# LINKS BETWEEN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ARMED CONFLICT

Report from a Field Trip in Lebanon March 7-17, 2010

Kvinna till Kvinna

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# Content



KVINNA TILL KVINNA

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation's project manager was Eva Zillén. The field work was carried out, on a consultancy basis, by Ann Wilkens and Lovisa Strand. In Lebanon they were assisted by Nour Shoukeh and Sara Khalil Fathallah. June 2010.

Wiring in Bourj al-Barajneh.

Bouthaina Saad, Najdeh

Traces of war in Beirut.

Walking home in Bourj al-Barajneh.

# Conflicts in Lebanon

Having been part of the French mandate of Syria since 1920, Lebanon gained its independence in 1943. When Israel was created in 1948, the first influx of Palestinian refugees formed some of the refugee camps which are still in existence. After the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, the Palestinian guerilla forces were expelled from Jordan and added to the population of these refugee camps. During the 1970s, tensions between different population groups increased and in 1975, a civil war broke out, lasting until 1990. The conflict was compounded when, in 1982, Israel invaded the Southern part of Lebanon and Beirut was put under siege.

A second round of instability was initiated by the murder, in 2005, of Rafic Hariri, a prominent businessman and political leader who had headed several cabinets since the beginning of the 1990s.

A year later an armed conflict, in Lebanon known as the July War, between Israel military and the Lebanese paramilitary force Hizbollah, began.

Laura Sfeir, LECORVAW

Port in Saida.


Palestinian kindergarten.

# I. Background

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is interested in exploring the interface between gender and conflict issues and wants to highlight the potential of women's participation in conflict resolution and peace building. It is our conviction that sustainable peace cannot be achieved unless women are included in the process on an equal basis with men. The problems related to peace building processes, as perceived through the eyes of women they directly affect, can also be important indicators of areas that have to be taken into account if such processes are to be successful in the long term.

At international level, recognition of the role of women in the peace and security agenda has grown and been endorsed in a number of resolutions from the United Nations Security Council, notably res. 1325 of October 31, 2000 and res. 1820 of July 23, 2008. One question to be explored is the extent to which this recognition on an international policy level is actually trickling down to conflict areas on the ground and concretized into relevant action.

Against this background, having examined the existing literature on the links between domestic violence and various phases of armed conflict, Lebanon was chosen as the target for a pilot study to further explore these interconnections. Lebanon is a country that has undergone several armed conflicts in recent times, ranging from civil war to invasion by external forces. It is also situated in a region in which the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is active. Kvinna till Kvinna has six partner organisations in Lebanon, two of which focus on Palestinian refugees.

These partner organisations, and a number of other relevant organisations, were interviewed during a field trip on March 7-17, 2010 (a complete list and short presentation of the organisations interviewed is enclosed, page 19). The questions explored centred around the links between different phases of the conflicts in which Lebanon has been involved, and the prevalence of violence against women; actions which could influence the situation and serve to alleviate the problem; and the extent to which the knowledge gathered by the organisations had been tapped by political actors dealing with conflict resolution and peace building (a list of core questions as distributed ahead of the interviews is enclosed, page 21). ❖

# II. Previous research, methodological difficulties

The relationship between domestic violence and armed conflict is difficult to explore for many reasons. For one, domestic violence alone is a sensitive issue, difficult to explore. If at all recognised, it tends to be surrounded by silence. Neither victims, nor perpetrators want to talk about it and victims will refrain from seeking help until the situation has become unbearable or life-threatening – and sometimes not even then. In some societies, the culture of silence surrounding domestic violence is backed up by a patriarchal system that places the man at the centre of the family, in charge of other family members. In line with this, it may be further endorsed by a legal system, which regards domestic violence as a family affair, beyond the scope of the judiciary. Still, in some cases, the culture of silence will be broken; but even then, measuring and mapping domestic violence remains a difficult proposition, requiring a multidisciplinary approach, a high level of confidence between interviewers and interviewees, as well as agreed parameters which do not yet exist.

The link between domestic violence and armed conflict is even more complicated, as armed conflict tends to absorb all other problems in society. In times of warfare, structures needed to cope with problems such as domestic violence will have broken down. And even if attempts can, in fact, be made to record domestic violence during or after conflict, there will be no data from peaceful times to compare with. Thus, it will be difficult to know whether the violence increased at all, as well as — if an increase can still be presumed — whether it is tied to the conflict or would have occurred anyway. Baseline statistics are needed in order to follow developments. To do this in a scientifically acceptable way is a challenge requiring urgent attention.

