WOMEN

FROM THE WAR GENERATION:

STORIES OF STRENGTH, STRUGGLE, AND SURVIVAL IN LEBANON'S CIVIL WAR

Norway

KAFA كفى
ENOUGH VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION
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UN WOMEN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

6 INTRODUCTION

8 CONTEXT

11 METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH
- 12 Methodology
- 14 Approach
- 16 On oral history
- 17 The socio-political context

19 FINDINGS
- 20 Factors leading to the war from women's perspectives
- 26 The roles women played during the war
  - 27 Social, humanitarian, and educational work
  - 29 Political and military mobilisation
  - 31 Breadwinners and household managers
  - 32 Peacebuilding committees and anti-war efforts
  - 34 Arts and literature
- 35 Navigating the social, political, and psychological obstacles women faced during the war
  - 36 Gender expectations and gender-based violence during the war.
  - 40 Violence, insecurity, and psychological trauma
  - 43 Fear, depression, and the persistent sense of unease

46 CONCLUSION

48 BIBLIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

> “This city is like a great suffering being, too mad, too overcharged, broken now, gutted, and raped like those girls raped by 30 or 40 militia men, and are now mad or in asylums because their families, Mediterranean to the end, would rather hide than cure…but how does one cure the memory?”

These are words from Sitt Marie Rose, a novella by the late Etel Adnan. Sitt Marie Rose begins at the cusp of the Lebanon civil war, and is based on the life of Marie Rose Boulous, a Christian Lebanese activist who worked as an educator at Palestinian refugee camps and was later executed by members of a Christian militia for betraying ‘her people’. The novella critiques the tribal mentalities and xenophobia that led to the war, while also portraying patriarchal and sexist attitudes toward women in Lebanon at the time. In that sense, the novella reflects the active but undermined role that women, such as Sitt Marie Rose, played during the war—a narrative that is critical though rather unknown and underestimated.

In a similar vein, the report at hand is interested in the reflections, roles, and challenges that women experienced during the Lebanon civil war[1]. The report is a result of a five-year project led by KAFA with the support of UN Women and including two phases: “Oral History and Dealing with the Past: The Lebanese Civil War, a Gender Perspective” and “Peace Building and Reconciliation: A Gender Perspective”. More specifically, during the first phase, KAFA organised several interventions—including round tables, dialogue sessions, film screenings, and a play—that aimed to provide space for women who lived through the war to share their experiences.

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[1] The 1975-1990 civil war in Lebanon is described, or referred to, in different ways: the Lebanon war; the war on Lebanon; the Lebanon wars; the Lebanon civil war; the war of others on Lebanon, among others. These terms carry different political connotations, which are beyond the scope of this report. The terminology used will be ‘Lebanon civil war.’

Over the course of several years, the oral history project brought together three generations of women in Lebanon to discuss their experiences of the civil war with the aim of establishing a gendered narrative of the past, creating intergenerational conversations, healing, and rethinking approaches and ways to resolve temporary expressions of conflict, and to pave the way for an anti-sectarian, feminist society, and system. The project’s gendered lens, also reflected in this report, was aimed at understanding and accounting for existing structural and historical differences between women and men in Lebanon, the implications this continues to have on women’s experiences in and recollection of the civil war, and the roles women took on during the war and reconciliation process. **However, the report is largely based on the stories and narratives third group, i.e., the women who lived during the Lebanon civil war, as that group was mainly focused on oral history and dialogue for reconciliation activities.**

The report begins with a general and rather abridged context of the civil war, as well as a detailed methodology. It is then followed by women’s narratives of how the war started; the roles they played during the war, including political mobilisation, household duties, social and humanitarian work, peacebuilding, and arts and literature. It also focuses on the everyday experiences of women during the war, including their experiences with checkpoints, harassment, limitations on their freedom, as well as their individual and collective attempts at navigating the expectations that their families and society had of them. It concludes with a reflection on said women’s relationship to and perception of the present; the ways in which the memories of the war seep into their current experiences of Lebanon’s economic crisis; and women’s eagerness and willingness to prevent the war from recurring in any shape or form.

CONTEXT

> **There is no memory if we do not speak up, if we do not archive.**
>
> *A woman who experienced the Lebanon civil war*

The Lebanon civil war remains a brutal, often repressed, memory among communities in Lebanon. During 1975 until 1990, the country witnessed episodes of armed conflict among state actors, non-state militias, the Syrian tutelage, the Israeli invasion and occupation, and multiple bouts of assassinations (UN Women & LAW, 2022). The Lebanon civil war killed around 100,000 people; led to over 300,000 injuries and approximately 17,000 missing people whose fate remains unknown; and pushed nearly a million to leave their homes (Labaki & Abou Rjeily, 1994). This affected, in one way or another, all communities in and connected to Lebanon, if not the region as a whole. Of course, women bore the brunt of a war fought largely by and for men. ICRC's (1999) *People on War Lebanon Country Report* finds that 85% of women interviewed experienced negative effects of war, and many of them had been wounded, lost family members, were forced to leave home, and had serious damage inflicted to their property.

The civil war was not a stand-alone event but rather a series of violent episodes in a succession of competing local and regional, even international, interests. Until today, the war's legacy on Lebanon's political climate is palpable. As Hourani (2021) notes, "The roots of many of today's crises—a collapsing currency, shortages of basic goods like medicine, fuel and electricity, rising poverty and government paralysis—can be traced back to wartime structures and the political settlement that institutionalised them." While the current economic and political crisis has led to new patterns and requires updated perspectives, it cannot be understood without a deeper, broader, reflection of the Lebanon civil war, the consequences that led to it, and how its events both damaged and shaped the country's infrastructure.

During the project's dialogue sessions, women themselves had different recollections of the war as part of the activities. Particular events or outbreaks of violence impacted women in various ways. For instance, some participants emphasised the 1980-81 Battle of Zahle, whereas others focused on the 1975 Black Saturday Massacre in Beirut. Depending on dynamics such as age, location, and affiliation, the women involved in the project's dialogue sessions focused on the 1982 Sabra and Shatila Camp massacre; the 1976 Damour massacre; the 1983 and 1990 events in Aley and Mirna Chalouhi respectively; the 1977 Chouf massacre; among many others discussed.

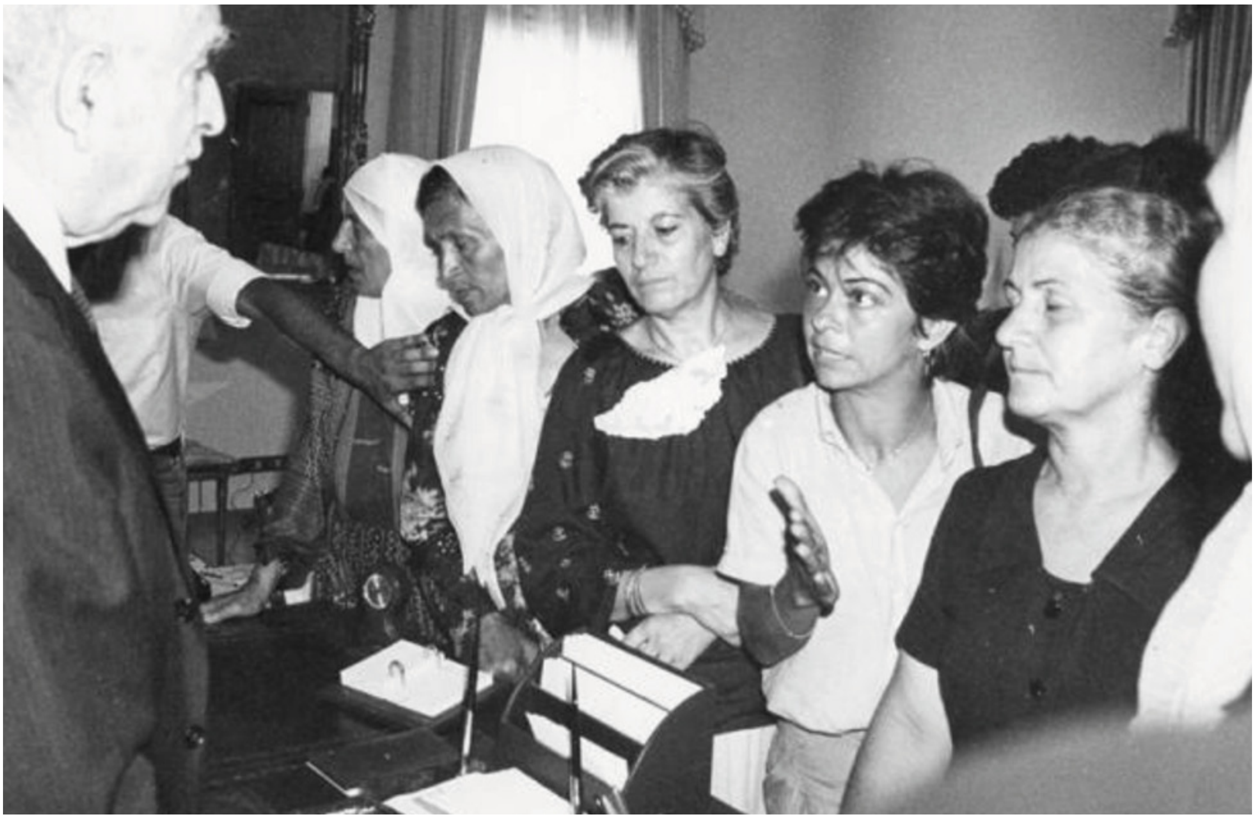

Figure 1: Dialogue between the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared and the prime minister Rashid Karameh during the Lebanese Civil War. [2]

These conversations highlighted the diverse narratives and experiences of women who lived through the traumas of the Lebanon civil war. In another dialogue session in Nabaa with 24 participants, a debate was sparked among the women regarding the siege of Tal Al Zaatar Palestinian Refugee Camp, and the root causes of the violence that followed. Some participants believed it to be the fault of Lebanese, while others reiterated it was that of Palestinians. Ultimately, in women's recollections of their personal associations and memories of the war, it becomes clear how many varying and complex narratives persist. One of the main aims of the dialogue sessions, facilitated by KAFA's team, was to reiterate that for every event and massacre that occurred during the Lebanon civil war, there are multiple narratives—and it is necessary to reflect collectively and build new narratives that bridge, or make space, for the various versions, even when conflicting.

