

Transformation of Women in Times of Conflict

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A conflict is defined as an actual dispute between two or more parties, who believe their goals to be incompatible or that resources are insufficient for both of them, and that a party is hindering the achievement of the other's goals, especially if that party is unknown, or that each side perceives the other differently than its true image encompassing all its life aspects. This image in our minds is often stronger than the real picture we see with our own eyes on a daily basis.

The image of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, of whom 78% are women and children, is a conception depicting the Syrian women refugees since the early years of displacement as barefoot, often dirty weeping ladies, sex workers, standing in queues for aid, illiterate women and farm workers. And even though many Lebanese see Syrian women refugees in various places as different from this picture, but our mobile phones, TV screens and news reports are stronger than our actual lives.

We are not talking about this conception here in order to convey the real situation, but we are talking about a message conveyed to the Lebanese viewer through this picture «Look, they are poor people different in customs, traditions and culture, who came to share our already limited resources». Therefore, the Syrians in Lebanon remained anonymous, hiding behind this picture as a cause of an underlying conflict and a possibility of a manifest violent conflict at every moment.

Because women usually naturally manage problems analysis, and usually accept temporary gains for the purpose of caring for their family for which they are almost entirely responsible, they started working as individuals and groups in a primitive unorganized manner at the beginning, but later preceded women's organizations in the will to work and in setting priorities. While the organizations focused on

providing relief and psychological support at best, mothers went to education and sought employment opportunities, shaking off the dust of a long and exhausting journey of displacement. Year after year, some Syrian and Lebanese organizations began to emerge from their shell and join women in local communities to work with them on long-term strategic and development goals.

Since 2017, Syrian women have been participating with Lebanese and Palestinian women's groups, domestic workers' groups, and LGBTQ groups to commemorate International Women's Day on the streets of Beirut. Many of them gave statements to the media voicing their desire to speak up regarding Syrian affairs in general and their status as refugees in particular. And so there were Syrian women who did not request assistance or relief, but demanded social

justice for all women under the slogan: our issues are many and our struggle is one. These rallies have not only changed the image of Syrian women in the minds of participants from other groups, but also changed the dynamics of the relationship between groups of host society and women refugees, both mentally and concretely, in an exemplary manner. They have indeed seen the solidarity of Lebanese women who defend them despite the significant harshness of the streets of Beirut.

With them, we discovered at the «Women Now For Development» organization which arranged this participation, that peace building begins in the streets, in narrow alleys, in homes and despite diverse issues and goals.

In another project carried out by «Women Now For Development» and entitled Women's Theatre, Syrian women took the stage to present their

play «Tarha Bayda» in Beirut, as part of ABAAD organization campaign for the abolishment of Article 215 of the Lebanese law which exempts a rapist from criminal sanctions if he marries the raped victim, and addressed a wide audience about women's similar experiences in the face of discrimination and violence. In the play «Souriyeh», they spoke about their experience of displacement and loss and their demands of social justice for all women. These ladies also said, in a live audio visual presentation, that they fight to be survivors of violence, not victims of conflict or its cause, and that they can be an essential resource with their experience and knowledge, and the trials they overcame and are still trying to overcome.

At first, women's access to social, psychological support, rehabilitation and training centers, was a result of a conscious sense defining their needs to change their common image and their willingness to change themselves as well. While today, it is the result of a deep understanding that their role in building peace must address the causes of injustice against them, their Lebanese counterparts, and all the women living on Lebanese territory marginalized and deprived of their rights in general, and that they must face this injustice by learning, training and seeking work opportunities that preserve their dignity. When speaking about Lebanon, Syrian women are now able to overcome the racist image of Lebanon that comes to mind, thanks to the eagerness of Lebanese women activists, human rights defenders and women of various nationalities on the Lebanese territory to provide assistance, help and expertise. They can also say that there are two kinds of Lebanon, a Lebanon confiscated by the Lebanese government with its political tensions, and a Lebanon of the steadfast solidary people who defend their rights and any other people rights for a decent life, whoever they are.

The Women Now for Development organization in Lebanon, which aims at empowering women everywhere to participate in all aspects of political, economic and socio-cultural life, was one of the first organizations to recognize the role of local women in the process of change in any society and in any legal situation. In 2015, it started addressing the role of local women in building peace at the local level and with host communities in Lebanon, and began designing its own programs that support women in having the necessary tools and skills to play this role from a special point of view that there is no road to peace but justice.



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