Nevertheless, the notion that domestic violence increases during and post conflict is widely accepted. In a UNIFEM report in 2002, Elisabet Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf refer to this phenomenon as a fact[1]. The conclusion relies on two surveys conducted in Phnom Penh in 1994 and 1996 respectively[2]. However, none of these studies go beyond *suggesting* that domestic violence increases in times of conflict – there is no proof. Still, the statement by Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf has taken on the dimensions of established truth and is often quoted in the following literature on the subject.

One reason why the notion has become accepted is probably that it is quite reasonable. It is not difficult to subscribe to the idea that violence in the surrounding society spills over into the homes of people. It is also supported by a study conducted in Kosovo, indicating that 44 per cent of 213 women interviewed had experienced domestic violence for the first time during the height of the conflict in 1998 and 1999[3]. During post-conflict periods, it is an accepted notion that "violence moves home", which is also supported by the Kosovo study and here, the link seems to be even stronger. But again, there are no facts and figures to back this up. Existing studies conclude that the link *may* exist but stop short of establishing it.

In the absence of hard facts, there are different ways of exploring this terrain further, horizontally or vertically, e.g. through interviewing organisations working on the ground with problems related to the intersection of domestic violence and armed conflict (as we are doing in this study) or through conducting in-depth interviews with women in areas affected by armed conflict. However, the sensitivity of the subject will remain a problem to be dealt with. In a report

1. Rehn, E. & Johnson Sirleaf, E., 16.
2. Byrne, B, Marcus, R. & Powers-Stevens, T., 7. See also Rehn, E. & Johnson Sirleaf, E., endnotes ch.1, note 24.
3. Wareham, R., 37

on the Israel-Palestine conflict, women were asked questions relating both to political violence and to domestic violence and sexual abuse[4]. While they had no problems answering the questions on political violence, they remained reluctant to go into the domestic sphere. This corroborates another finding from the Middle East context that "domestic violence is likely to be kept private, whereas violence associated with the conflict may be widely discussed"[5].

In one recent survey conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a link was established between rape perpetrated as an instrument of warfare and a following increase in the prevalence of rape in the civilian context[6]. The phenomenon is termed "civilian adoption of rape", i.e. civilians adapt their ways of executing personal power to those used by soldiers in a war situation.

Against this background, in order to develop the study of links between armed conflict and domestic violence, to take it from the realm of assumptions to more solid ground, a first step would be to establish violence as a crime, regardless of whether it is carried out in the private or the public sphere and regardless of whether the victim is a man, woman or child. In Lebanon, efforts are being made to pass a law on violence against women, which would go a long way towards meeting these objectives. These efforts, however, have been hampered by the political instability[7], as well as by the complicated structure of separate family legislation for 18 different sects[8].

In Lebanon, it was also quite clear that the patriarchal system is an important factor behind the prevalence of domestic violence – primarily in the sense that it disempowers women in various ways. Disempowered women have difficulty asserting their individual rights and, in a patriarchal system, are not used to dealing with institutions outside of the family context. They will tend to accept the limits put on their existence and even limit themselves where no boundaries exist[9].

The trend of rising religious fundamentalism affecting i.a. the Palestinian population tends to make things even worse. While neither patriarchy nor religious extremism is per se a threat to the physical integrity of women – on the contrary, the "respect" for women is a seminal notion in both phenomena – they are both oppressive in the sense that women are limited, both geographically (to homes) and psychologically (to the functions of wives and mothers). For women to remain secure, they have to accept the rules of the game. When they cease to submit, they may encounter violence[10].

In this way, macro-politics inevitably enter into women's homes. In the Middle East, the long-standing political and military conflicts coupled with a perceived lack of interest in solving them on the part of the powerful Western world, seen as siding with the enemy, contribute to the acceptance and expansion of fundamentalist thinking, rejecting modernity and concepts such as gender equality as expressions of cultural imperialism.

In this context, a Swedish NGO approaching the link between domestic violence and armed conflict could easily be interpreted as yet another plot in the context of Western conspiracy. In practice, however, we encountered no such difficulties on the level deemed to be accessible to us, i.e. casting light on the subject through interviews with organisations dealing with it at grassroot level.