Despite the war's colossal impact on the country's different communities, a state-sponsored collective amnesia—instilled by the post-war regime—sought to contain the war and bury its different narratives. The infamous 1991 General Amnesty law exempted those who had committed crimes with the aim of promoting disarmament and reconciliation. In doing so, the law limited transitional justice, perpetuated conflicts based on unresolved tensions, and gave ammunition to sectarian communities to memorialise the war in a way that suited them (Saadeh, 2021).

Ultimately, for many of the women involved in the dialogue sessions documented in this report, this was one of the few, if not the only, opportunities they'd had to discuss the civil war and its events with individuals from different communities. Women reiterated how necessary these conversations felt, as they helped to break the aura of secrecy and taboo surrounding the civil war and made them feel that a different future might be possible.

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[2] The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared archive.

Women were often excluded from high-level national political dialogues, unlike their male counterparts, and there was a palpable absence of women-led and community-based reconciliation processes. Women noted that not only were their roles and experiences during the civil war rejected or disregarded, but they were also excluded or even prevented from contributing their visions for the future. The post-war reinforcement of a sectarian political and economic status quo continued to entrench a hierarchical, patriarchal state that marginalized women (Geha, 2020). In her book *Sextarianism*, academic Maya Mikdashi argues that the state uses personal status laws, along with criminal and civil ones, to control and perpetuate both sectarian identities and gender roles. By doing so, the state actively maintains divisions between different religious (sectarian) groups and reinforces specific gendered expectations and power dynamics within these communities. As a result, women are still treated as second-class citizens through a combination of regressive laws, sociocultural norms, and structural barriers to political representation (Salameh, 2014; UN Women, 2021). Amid this context, our knowledge on the role and impact of the Lebanon civil war on women diluted. Existing studies often emphasise the gendered violence women experienced (LAW & UN Women, 2022; Khatib 2008; Khattab & Myrittinen, 2014; ICRC, 1999). Their analysis centres women as victims of gender and sexual-based violence. For instance, Julinda Abu Nasr (1992), argued in *The Effects of War on Women in Lebanon*, that: "Women had no say over when the war started, neither in the decision-making processes, nor in the efforts to achieve reconciliation. Their roles were those of the recipients of the consequences and the outcomes of the war on the one hand, and the makers and manufacturers of the laws of survival on the other hand." Moreover, during times of war and increased militarisation, women's bodies are targeted systematically as a tool of war (IRIN, 2004; Speake, 2012).

While women indeed suffered from gender-based and sexual violence, viewing them solely as passive victims of the Lebanon civil war is limiting and perpetuates the narrative of women as bystanders. Despite increasing public efforts over the past decade to piece together diverse narratives and experiences of the war, the collective memory of women's experiences remains narrow and linear. Women are often remembered as homogenous victims of the war rather than as active participants who suffered, fought, retreated, resisted, and adapted in complex, non-linear ways. This is where the ethos of this project comes in—by situating women at the center of remembrance, the report aims to archive their experiences as they recall them, preserving their perspectives and agency.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on an oral history methodology that centers the lived experiences and reflections of 60 women, with three different age groups[3], in phase 1 and 159 women in phase 2. Of the 159 women in phase 2, 26 are 'women leaders', i.e., women who KAFA worked with very closely for several years, and who shared many stories and varying perspectives[4] throughout the course of multiple workshops, sessions, and gatherings[5]. The remaining 133 women were also involved in multiple dialogue sessions—approximately 10 each—also over the duration of multiple years[6].

The approach relied on qualitative data collected through dialogue sessions, workshops, and in-depth interviews, with attention to the importance of capturing diverse, personal narratives. By focusing on women's voices, the methodology aims to construct a gendered understanding of the Lebanon civil war, highlighting how it impacted women differently based on age, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and sectarian identity.

There was a particular focus on three age groups:

- Women who lived through the Lebanon civil war (the primary focus group).
- Participants aged 25-55, who experienced secondhand narratives from parents and relatives.
- University students aged 18-25, whose understanding is primarily academic or abstract[7].
- This segmentation was intended to facilitate intergenerational dialogue and provide a comprehensive view of the war's effects.

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[3] Each age group included 20 women—those that are young and considered 'the new generation', those who are considered part of the in-between generation, and those who actually lived through the Lebanon civil war. These women had diverse socioeconomic, political, educational, and religious backgrounds, which ensured that, for the most part, the complex narratives of the civil war were captured.

[4] All dialogue sessions were transcribed by KAFA and analysed at later stages by the research team involved.

[5] The women selected in 2023 during a second phase of the project entitled 'Peace Building and Reconciliation – A Gender Perspective'. They are women who showed interest in the project and sought to cultivate their leadership skills and work on peace-building initiatives within their communities.

[6] Women leaders, along with KAFA staff, helped organise 10 dialogue sessions comprising 17 to 20 participants in 8 different areas. Participants in dialogue sessions were diverse and had different ages, backgrounds, experiences and memories of the war, family statuses, and nationalities.

[7] Through the project, KAFA also engaged with student clubs and voluntary groups in universities or voluntary groups to involve them in the conversation about women during the civil war and to raise awareness on the importance of a civil personal status law, as well as the discriminatory impact of religion-based status laws and courts on women and their family, and how that ultimately effects women's involvement in peacebuilding (Simpson & Assaad, 2022; Zaiter, 2018).

The 26 women leaders helped select further participants for the dialogue sessions. Participants were selected from various regions, including North Lebanon (Tripoli); Akkar (Rahbeh, Dawra, Deir Ouza, Bazbina); Nabatieh (Hasbaya and Marjaayoun); South Lebanon (Zahrani and Khaizaran); Beirut (Zarif and Nabaa); Mount Lebanon (Chouf and Aley)[8].

Each location featured a unique profile of women participants. Dialogue sessions were tailored according to the area's specific context, considering factors such as safety, feasibility, necessity, and the perspectives of women leaders regarding what they felt capable of and compelled to accomplish. As noted above, the project was focused on women's experiences during the Lebanon civil war, centering predominantly on Lebanese women, as they were directly affected by and actively participated in the events surrounding the war. Thus, the perspectives gathered primarily reflect the experiences of Lebanese women, aligning with the project's aim to document the conflict's impact on local communities[9].

DATA WAS COLLECTED THROUGH MULTIPLE CHANNELS:

- **Dialogue sessions and workshops:** Supervised by KAFA team members, including both facilitators and trainers[10], these sessions allowed women participants to share their experiences in a safe, supportive environment. These gatherings encouraged open discussions and fostered a sense of solidarity among women who often had differing perspectives on the war. Woman participants attended 10 dialogue sessions each. In total, 80 dialogue sessions were held.
- **In-depth interviews:** Select participants, particularly women leaders closely involved with KAFA, provided detailed oral histories through one-on-one interviews and intimate group discussions. These narratives were instrumental in delving into individual experiences and reflections.
- **Observational data:** Facilitators observed the dynamics within the dialogue sessions, noting interactions, body language, and emotional responses, which provided additional layers of context to participants' stories.

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[8] The selection of these locations was based on a developed set of criteria, including politically and socially diverse areas where women felt it was safe and feasible to implement the project, as well as securing support from local actors through stakeholder engagement strategies.

[9] Organisers of sessions sought to include Palestinians and Syrians, considering the geographic proximity and historical relationships between their communities, as well the direct involvement of Palestinians in the war. Including Syrian women in the project proved challenging, as in many of the selected areas, Syrians were not actively involved in social or political capacities. This was due to various factors, including legal and security-related restrictions, economic dynamics, and the nature of Syrian women's everyday lives and employment in the select areas. Many Syrian women live in rural areas, particularly in Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs), where they worked in the agricultural sector, making their involvement in such discussions less accessible. However, in urban areas like Nabaa, where Syrians and Lebanese often interact, Syrian women were involved in sessions. Palestinian women were not included, as the areas selected also had relatively low numbers of Palestinian residents. **This is a noted limitation, as Palestinians played a significant role in the Lebanon civil war, and their perspectives would have added valuable insights.**

[10] Joe Haddad and STEPs Civil Company for Change (represented by Mona Hassoun and Daniel Altheb) were key trainers, hired by KAFA.

APPROACH

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, ethical considerations were central to the methodology. Participants were assured of confidentiality and had the freedom to opt out of any questions or sessions. Facilitators were closely trained to handle discussions with empathy, especially when dealing with traumatic experiences, and sessions were adapted based on participants' comfort levels.

TABLE 1: KAFA'S ETHOS

For decades, KAFA has sought to work with community members toward eradicating the patriarchal structures through a range of different approaches—legal reform, research, public campaigns, provision of services for menta health, protection from Gender Based Violence and access to justice and advocacy A core strategy of KAFA's work focuses on abolishing the current sectarian system with its discriminatory personal status laws toward women. Doing that requires an in-depth understanding of the sectarian system and its current and historical pervasiveness across all segments of society. It also entails revisiting the Lebanese civil war and its effects on generations and prospects of change.

Establishing a safe, non-judgmental environment was essential for the success of this project. Facilitators worked to cultivate trust among participants by allowing women to share at their own pace. Given the cultural and emotional barriers to discussing personal experiences, especially those involving trauma and gender-based violence, facilitators provided consistent support and validation, helping participants feel comfortable opening up.

Indeed, women participants often did not want to speak about their personal positioning or experience of the war—even when a question was directed at them, they diverted and spoke about the perspectives of their children, husbands, or parents. It was a challenge in and of itself to create a space to understand what they, the women who lived through the war, felt or experienced.

Creating room for conversation among women from the older generation was made more challenging by the fact that these women had varying backgrounds and were oftentimes in the war's opposing "camps." **This challenge was mitigated by finding the common ground among them, which is their shared experience *as women within the war.*** It also meant enabling spaces where women could disagree about the events of the civil war, while still engaging meaningfully with each other's versions.

