wounded and sent them for treatment abroad. They coordinated relief actions for refugees and displaced families by providing food rations, blankets, clothes, medical treatment and shelters.

Lebanese women, individually and collectively, played a major role in creating a semblance of normalcy, becoming the, «saviors of the fabric of Lebanese society». They served as a buffer throughout the war period attempting to help break the demarcation lines and striving to bridge the gap and erase the division in a country wrecked by sectarianism that created havoc among its citizens. They negotiated peace in their communities, they were the go-betweens who shielded their men and families trying to reason with the militia men on the streets and with the warring factions to maintain

constructive dialogue.

One such person is Iman Khalifeh, a regular citizen, who was turned overnight into a peace activist when she spontaneously questioned «Do you think people need a permit to revolt?» and called for a peaceful march protesting the atrocities of the war around its tenth anniversary. The march she strove to organize never materialized in Lebanon due to heavy shelling by warring factions, however, her call triggered protests in Paris, London, and New York and her activism earned her the Right to Livelihood Alternative Nobel Prize for Peace.

Na'maat Ken'aan, then-Director General of the Ministry of Social Affairs, indefatigably committed to her humanitarian obligations, bravely spoke out against the militia barricades and partitions, «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».

The war also triggered resistance from Lebanese women writers who voiced their horrors and resistance to the war. Emily Nasrallah, Hanan Al Shaykh, Etel Adnan, Evelyn Accad, and Jean Makdissi were just a few of the writers that documented their experiences, transforming their daily sufferings into moving stories of humanity's capacity for rebirth, degradation, and compassion.

In a now-famous plea echoed across a militia radio stations, Wadad Halawani called to all Lebanese who knew someone that was missing to march with her in front of the Abdel Nasser Mosque to demand government support for their missing relatives and friends. From her work grew the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared – it was one of the first times that women actively took to the streets in protest of the war.

Despite all their efforts and even though women represented a majority of peace movement activists, and their participation in unions and political parties

increased during the war, they were marginalized from participating in post-war peace negotiations and reconstruction efforts. Their absence from the negotiation tables and their relegation to the private sphere is indicative that patriarchal structures can be recalled whenever «order» is restored. While the Lebanese war was a war without winners, those who lost the most were, ultimately, women.

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