Within these restrictions, compounded by the fact that the number of organisations dealing with domestic violence in Lebanon is limited, the purpose of this study is to take the presumed link between domestic violence and the different phases of conflict one small step further towards corroboration through experiences reported in a conflict-ridden country. We are still dealing mostly with impressions and assumptions, but a coherent pattern is visible throughout most of the interviews. According to this pattern, in spite of the sharp division between private and public spheres, there is interaction between armed conflict in the surrounding society and violence towards women in their homes. While the pattern during the acute phase of a conflict is mixed, the post-conflict phase is definitely problem-ridden in a way that spills over into the homes.

Sadly, however, there was nothing to report in terms of one important conclusion to be drawn from that interaction, i.e. that women have to be part and parcel of efforts towards conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The reason for this conclusion is not primarily related to gender justice but to instrumentality: If women are involved, if their perspectives are taken into account, conflict resolution will improve. Even intractable conflicts, such as the one besetting the Middle East, could come closer to a sustainable and lasting solution.

The world cannot afford to overlook the chance offered by a more holistic approach in this regard.

4. Sachs,D., Sa'ar, A., & Aharoni, S., 2.
5. Usta, J., Farver, J.A.M., & Zein, L, 801-802.
6. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative Report, April 2010, 38-39.
7. See pt. III.2.2, page 11 in the report.
8. See pt.III.1, page 10 and III.3.5 page 18 in the report.
9. See pt. III.3.3, page 15 in the report.
10. See pt. III.3.1, page 15 in the report.

# III. Report from the Field Trip

## **III.1** Political and socio-economic background factors

Lebanon is strategically situated on the crossroads between East and West, a location which has turned the country into an important trading centre but also exposed it to the political hazards of unresolved problems in the Middle East region. Throughout history, the ancient Phoenician civilization has been influenced by most of the world's dominant cultures, turning Lebanon into a cultural melting pot but, at the same time, making it extremely sensitive to demographic balance. After World War I, it became part of the French mandate of Syria and when it gained independence in 1943, a power-sharing mechanism based on confessionalism was introduced, according to which the President should be a Maronite Christian, the Speaker of the Parliament a Shiite Muslim, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Deputy Speaker a Greek Orthodox.

Adding to the complications of this delicate balance between different population groups, Lebanon is also host to recurrent influx of refugees, notably Palestinians and Iraqis. This overall situation has been one of the factors behind internal armed conflicts, such as the long and brutal civil war between 1975 and 1990, and has increased Lebanon's vulnerability to the regional conflict besetting the Middle East since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Most recently, in the summer of 2006, a war between Israel and Hezbollah broke out which lasted for a little over a month. In the absence of a sustainable conflict resolution, another outbreak of armed violence between Israel and Lebanon/Hezbollah, on Lebanese territory, was not excluded during the period when the interviews were carried out.

For the purpose of this study, one relevant aspect of the political and demographic situation concerns the division of the Lebanese population into 18 different religious sects. Each of these sects has a separate Personal Status Law regulating family matters. Introducing changes into this system is extremely complicated.

The demographic complexity is also one of the factors contributing to the lack of integration into the Lebanese society by the Palestinian refugees. In spite of generations of residence in the country, the Palestinians, now numbering more than 400,000, the bulk of whom arrived already in 1948, have never been accepted as citizens. Thereby, they are kept out of essential social services, as well as being barred from a great number of professions. The refugee camps in which around half of them still live may not be separated by fences and check points, but their environment is still secluded, physically as well as mentally.

# III.2 Observations made during the interviews, sorted into phases

## **III.2.1** Links to domestic violence or other trends in the situation of women in the pre-conflict phase ...

As one interlocutor remarked, in the case of Lebanon, it has not been quite clear what constitutes a pre-conflict phase. Conflicts have been so recurrent that their phases – pre-conflict, during conflict, post-conflict – are blurred. In reality, post-conflict phases may, in fact, turn out to be pre-conflict. People have lived with conflict, in one form or the other, for more than 30 years, i.e. the life-span of a generation.