The project was also structured to encourage dialogue between different generations, enabling younger women to learn from the experiences of those who lived through the war. This approach not only preserved personal histories but also bridged knowledge gaps, creating opportunities for collective healing and rethinking societal norms. For many participants, this was the first time they had discussed their experiences with individuals outside their community or age group.

The methodology embraced a reflective, participatory approach, whereby women were encouraged to interpret their own experiences. Through discussions, participants could collectively process memories, negotiate differing perspectives, and build a shared narrative. The participatory nature allowed for mutual learning, as women shared coping mechanisms, resilience strategies, and the complex emotions they still carry.

Finally, the collected narratives were thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes, such as gender-based violence, socio-political obstacles, psychological trauma, and the multifaceted roles women undertook during the war. This thematic organization helped to structure the report and provided insight into how personal stories intersected with broader historical and social contexts. The analysis drew on feminist perspectives, seeking to challenge traditional narratives that often overlook women's agency during wartime.

ON ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is a crucial form of writing women's histories and narratives (Agarwal, 2020), which is necessary in Lebanon considering there are very few feminist narratives of the civil war. As noted by Anderson et al. (1987), "When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the "truths" of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories."

Existing narratives are often about the war's brutality, the security situation, the death counts, the militias. Rarely do we encounter accounts of the war that discuss the war's effects on the everyday social fabric, and its gendered impact, i.e., the different consequences the war has on women and men, depending, as well, on additional characteristics such as socioeconomic background, nationality, and location.

From a feminist perspective, it becomes critical to archive Lebanon's history, particularly its brutal fifteen-year civil war, by holding the space to hear the stories, perspectives, and everyday lives of the women who lived through it. The aim of oral history is to "shed light on the past, inform the present, and inspire the future by reflecting on prior experiences" (Chancellor & Lee, 2016). The structure, and narrative, of this report is based on amalgamation of women's memories, experiences, and perspectives of the war, in tandem with an extensive literature review.

Moreover, one of the only shared aspects was the fact that they were all women, specifically women of a certain generation. That is, beyond the various political camps women belonged to, conversations alluded to the fact that they shared many of the same challenges, as will be reflected in sections below. In that sense, their womanhood and age became fundamental to the construction of a space to revisit the war and find ways of talking about it and sharing its weight.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Between the years of 2020 to 2024, these women came together frequently. Relevantly, their gatherings were happening against a radically shifting background. They started to meet soon after the October 17, 2019 protests had erupted across the entire country. The uprising reopened public and often radical conversations about the war, with one of the most famous slogans to come out of the demonstrations being: "We [the people] are the popular revolution; and you [the sectarian political elite] are the civil war." Although the women involved in the project shared different perspectives on the uprising, they were able to share, in different ways, the euphoric spirit the country was experiencing.

Mothers who had lived through the war, initiated protests across the city, marching from Chiyah to Ain el-Rimmeneh, as well as from Khandak El-Ghamik to Achrafieh, in a bid for reconciliation[11]. However, there were also daily road blockades to deal with, as well as spiralling violence protesters faced by security forces and other state apparatuses. The juxtaposition of protests demanding a new system, coupled with the gripping fear and uncertainty as the economic crisis began to unfold, contributed to rich discussions among participants of the project. By March of 2020, the entire world was forced to reckon with the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns. But even amid the lockdowns, the women within the project continued to meet through online meetings as well, which ensured the project's continuation and enabled a safe space to discuss shared worries, concerns, and aspirations. Indeed, after the Beirut blast, and the collective trauma the entire country went through, the space had turned into a space of solidarity and support. Moreover, since the ongoing Israeli aggression on South Lebanon, women from affected areas have also continued to attend sessions online.

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[11] These neighbhourhoods hold significant historical and symbolic value in Lebanon's civil war history. Chiyah and Ain el-Rimmeneh, located along the former Green Line, were known for being on opposing sides of the conflict, while Khandak El-Ghamik and Achrafieh also represented contrasting political and sectarian communities. Protests initiated by mothers in these areas symbolize a call for reconciliation as they sought to bridge divides deeply entrenched during the war.

Although the women were at first cautious and sceptical, they eventually began to feel a strong sense of solidarity among each other. If an incident happened in the South, the women in the North would check in on each other, and vice versa. When one woman's husband passed away, the others provided emotional support. Some spoke to each other regularly, others shared career ideas and thoughts as well. As one project participant put it, "I consider these women friends, even family."

For several years, the project worked on re-archiving women's memories of the Lebanon civil war as a way of holding onto the past, while also exploring the present and imagining alternative political roles and realities for the future. Women from three different generations tapped into their stories, creating an intergenerational dialogue about the lived and passed-down memories of the war. The space also became a process to discuss what it means to deal with trauma, and what lessons can be utilised in navigating previous and current conflicts and attempting to prevent them. The project helped cultivate a more complicated understanding of the past and what it means to live with its shadows. It also highlighted how women—despite their roles, jobs, or statuses—can be part of the social change in their communities and play effective roles in the reconciliation process.

FINDINGS

The sections below explore the perspectives and recollections of women who lived through the Lebanon civil war, as well as those affected by its legacy even if they did not experience it directly. The first section examines the factors leading to the war, drawing from both a comprehensive literature review and insights shared by project participants. The second section highlights the diverse roles women assumed during the conflict, aiming to capture how participants navigated their everyday lives amid turmoil. The third section addresses the complex, multi-layered obstacles women faced, shedding light on the personal and collective challenges they encountered throughout the war.

FACTORS LEADING TO THE WAR FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

> **Everyone has a different version of the war, and what led to it. I lived in a different way than [another female participant] did.**
>
> *Project participant*[12]

The reasons for the war vary depending on the woman sharing her story. A woman's background—her location, socioeconomic status, sect, and political affiliations—shaped her understanding of how the Lebanon civil war began and unfolded. For one participant, the moment she realized the war was starting was the Ain El Rimmeneh bus incident: 'I was a young girl that knew how to have fun, how to play, how to laugh. I didn't know what the war was. [...] This is why for me, the Ain El Rimmeneh bus scene is one I can never forget. Because of it, my young self realized—the war is starting.'

---

[12] The project happened over several phases during the years of 2019 and 2023. Unfortunately, not all the notes reflected details about the speakers. Whereas some quotes can be traced back to particular demographics, other notes exist merely as quotes shared by project participants during dialogue sessions. Where possible, demographics of participants are given; otherwise, they are referred to as project participants.

> **I was a young girl that knew how to have fun, how to play, how to laugh. I didn't know what the war was. [...]. This is why for me, the Ain El Rimmeneh bus scene is one I can never forget. Because of it, my young self-realised – the war is starting.**
>
> *Project participant*

In April 1975, members of the right-wing Christian Phalangist group attacked a bus carrying Palestinians in the neighborhood of Ain El Rimmeneh, killing around thirty people. This attack followed an earlier incident that same day, when unidentified individuals fired at Phalangists outside a church, injuring several (Jureidini, Mclarin, & Price, 1979). Although there were numerous tensions leading up to this point, this particular scene is often depicted as the catalyst for the war, setting the Palestine Liberation Organization and its supporters against Christian parties and splintering the country into factions aligned with either the National Movement or the Lebanese Front (Salem, 1979).

Despite the many brewing tensions prior, it is this particular bloody scene that is often depicted as the catalyst in the mainstream narrative of the war, as it pitted the Palestine Liberation Organisation and its sympathisers against Christian parties. This consequently splintered an already fragmenting country into (mostly Muslim) militias—under the umbrella of the National Movement—that fought alongside the PLO and (mostly Christian) militias—under the umbrella of the Lebanese Front—that fought alongside the Phalangists (Salem, 1979).

While the country's fragmentation was due to multiple intersecting economic and political issues, and even its starting date is considered contentious, there generally "is agreement among historians that the war broke out as a result of a period of growing division between those Lebanese who supported the right of the Palestinian resistance to stage operations against Israel from Lebanese soil, and those who opposed it" (Haugbolle, 2011).

> **The war was a struggle for identity.**
>
> *Project participant*

Women participants who lived the war say the war was not simply a sectarian conflict, but rather a combination of economic, geographical, geopolitical, and social factors that came together and led to an eruption of conflict, as well as a fragmentation of society on identity-based lines (Traboulsi, 2007; Salibi, 1988). There was growing disenchantment with the state, and its legitimacy, and there were also different, highly divisive, perceptions of what the state's identity was—while some considered it Arab, others considered it Mediterranean or Western-leaning (Nauphal, 1997). Meanwhile the state institutions were weak, inequality was growing, and sectarian and religious divisions were being further entrenched (Shehadeh, 1999). The country was also negotiating with changing demographics—from the growing Shi'a communities to the influx of Palestinian refugees across different waves, the Israeli occupation, and Syrian tutelage (Picard, 2002).

Like many other conflicts and wars, the Lebanon civil war is congested with many—often widely divergent—chronicles. This is natural: for fifteen years, and even prior to those years, Lebanon was a site of struggle with contracted, interspersed periods of violence. For one participant, the war did not start after the Ain El-Rimmaneh incident but rather later, when Lebanon became under Israeli occupation. For another woman, the war started when she went to school and saw a slogan written on the wall: "Lebanon is for us. Sunnis to Saudi Arabia, Druze to Hauran, and Shias to Iran." And for a third one, Lebanon's war started when Rafik Hariri died, and the Syrian army left in 2005.

Ultimately, women interviewed say they often felt pressured to choose, to pick sides in the battleground: who they were with, and who they were against. The war, several participants say, became "an identity struggle." Because interviewees occupied vastly different landscapes during the war, even if they agree that the war was caused by different issues, the weight they give to one factor over the other varies. The blend of 18 different sects, with varying international political affiliations and ties, threw the country into a political chaos. The existing parties, religious authorities, and local groups were unable to agree on anything. One woman also connected the identity struggle to the nationality law, which prevents women from passing down their nationality. Women have to legally suffer the consequences of the sectarian system, which was designed by men who wanted to maintain the sectarian status-quo (for more, see Human Rights Watch, 2018).

As Lebanon's socioeconomic inequities deepened, participants observed widening gaps among different socioeconomic and sectarian strata, further fracturing the country and intensifying grievances that fueled the Lebanon civil war. Participants observed that uneven development across the country led to growing discrepancies among different socioeconomic and sectarian strata. As one woman simply put it, 'The government made us poor, and poverty pushed us to fight.' Indeed, although Lebanon was classified as a middle-income state in 1974, around 54% of the population was considered poor (El Khazen, 2000).

Interviewed women noted that the cost of living had become unbearable for many communities across the country. Traboulsi highlights that "between 1967 and 1975, the cost of living had doubled, and during this time, Beirut was classified as more expensive than Washington, DC" (Traboulsi, p. 160). While Beirut may have experienced an economic boom, rural and peripheral areas were neglected, leaving communities to fend for themselves. An IRFED study found extreme underdevelopment in regions like Akkar, Baalbek, and Jabal Amel, with severe deficiencies in health, education, and transport infrastructure (IRFED, 1963). Extreme poverty also extended to neighborhoods in and around Beirut, where approximately half of households were impoverished or destitute by 1960 (IRFED, 1963). Women interviewed expressed a growing sense of injustice and insecurity, as many communities felt a lack of social services and infrastructural development in their areas.

On the other hand, some participants experienced the Lebanon of the late 60s and early 70s as a space pulsing with culture and intellect. They expressed themselves as being able to negotiate their changing roles as women, and assert themselves as activists and artists and intellectuals, while also respecting societal expectations of themselves as daughters and mothers and sisters. Some participants also describe the scene prior to the war as one that was rather politically active: workers were striking due to low wages and large monopolies; students in universities were protesting their economic situation; and solidarity alliances were being made on local levels. Some women considered themselves as part of a new generation changing the perception that women couldn't practise politics and that, in fact, they were involved in unions, protest movements, and strikes at the time. One woman describes how revolutionary she was considered by people within her village, after she took off her hijab and decided to start driving at the time. While the different perspectives women shared regarding why, or how, the war started are not necessarily new, they are critical, as they allow insight into women's particular understanding and recollection of the war.

TABLE 2: THE INTERSECTION OF SECTARIANISM AND GENDERED DISCRIMINATION

Article 7 of the Lebanese Constitution states that all Lebanese citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal civil and political rights. However, this principle of equality is significantly undermined by the country's personal status laws—15 separate, religion-based legal systems that govern matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. These laws are administered by religious courts, operating with minimal government oversight. As a result, for many of the women interviewed, religious authorities maintained control over both public and private aspects of their lives, despite the rapid social and cultural changes of the time. This disconnects between constitutional equality and the realities imposed by religious laws highlights the challenges faced by women in achieving genuine equality in Lebanon.

Women nevertheless agree that there was a dogmatic patriarchal structure that governed their everyday lives. Many women interviewed say their families stood in the way of their fighting with militias in the war, or even their activism against the war, and that they were overwhelmed by having to fill in their domestic role while also pondering what they ought to do in response to the war. Their desire to be socially and politically active, whether as peacebuilders, fighters, or activists, was often met with resentment and resistance, and in some cases surprise. One participant was not allowed to travel abroad on a scholarship because her parents believed it was not befitting for a woman at the time. Another was prevented from visiting her friends because her parents were always scared that she would be harassed or attacked. Participants also say restrictions—to mobility, education, socialising—were often imposed on them, and they were absent from most public spheres of decision-making, at the very least when it came to the war. Across the country, women were limited by prevailing harmful attitudes and constantly had to find ways to manoeuvre them.

> **There was no room to question the choices men were making. Patriarchy was everywhere. And still, depending on the area, many women were breaking through.**
>
> *Project participant*

Meanwhile, as the war continued to unfold, sectarian and political party-backed militias held the country's economic and political situation hostage, forming intricate networks of organised crime. Women say that these networks not only trafficked drugs and smuggled but also were also the ones to collect taxes and control livelihoods and most forms of income-generation across the country. Women interviewed say that power was often in the hands of these male-dominated militias, and they controlled roads, ports and customs duties. These militias had a say on what entered and left the country and its areas.

> **Where was I when the war ended? Why... Did the war end? I feel as though I am still in it.**
>
> *Project participant*

Prior to and during the war, women were marginalised by existing laws, sociocultural norms and traditions, discrimination in the political sphere, economic inequalities, and structural obstacles to their participation in the job market, and limited information and data (UNICEF, 1995). Although they were negotiating their role within society, they were ultimately second-class citizens: they had very little political decision-making power, earned significantly less than men, were bound to many social and religious taboos that prevented them from making choices, and were deprioritised even within their families. Political sectarianism, in addition to sociocultural norms, was a direct obstacle for their involvement in politics. Participants give the example of Mirna Boustany who was the first woman to attain a parliamentary seat in 1963. However, Boustany became a parliament member after her father's death and not because of her direct personal involvement in politics per se. Politics, then, was a way to preserve patriarchal lineages and maintain sectarian provisions.

THE ROLES WOMEN PLAYED DURING THE WAR

> **Women had to cook, to medicate and heal, to raise children, and to work. [...]. If women didn't take the initiative for change, there would not have been change.**
>
> *Project participant*

During a peace dialogue session in Khaizaran, South Lebanon, a participant reflected on women's roles during the war: **"Isn't it curious that we only seem to acknowledge women's roles when men are absent? It's as if women's roles are only recognized in the absence of men. Have any of you noticed this?"** Despite this perception, women were encouraged by facilitators and women peace leaders to reflect on their contributions—not merely in the absence of men, but as fully active agents.

In a peace dialogue session in Aley, one woman mentioned, "I actively engaged by taking up arms to defend and protect my family." Another shared, "I contributed by opening our home as a shelter for people in need." Many women recounted how their involvement extended to providing medical aid, cooking for affected families and fighters, and creating safe spaces in their communities. As one participant expressed, "I participated in the war as one of its victims; I lost my childhood and education, and even today, I struggle with psychological issues stemming from the war." In dialogue sessions in Akkar, women highlighted the many roles they embodied: fighters, caregivers, advocates, medical practitioners, and defenders.

Women who lived through the war occupied "grey spaces" and played countless roles. They studied and worked, led informal peace-building initiatives, tended to the injured, and established makeshift healthcare centers. They fell in love with someone they could never be with. They eloped, then aborted unwanted children. They gave birth at home. They were raped. They killed; they were killed. They laughed and sang and came up with cheeky songs about those on the other side. Participants interviewed even note that women had more roles to play than men during that period because men were either fighting or unemployed, whereas women—in one day alone—had to take on several roles: the mother, the caretaker,

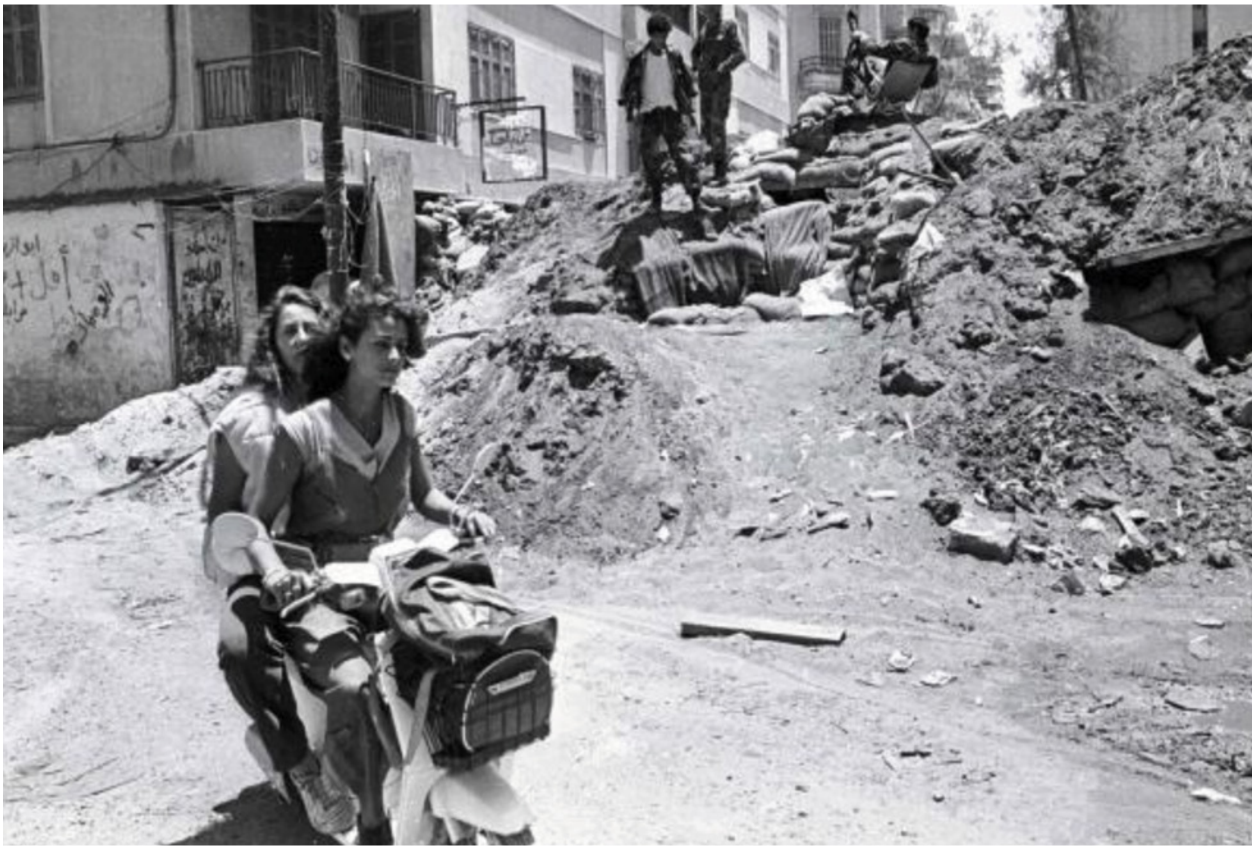

Figure 2: Women on a motorcycle in Beirut, 1984. [13]

the fighter, the neighbour, the educator. One participant reflected, "A woman could do anything back then; actually, it often felt like the men were the ones being useless." Women's roles spanned caregiving, activism, and even combat, as they juggled multiple responsibilities every day.

The war's breakdown of societal structures left gaps in fields such as community work and education, which women were quick to fill. As a participant noted, "We were suddenly responsible for managing all aspects of society." Many women took on roles in teaching, healthcare, and social services, often without formal training. Although many of these roles went unpaid, women felt it was their responsibility to support their families and communities, learning necessary skills under challenging conditions. Research has documented the ways war can redefine and deconstruct gender roles (Meintjes, Pillay, & Turshen, 2001; Van Der Haar & Hilhorst, 2017; Yadav, 2021).

One participant shared her experience: "I was among those girls who wanted to break through. I defied traditions. There was a great commotion in the village. I swear, the kids chased me while shouting: 'A woman is driving a car!'" The diversity of roles women played, from social work to education and health, is explored further below. These roles often intersected, with women's ability to fulfill them influenced by socioeconomic and geographic factors.

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[13] Jamal Al-Saeedi, Independent Arabia.

SOCIAL, HUMANITARIAN, AND EDUCATIONAL WORK

The war disrupted Lebanon's social order and created gaps across various sectors, especially in education. Although the education system persisted in private institutions, women participants say their efforts in university campuses and schools were key to keeping it afloat during the war. They took on teaching, administrative, and managerial roles at schools and universities, organized after-school programs, and even home-schooled children. Education among the younger generation at the time became a lifeline, a means to escape the tragedies of the war and break out of the vicious cycle of violence.

However, many adolescent girls were prevented from attending school due to the war and prevailing patriarchal norms. Participants shared that while older women were essential to maintaining the education sector, a significant number of younger girls missed out on education, limiting their future opportunities. Participants say their parents were worried about the risks their daughters might have faced both in school and the journey to school. This was almost ironic: although older women were the ones contributing to the continuity of the education sector, a significant number of younger ones were prevented from going to school.

Women also became healers, stepping in where the Ministry of Public Health could not meet the population's needs. The country overall witnessed the burgeoning of private health sector practices, as well as health support provided by non-governmental agencies to cover the country's serious healthcare gap (Tlais, 2013). Women worked as nurses and doctors in hospitals, NGOs, small clinics, and other makeshift or more ad hoc medical centres used to treat those injured. Women interviewed say that they had a strong desire to contribute and help support fighters who were injured and more generally, community members falling sick. Some women involved in healthcare support did not even receive informal training but were eager to learn first aid from mere observation.

They established charitable activities, organisations, and unions, and they liaised with international organisations and diaspora communities for financial support to carry on with their work. Two significant examples of the latter are the Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering (RDFL) and the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon. This period also witnessed the rise of two feminist movement waves, with the first wave tackling women voting rights through the Lebanese Women Union, while the second focused on humanitarian work and advocacy. Such initiatives promoted participation in politics and activism with the likes of Laure Moghaizel, Linda Matar, among others.

Interestingly, during a dialogue session in Tripoli, participants talked about the positive effects of war. They mentioned that the challenges during wartime led to women's determination to continue living and their hopeful outlook for a better future. One woman stated, "War made women more determined to carry on with life and gave them hope for a better tomorrow." Indeed, women interviewed said that they were often involved in advocating toward peace through social, humanitarian, and educational work.

At another dialogue session, whereby women had to engage with a series of selected photographs, a group of women discussed the photograph titled "March Condemning War with Women from the Lebanese Women's Council and Journalists Syndicate President Riad Taha Heading towards the Parliament - Najmeh Square, 1975," a woman said, "I really liked this picture because it shows how women have a role in the media at a time when we didn't hear about their role" Another woman said, "This picture really touched me because it demonstrates how women are strong and have a role in both war and peace."

POLITICAL AND MILITARY MOBILISATION

Women played a range of both implicit and explicit roles in political mobilization and participation during the Lebanon civil war. They were active members of political parties, directly involved in armed conflict, and engaged in community-level and municipal elections.

Although women did not typically establish political parties and were often excluded from decision-making, female members and combatants could be found across many militias. Women interviewed for this project were involved in a range of political groups and fronts, including the Lebanese Forces, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Kataeb, the Communist Party, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Lebanese National Front. In certain cases, particularly among leftist political parties and the Phalangist party, women even led battles. For example, it has been documented that during the 1960s and 1970s, the Kataeb youth movement included many Maronite women, with approximately 3,000 of them receiving military training, though only 300 ultimately participated in direct combat (Karame, 1995).

Within these parties or militias, women often took on logistical or fundraising roles. Shehadeh (1995) reports that 5-10% of the PSP's members were women, primarily in medical or administrative roles.

The Amal Movement also had women members, though about 30% of them were not involved militarily (Schulze, 1998). While women in Hezbollah were armed, they were not engaged in direct combat. Schulze (1998) notes that the presence of armed women sometimes encouraged young men to join the fight, even if women were not involved as equal combatants.

Across various political parties, women often worked in party offices or militias, undertaking missions to protect neighborhoods. However, interviewees agree that in many cases, they were following direct orders from male leaders. Women had mixed feelings about their positions within political parties. One participant who fought with the PSP noted that although she never felt discriminated against outright, her options as a woman in the party were limited.

Other participants echoed this sentiment, observing that while they had space within political work, men often "used" them to fill specific needs. For instance, women were sometimes chosen to cross checkpoints because they were less likely to be searched, or to carry messages to the opposing camp because they posed less of a threat. As one participant put it, "Men delegated certain positions or roles to us not because they viewed us as equals but because they needed us." Women's contributions to party strategies were not always taken seriously, especially in public. Schulze (1998) also notes that society tolerated female fighters primarily because they were perceived as "temporary." Additionally, parents often feared for their daughters' safety and reputation, which could jeopardize their marriage prospects. Still, some parents accepted their daughters' involvement for patriotic reasons.

Some women fighters felt they had to suppress their gender identity or femineity to fit in. One fighter with the Phalanges said her colleagues only realized she was a woman when she married. "I had to stop being a 'woman' to become a political member," she explained.

In dialogue sessions, women discussed how certain photographs reminded them of their roles as militants and political advocates. One woman from Hasbaya, in South Lebanon, stated that during the civil war, women continued to advocate for justice: "It's a reminder that our voices cannot be silenced, even in the darkest of times." In Chouf, another woman recalled her mother wielding a weapon to protect their family, while another remembered her aunt acting as a guardian for the family.

In Aley, a participant reflected on her childhood desire to fight alongside her father. A friend added, "We, women, are not just gentle creatures; [during wars] we can carry arms and defend." Women interviewed said they, or others they knew, joined militias out of a perceived necessity, whether for survival, community defense, or personal beliefs. Motivations varied, from political ideology to religious conviction, family loyalty, or desperation. Soha Bechara and Sana'a Mehaidli are among the known women who took part in military action, but interviewees mentioned many others who fought and died without recognition.

A recurring motivation for joining the fight was to protect other women. Women developed informal protection networks to prevent violence, especially rape and sexual assault. One participant who fought with the Lebanese Forces recounted fighting the Syrian army in Hadath due to rumors that they intended to harm local women. "Yes," she said, "I killed Syrian army members before they had the chance to kill our women." Two other participants from the Kataeb and the Lebanese National Movement also said their main motivation was to protect women from sexual violence. As one stated, "I stood between women and militia groups, unashamed to carry weapons, to protect them from being raped." Another woman from Nabaa added, "My brother entrusted me with a gun. I always carried it because of my perpetual fear. When all the men in our building were on the frontlines, we girls decided to guard it ourselves. We would sit at the entrance with weapons, firing into the air if we suspected anyone was approaching."

However, not all women viewed military involvement positively. Some interviewees felt that participating in violence, regardless of the situation, was inherently problematic. Others believed that military roles were "not for women," reflecting societal expectations. As one participant commented, "[Women's military involvement] might even be worse because women are supposed to play the feminine role of peacebuilding."

BREADWINNERS AND HOUSEHOLD MANAGERS.

Across the country, participants recounted memories of the protective and managerial roles their mothers, aunts, and other women within their families and communities played during the war. One woman from Zarif recalled an image she "would never forget": seeing her mother running through the streets, holding her brother's hand tightly, searching for a safe place amid the utter chaos of war.

With many men on the frontlines, women had to find "non-traditional" ways to support their families—emotionally, financially, and socially. Interviewees spoke of the heavy burden of caretaking: women not only had to shield their children from armed conflicts, search for missing husbands, and mourn loved ones lost to the violence, but they also took on the responsibility of securing basic necessities and managing household needs.

A woman from Chouf shared a story about her grandmother: "She was a mother who knew nothing about her husband's fate after he was kidnapped during the war. She had three young children and faced countless challenges. Despite everything, she stayed strong for her children, taking on both the roles of mother and father. She reassured her children for years that their father was alive." The unimaginable burden of handles these often-conflicting roles during war—having to protect her children and ensure their sense of safety while feeling unsafe herself—left the participant with a simple message for the others in the session: "Please, let us live safely and enjoy our basic rights."

As the war continued, many women were compelled to enter the labor market because men were either on the frontlines or less economically active, while inflation surged. A 1984 survey indicated that two-thirds of Lebanese women were working out of economic necessity (Chicani-Nacouz, 1988). Consequently, women took on various informal jobs, which often subjected them to further exploitation and lower wages than their male counterparts. The types of work they performed varied by location and social status, and included roles in administration, agriculture, factories, NGOs, and charities (Shehadeh, 1999; Schulze, 1998).

PEACEBUILDING COMMITTEES AND ANTI-WAR EFFORTS.

Women played a critical role in various peace-building efforts during the Lebanon civil war. Initially, many women focused on more "individual" attempts to promote reconciliation, attempting to repair divides between friends and family members who found themselves on opposing sides. One woman shared how she worked to maintain amicable relationships within her area as a form of resistance against the war.

Beyond these individual efforts, women became involved in broader initiatives through charities, associations, and labor unions that crossed sectarian lines (Schulze, 1998; Jabbra, 2021; Abisaab and Hartman, 2022; Eggert, 2018; Stephan, 2014; Joseph, 1997). Many women participated in teachers' union strikes, anti-war gatherings, and other movements, where they emerged as key figures. Women organized anti-war sit-ins, advocated for peace, and led protests demanding accountability for the detainees and the disappeared.

During dialogue sessions centered around images from the civil war, several women were drawn to a photograph titled "March Against War." Reflecting on the image, one woman said, "This picture captures the strength and determination of women in advocating for peace. It's a reminder that

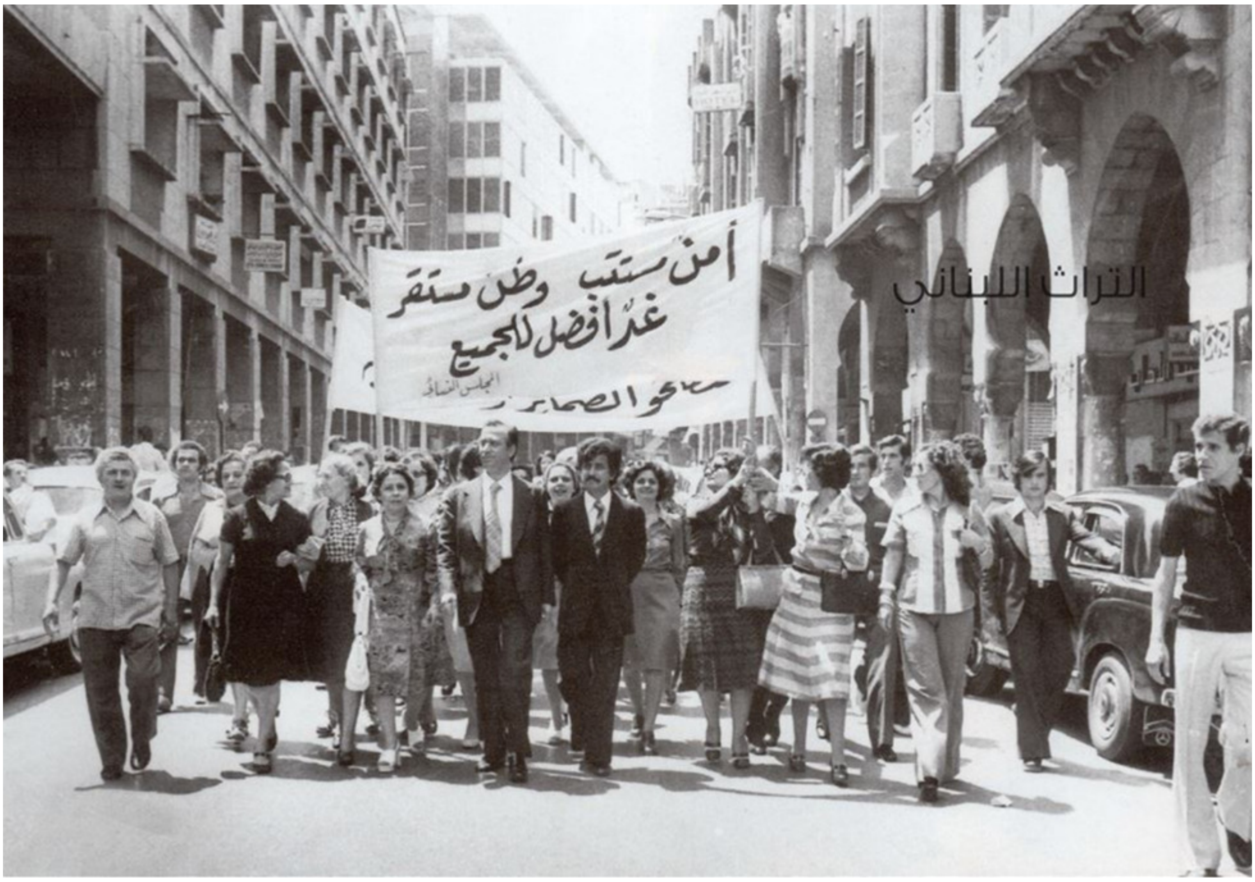

Figure 3: Women protesting during Lebanon's Civil War, advocating for peace and reconciliation. [14]

even during chaos, our voices can make a difference." Another participant added, "This picture reminds me of the present, where despite everything that has happened, we still cannot hold accountable the politicians who played a role in the civil war."

Indeed, although women were almost completely absent from the formal peace-building processes, they were actively involved in informal and scattered peace-building activities between 1975-1990. Many say they were part of protests, dialogues on inter-sectarian reconciliation, and small-scale negotiations to end cycles of violence.

In addition to peacebuilding, women were also on the frontlines of relief and humanitarian work. Some of the groups women belonged to were formalised, launching into NGOs. Others remained informal and spread out on a grassroots level. Interviewees say women also acted as physical blockades to stop attacks and kidnappings, sometimes blocking passageways in Beirut (Accad 1994).

Over 100 forms of civil resistance actions and organisations emerged, such as one for the Kidnapped and the Disappeared, one for People with Disabilities, and the national trade union (Nauphal, 1997) notes that over. Here, it is important to note that even prior to the war, Lebanon's civil society networks were relatively developed. From as early as 1920, a council of women's organisations was founded, for instance (Stephan, 2014).

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[14] Source unknown.

ARTS AND LITERATURE.

A lot of women "responded creatively to the war" (Cooke, 1987; Hartman, 2022) by becoming poets, filmmakers, performers, musicians, writers, painters, photographers, and sculptors. Women also emerged in literature; a field that historically was dominated by men. Some of the prominent figures included Emily Nasrallah, Hoda Barakat, Ghada Samman, Iman Yunus, Etel Adnan, and Hanan al-Shaykh, who, as Miriam Cooke argues, "to record for posterity the participation some wished to forget; they also extended the consciousness of the few to the many." While these writers, some of whom were not Lebanese but lived through the war, greatly contributed to the Lebanese and Arab literary movements, they also pushed for civic engagement, especially women's rights in their country as well as the Arab world. They challenged the roles of women in the traditional social structure of Arabs and depicted the everyday horrors of the civil war.

The involvement of women in arts and literature in the aftermath of the war contributed to changing perspectives. Lina Khatib in her article titled The Voice of Taboos, Women in Lebanese War Cinema, notes, "The war seemed to be orchestrated by men, but women bore its brunt and took part in its execution. Lebanese cinema, however, has generally chosen to ignore the role of women as active agents in the civil war." She commends the film by director Randa Chahal Sabbagh, A Civilized People, for using women to reflect taboos in a war-torn country. Other notable film-makers during the war include Jocelyn Saab who documented the Lebanon civil war extensively. Her films, such as Beirut, Never Again (1976) and Letter from Beirut (1978), depict the devastation of the war and explore the resilience of the Lebanese people, particularly through a gendered lens. Heiny Srour and Mai Masri also worked on documentaries exploring the Lebanon civil war.

Women interviewed say that stories, whether through arts and literature or simple communication, is way to narrate their paths, archive the various truths of the time, and enable deeper expression of gendered perspectives. Women add that even during the war, there continued to be an emphasis on art, although it was often not attributed as something critical or needed during the time. Project participants say some of them made up songs during the war to make fun of the "other", which in and of itself, became a form of expression. Other project participants note that they were not permitted to go to cinemas or theatres, which greatly affected their moods and sense of well-being.

Ultimately, women were involved in arts and literature but also, as this section shows, politics, education, peacebuilding, activism, care labour, formal and informal livelihood opportunities, among others. Their exposure to these various roles shifted depending on their positionality, age, background, and interests. Their roles also influenced how they navigated the war and the obstacles they faced. The second section explores the various challenges women faced.

NAVIGATING THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSTACLES WOMEN FACED DURING THE WAR

> **We lived in a country that felt like a huge prison—all our dreams of education and employment were limited.**
>
> *Project participant*

For all parties involved, the civil war led to suffering and loss, sustained violence, and an overall psychological state of desperation and desire for escape. **“Trauma generates a second identity,”** one project participant noted. **“It is loud. It grows arms and legs. It grows a brain of its own.”** This section explores the different hurdles women experienced during the war, and how they affected them on an individual and collective level.

GENDER EXPECTATIONS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING THE WAR.

It remains very challenging to find quantitative data that captures the atrocities women experienced during the war in Lebanon, and as noted in a study (LAW & UN Women, 2022), "The exact number of women and girls subjected to rape and other forms of SGBV is not known." Ultimately, as interviewees note, women were subjected to rape and sexual exploitation, including torture; domestic violence; military exploitation; inferior treatment from members within their family and the political parties they belonged to; limitations on mobility and education; and daily acts of intimidation.

However, during discussions with women, a lot of them recalled their experiences with sexual abuse and harassment, saying it continues to define their relationship to themselves, their bodies, and society until this day.

During a dialogue session in Nabaa, Beirut, one woman shared that her neighbour was raped during the war. This experience has shaped her neighbour's life and made her, and her family, suffer for a long time.

Meanwhile, a woman in Zarif, Beirut, recalled during a discussion, "I was at home with my two sisters. I vividly recall one day, when I was at home with my two sisters. My father handed my mother a weapon before he left the house. He instructed her that if she sensed armed men entering the house, she should kill the three girls and then herself, all out of fear for our honour. We lived in constant hiding and fear, not only of potential intruders but also of our own mother's actions. This experience left me with deep psychological trauma."

Another woman, from Zarif, said, "I consider myself a war victim because when I was young, my mother applied ointment on our faces and hands to make us break out in small rashes, to keep us safe from the risk of rape or abduction. She did this to make people afraid of us and think we had a contagious disease." Also, a woman from Nabaa said, "A group of women were kidnapped in the Sin El Fil area and disappeared for four days during the civil war. When they returned, they were unable to speak, but we could tell from their psychological state and their hostility towards men that they had been raped."
Ultimately, gendered expectations and sociocultural norms affected women's ability to make decisions about the choices they made during the war. One woman said, "Men always dominated, and it made it very difficult for us to be active participants in decision-making." Women often felt their opinions were not considered and they often felt a lack of privacy both within their homes

and in public spheres. Indeed, according to Schulze (1989), "The main obstacle for Lebanese women of all communities has been traditional gender socialisation based on notions that women cannot and should not exercise decisive power."

During different dialogue sessions, there were often debates about how society views mothers. Some women found it frustrating that society often reduces their role to being a mother with children and focuses only on their homes and offspring. However, others had a different perspective and felt that there is nothing more precious than being called the mother of children, considering them the most valuable aspect of their lives. The image "A Woman Crossing the Museum Street with Her Child, and the street appeared empty of passers-by, 1986," was selected by the woman, who elaborated, "I chose this picture because it reflects the strength and determination of a strong mother who is fighting against war and pain. It captures the resilience of motherhood amidst adversity." She added, "Now I see myself like her with my children, navigating through challenges with unwavering determination."

Interviewees also added that they were subjugated to significant amounts of pressure by family and society as well, and they often saw their role diminished to that of "motherhood." Women describe being pushed into early marriage and motherhood at an early age as a way of parents evading responsibility or to help women escape the country (if their partner lived abroad). Early marriage and having to take care of children also affected women's ability to pursue a meaningful education or career, or even to carry "normal lives" that included socialising with friends, taking walks, and partaking in cultural activities. It became a challenge for women to go about their day without being told what to do and what time to be home. One woman explained how she broke through all the limits that were imposed on her by society, becoming the first girl in her community to drive a car and work in Beirut. She also took off her Hijab as a way of defiance. These two acts, she added, were considered revolutionary at the time.

Moreover, it was often the case that men were the ones who travelled abroad for education and career opportunities. It was much more difficult for women to escape—their families saw such a journey as particularly dangerous and full of obstacles. In 1970, 44.5 of students in public school were females (Schulze, 1998). However, according to Khalaf (1995), although female participation in education was relatively high in Lebanon, parents continued to prioritise sending their sons to school especially during periods of economic precarity.

> **I got a scholarship to study abroad – but I was prevented for two reasons: the occupation, but also the prevailing sociocultural norms that I was a prisoner of.**
>
> *Project participant from Hasbaya*

On the other hand, the war prevented women from marrying those they loved because a lot of men were either fighting, travelling hurriedly, detained, or kidnapped. "The war took away those we loved," one participant noted. The participants added that there was a young man who wanted her for marriage, and that she liked him very much. She continues, "One day, I walked out of my house in the village, and I saw his photo as a martyr on the walls." This experience shook her understanding of love and her ability to make sense of the future.

Moreover, the weight and expectations that also came with caretaking caused them deep anxieties with many women saying they rarely slept well at night because they were on the watch to protect their kids.

> **I hid my son because I didn't want them to see a young boy and kill him. Of course, I'd rather die than have my son be killed.**
>
> *Project participant*

Domestic violence, according to interviewees, increased in certain areas and women were subjected to male aggression. Women say violence became normalised in their everyday life and there was a noticeable increase in domestic tensions in some households, with men taking out their anger and desperation on their wives (Osseiran, 1995; Schulze, 1998).

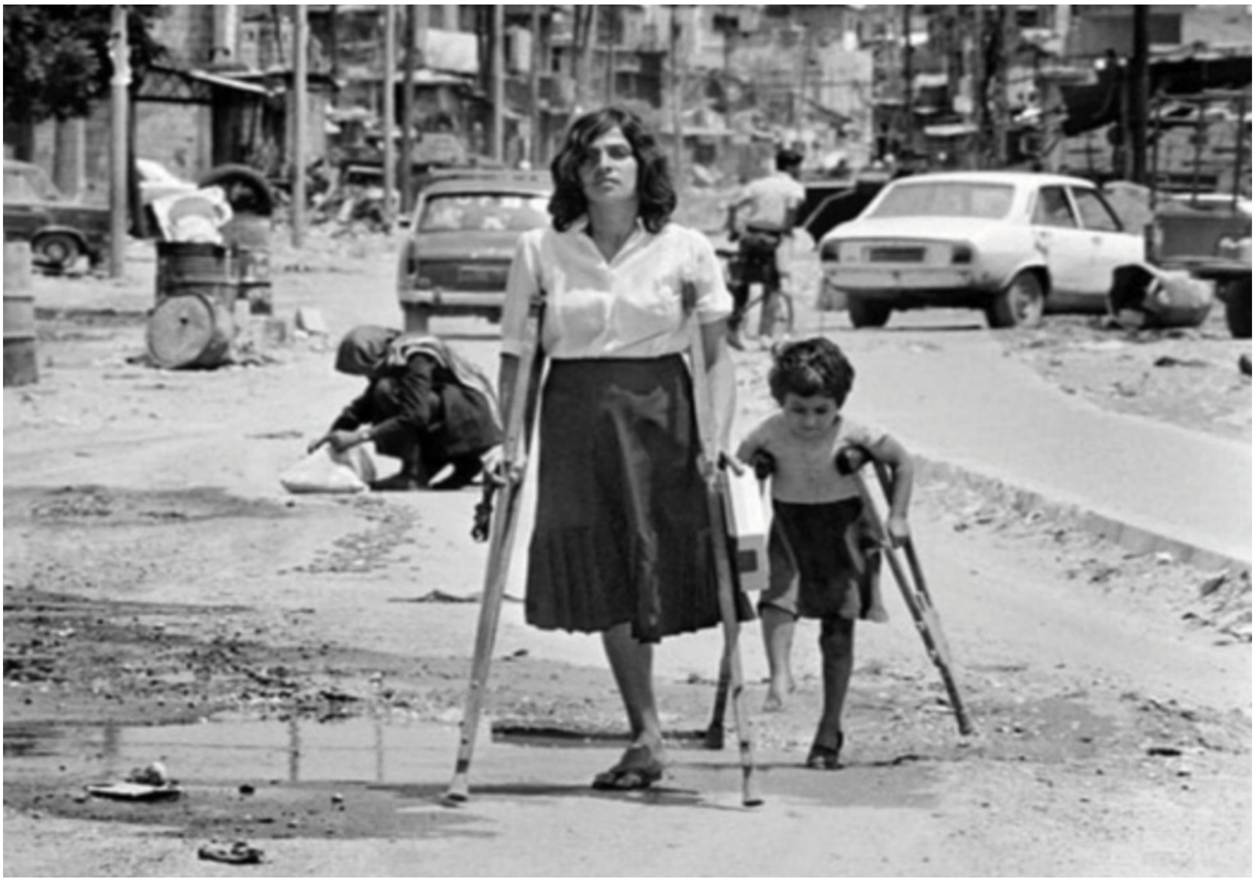

Figure 4: A one-legged mother holds her injured daughter's hand as they walk through a Beirut street, 1985. [15]

> **What! A woman wanting to go out of the house? Impossible, everyone constantly feared she would be raped.**
>
> *Project participant*

Violence extended from individual and intimate partner violence to collective experiences of sexual and gender-based violence. A recent study by Legal Action Worldwide and UN Women titled *They raped us in every possible way, in ways you can't imagine: Gendered Crimes During the Lebanese Civil War*s details the sexual and gender-based violence that women were subjected during the war. This included accounts of forced nudity and prostitution, genital mutilation, gang rape, torture that is sexualized in nature. It also details family violence and psychological pressures women faced. Women were constantly afraid of being raped or exposed to violence on the basis of their womanhood. Public discourse at the time also perpetuated that notion, with adolescent girls being prevented from many outings on that basis. Women interviewed say as adolescent girls they "did not have a life". Women in shelters particularly faced heightened fear especially during overnights. Women gave examples of not being able to sleep properly in the shelters out of fear of being attacked at night.

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[15] Maher Attar.

VIOLENCE, INSECURITY, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA.

> **I remembered during the Battle of Zahle when I was young, there were curtains covering the balcony door, and my mother was afraid that there was someone from the fighters on the balcony, but it was just a cat. We stayed scared for hours, but in the end, it was just a cat. This image made me feel a lack of safety, fear, especially during the Battle of Zahle during the siege that lasted for about 3 months, and we experienced fear and a food blockade, but despite everything, people loved each other unlike today.**
>
> *Participant from Akkar*

Many of the women recounted experiences that have left deep psychological scars. Whether it was witnessing the murder of loved ones, living in constant fear, or enduring traumatic events like being instructed by a parent to commit suicide to preserve honor, these experiences have lasting effects on mental well-being. The fear and grief experienced by these women is profound and ongoing; through their narratives, the women call for action to address the root causes of conflict and to ensure that the voices of those affected by war are heard and heeded.

A woman in Nabaa noted, "My friend was kidnapped during the war and we lived in constant fear because of it. The ordeal left her mother with psychological and nervous disorders, scars that lingered long after the war had ended." Several other women discussed their family's experiences with kidnappings. One woman noted that the lack of accountability when it comes to kidnappings during the war is a symbol of the continued struggle for justice in Lebanon. Another woman from Nabaa said, "I lost my father during the civil war when I was young, and I was deeply attached to him. He was a remarkably peaceful person and did not align with any party involved in the conflict. His only misfortune was being at his workplace, a gas station, when a shell struck. To this day, I continue to feel the profound emptiness of losing him."

For many women, the war forced them to grow up while they were young. "At first, [the war] felt like a twisted game until I witnessed the tragic killing of a young man before my very eyes. That experience forced me to grow up far beyond my years".

Another woman shared her story, saying, "My brother died when I was young, he was killed in a war where neither young nor old are spared. Since then, I've been afraid of any loud noise because it reminds me of the moment he was killed."

> **We were always so scared of being kidnapped or raped by one of the soldiers every time we had to cross the checkpoint.**
>
> *Project participant*

Across the country, checkpoints and frontier posts were erected by Lebanese and non-Lebanese militiamen and soldiers. Women describe them as among the greatest sources of anxiety and fear during the civil war. One woman said, “Regardless of who was standing outside the checkpoint with a gun, they all caused suffering.”

> **The Mathaf checkpoint was one of the worst—women were harassed more than men. If one of the militiamen "wanted" a woman, they would stop her under the pretence that her ID was invalid, or she needed additional documentation.**
>
> *Project participant*

Checkpoints deeply humiliated women. They sometimes had to cross them if they wanted to go to a school, an event, or a friend’s house. Because of them, their mobility was severely limited, and they attempted to avoid them at all costs. Some women ended up having to bribe those at checkpoints with money, others walked long distances to try and avoid checkpoints but even that often felt unsafe too. Others yet avoided them completely. Many women say they had to stop their education or career because of checkpoints and frontier posts.

Mobility was particularly difficult for adolescent girls. One woman describes how, as a young girl, she was always terrified of leaving her grandparents’ home—where she lived—out of fear from sexual harassment.

> **They used to search our cars and take out all our stuff. Everything felt so exposed and meddled with. But then you'd feel as if you have been given a second life after you have crossed a checkpoint.**
>
> *Project participant*

Life also felt particularly fragmented and cantonised for women because of the checkpoints. One woman, for instance, lived in a mixed neighbourhood and said that neighbours lived together happily, sharing food and space and moments. However, there was always a fear of leaving the neighbourhood as though everything outside of one's area, beyond the checkpoint, was automatically terrifying. Some had a fear of crossing the checkpoint with the hijab because they worried it would implicate them with a particular political party. One woman said, on the topic, this wasn't fair because wearing the hijab should not immediately tie you to a specific camp and that this pinpoints to wrong conception of what religion and religious symbols are.

> **I once needed to go to Beirut because my son was sick. On my way, I realised my permit was expired and the men at the frontier post did not let me pass. I begged them and asked if they'd do the same to their sister or wife. Then they let me pass.**
>
> *Project participant*

Tied to women's perceptions of the checkpoints was the gnawing fear that they, or someone they cared for, would be detained or kidnapped when they left the house. The disappearance of loved ones– children, especially – was also a main source of long-lasting pain, not only for the generation that lived the war, but also those who have lived in its aftermath. Interviewees say they would stay up at night, anxiously, to protect their children in fear that it was their children who were "next".

FEAR, DEPRESSION, AND THE PERSISTENT SENSE OF UNEASE.

> **It was hard to see this much injustice and not be able to do anything.**
>
> *Project participant*

> **We lost many loved ones due to the war, some were kidnapped, and some were killed. This, coupled with financial loss, physical injuries, and enduring psychological trauma. Till now, I suffer from psychological issues where loud sounds trigger memories of my wartime experiences."**
>
> *Woman participant in Tripoli*

The women interviewed unanimously consider themselves victims of the war, experiencing various forms of violence including physical, psychological, and familial. While they said they do not want to be portrayed merely as victims, they thought it necessary to recount hardships such as losing loved ones, displacement, and the kidnapping of family members, and the ways in which these experiences led to persistent fear and depression, as well as unease that lasts until this day. Ultimately, these experiences have left deep scars and have disrupted many aspects of their lives, including education, relationships, and livelihoods.

They often worried about their next steps and describe the years of the war as being loaded with depression and anxiety. Even during spells of fragile peace, women say they were haunted by discomfort and unease. One woman said, **"There was always the question of—what comes next?"**

> **I can't forget the time my dad was injured, how I kept screaming next to him. Such images affected my sleep until I started therapy.**
>
> *Project participant*

Even after the war ended, women describe feeling an amalgamation of emotions when recalling it—hate, disgust, fear, trauma, numbness. Disgust kept coming up as a dominant emotion among women interviewed. One woman explained that she has no recollection of the civil war and what consumes her is simply the feeling of disgust—disgust at how everyone was willing to participate in violence. The “wiping out” of the war memory, as another woman put it, was an additional psychological toll for women interviewed. Many say they were haunted by its memory, but unable to look it in the eye.

Until this day, women continue to struggle with a perpetual sense of trauma, as though they are still stuck during the times of the war. One woman, for instance, said that she can never forget the finger she picked up from a dead pilot. Another woman returned to a massacre she witnessed when she was young. She said, “I was on a school trip. We had a house in Ein El-Rimmeneh. That day, we were in Baalbek. and on our way back. We reached an area where a massacre had just happened.” Her voice breaks. “It was a full-fledged crime scene. Do you see what I mean? I will never forget that scene. Everything shattered at a very young age”. A woman from Nabaa said, “When I was a young girl, we spent a significant amount of time in the shelter. I vividly recall hearing voices and witnessing events that, while I couldn’t understand them at the time, filled me with fear and insecurity. However, as I grew older, I discovered that women in the shelter were subjected to harassment and sexual assault. Until today, I still feel fear and insecurity in the dark.”

They talked about certain events that their mind returns to on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Some said they cannot speak to anyone about what they remembered and saw from the civil war. Other women, including those from the second and third generation, said they have inherited their parents’ traumas. “I may not have lived through the civil war,” a young woman added, “but I carry the trauma in me. I have inherited it from my mother, my grandmother, my father.”

Trauma, interviewees say, affects the formation of memories and even their validity. Dialogue sessions highlight how trauma from the Lebanon war continues to be transmitted across generations through stories, family narratives, and societal memory, shaping the identity and worldview of those who grew up after the war. A systematic review of PTSD prevalence among Lebanese individuals and Syrian refugees highlights war-related events as a major contributing factor. Indeed, research in psychology and sociology on a global scale has shown that the impact of war and violence is often carried forward by children and grandchildren of those who experienced it firsthand, affecting their mental health, sense of identity, and their perceptions of the past (Zerla, 2022).

One study, for instance, examines the transgenerational transmission of trauma among Alevi Kurds, focusing on three generations affected by the 1937-1938 Dersim massacre and subsequent displacements. Using a mixed-method approach, including qualitative interviews and standardized diagnostic tools, the study explores how trauma impacts mental health across generations. It finds that trauma symptoms, including PTSD, anxiety, and affective disorders, persist in descendants who did not directly experience the original events. These findings highlight the enduring impact of historical trauma and its influence on community identity and well-being.

Another study specifically in the context of Lebanon investigates the transmission of intergenerational trauma among survivors of the Lebanon civil war and their adult offspring. It finds that the relationship between parents’ war trauma and their children’s mental health is mediated by parental psychopathology rather than by adverse childhood experiences. That is, when parents have experienced trauma, their psychological state can impact their ability to provide a supportive and stable environment for their children. This can increase the risk of similar mental health challenges in their offspring, as the emotional and behavioral struggles of the parents may influence the child’s development and coping mechanisms, contributing to the transmission of trauma across generations (Tarabay & Golm, 2024).

CONCLUSION

> **It is important to acknowledge the reasons behind the war, and the factors that led to the escalation. We need to unveil all the emotions we felt to be able to protect our youth and prevent upcoming conflicts.**
>
> *Project participant*

The sessions and discussions with women evoked memories and stories that served as a poignant reminder of the trauma endured during the conflict. Despite the emotional weight, many women expressed that sharing their stories brought comfort and support—the act of coming together fostered a sense of trust and camaraderie among participants, creating a supportive environment conducive to healing.

Participants reflected on the enduring impact of the Lebanon civil war on society, from divisions along sectarian lines to the lingering fear of returning unrest. They drew parallels between past and present challenges, highlighting ongoing struggles, such as economic hardship and shortages of essential goods. Syrian women involved in these discussions shared that learning about the civil war from Lebanese women helped them contextualize their struggles and pain within the larger historical framework of the region.

One woman from Hasbaya reflected on a photograph titled "A Woman Holding Her Disfigured Daughter's Hand after a Car Bomb Explosion in West Beirut, 1986." She noted, "This image is very significant because, unfortunately, it keeps happening. I remembered a scene during the Beirut explosion on August 4th, when a mother was frantically searching for her son, saying, 'He's beautiful, and his eyes are beautiful—can anyone find him?'"

For women of a younger generation, the memories of the civil war still resonate. A woman from Chouf explained, "Even though we didn't live through the civil war, we heard many stories and saw countless images and news about it. This was especially true when many people from the South came to us during the Israeli war in 2006, and we hosted several families."

Other participants noted a continuity of crises, moving from wartime struggles to today's economic paralysis. A woman from Chouf observed, "Life was more manageable back then; today, we face an economic war that presents even greater challenges. The scarcity of medicine and essential goods, especially for children, makes our current situation feel even harder than during the war."

This oral history archive depicts the importance of adopting a gendered perspective on the civil war. It adds nuance to the collective memory and prioritizes the voices of women who lived through it and have their own unique stories to tell. Discussing the war and exposing its atrocities, along with diverse responses and coping mechanisms, may, at the very least, help in mitigating the risk of recurrence.

With contributions from around 200 women, the project reveals the layered nature of their experiences and perspectives. For many women, sharing served not only as a release of stored trauma but also as a warning to younger generations. As one participant expressed, "We lived through so much violence, and it makes me wonder—why is the current generation re-living it? Haven't we learned already?"

Archiving these stories is critical, as it redefines how women are remembered—not as passive bystanders, but as fighters, caretakers, victims, perpetrators, and more. Despite the legal and socio-political barriers they faced, women adapted and took on multiple roles. Their participation in the labor force increased, even as they continued managing household affairs and providing for their families. Many were involved in peace-building committees and informal negotiations, striving to maintain everyday life amidst pervasive violence and targeted sexual exploitation. The war profoundly impacted people's lives, increasing both their sense of responsibility and desperation. Yet, for women who lived through the conflict, access to mental health support was minimal, and their traumas and memories have often been erased from collective histories.

This project highlights the essential role that feminist oral history can play in fostering collective awareness of women's specific issues and creating a more inclusive memory of the civil war. However, it's evident that many more stories remain untold. Although the participants were diverse, the interviews portray the importance of further exploration, particularly from the perspectives of those with disabilities, individuals without national IDs, Palestinian refugees and other non-Lebanese residents during the war, female-headed households, and many others.

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Norway

KAFA كفى
ENOUGH VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION
كفى عنف واستغلال

UN WOMEN