Another aspect characterising Lebanon's volatile political climate is the speed with which a conflict can develop. Talking about the eruption of violence in the Palestinian camp Nahr al-Bared outside Tripoli in May 2007, Ms. Zeina Mezher of the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), remarked that it took only a few days for a full-fledged conflict to have developed, in spite of the fact that Nahr al-Bared had been an established, stable camp where people ran their own shops and trade companies. If anything, the pre-conflict phase was a state of shock that things could unravel so fast. She dismissed the notion of a surge in domestic violence as an early warning sign of conflict as "silly, a Hollywood idea".

Other organisations agreed that no particular pattern could be tied to the pre-conflict phase. Ms. Olfat Mahmoud of the Palestinian Women's Humanitarian Organisation (PWHO), however, added that increased tension could be palpably felt before the eruption of conflict and could affect women, i.a. in the sense that they start thinking about storing food and other necessities. The wife has to "shop for war" but resources are limited and when she asks for money, her husband sees her as "nagging". But she carries the responsibility for the survival of her family, and seeing her husband or son prepare for war also adds to her anguish.

## **III.2.2** ...during conflict...

Our interlocutors defined a number of ways in which women are affected during the acute phase of a conflict, some of them related to violence. Generally, harassment and abuse of women were deemed to increase during conflict, including domestic violence. Men might feel increased stress and tension from the war situation and know no other way of channelling this than taking it out on the women surrounding them.

In other cases, men would take to the field in order to participate in the fighting, leaving women and children without protection and exposed to harassment from other men, e.g. fighters roaming around in the streets of Palestinian refugee camps. Another problem would be that, even in acute situations, women would be reluctant to go to shelters without their husbands. During the Israeli bombardment of Southern Lebanon in summer 2006, women were not allowed to make the decision to leave home on their own, even when husbands were away, resulting in some families sustaining unnecessary psychological damage. For those who managed to flee the combat zone, there were other risks. Women had their privacy invaded and could be sexually harassed when living in cramped conditions with other families. Provisional living increased tensions, passed on from men to women and from women to children.

A problem repeatedly mentioned in the interviews was the taboo surrounding rapes and other types of sexual violence – especially during internal conflicts (violence from Israeli

perpetrators would be more easily acknowledged). This was defined as one reason why it is important for NGOs to start documenting incidents – relieving the taboo would relieve the victims. Linked to the taboo were difficulties for rape victims to reintegrate into society, to be accepted by families and be able to carry on with their lives. In the worst scenarios, rape victims would be forced to marry their rapists as a means of regularising their social situation. Thus, rapists would be rewarded rather than punished; a signal that would be picked up by others, impunity serving as a whitewashing of crime.

One particular problem was the wish during war time, from men and the community at large, to have many children – again, demography comes into play. Women's sexual and reproductive health would be neglected in favour of procreation at any cost. This could become another reason for domestic violence taking place. In this connection, the representative of the PWHO, Ms. Olfat Mahmoud, also pointed to the pressure put on women to sustain the Palestinian cause: "You have to carry it on your shoulders all your life." The cause means, among other things, that people have to be brave: "When rockets were hitting the camp, no one was allowed to express fear. Even children would be hit by brothers or uncles if they screamed."

In a related context, Ms. Anita Nassar of the Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW-LAU), pointed out that "during the July 2006 war on Lebanon, women who had just lost a son or husband, appeared on television or radio despite their grief and their sorrow, to tell the world that they were ready to sacrifice more if this would lead to saving their country. Every war that is waged on Lebanon makes women tougher, especially in areas directly targeted by the enemy."

Unemployment brought about by the war situation or war destruction would be another source of conflict in the family. At the same time, families tended to be brought closer together in times of external aggression. Internal displacement, on the other hand, would bring a new set of problems, including an increase in male violence against women, as well as child sexual abuse. Clear signs of such an increase in violence within the family had been noted by NGOs working in displacement centres but no statistics were available.

The representative of KAFA (Enough), Ms. Zoya Rouhana, observed a particular, negative side effect of war in the difficulty in sustaining a campaign for e.g. women's rights: "We can't run for a long time with a campaign." When conflict erupts, all programmes have to be stopped, the general atmosphere is absorbed by the conflict, keeping social welfare and women's issues aside, and, when the situation is normalised, work will have to start again from scratch. This had happened to the campaign for a law regulating violence against women, when the war broke out in 2006, and it was also a factor in the generally low level of consciousness of these issues among Lebanese decision makers. Women's rights were "the least of their priorities".

### III.2.3 ...and post-conflict

There seemed to be a consensus that post-conflict is the phase which carries the most problems in terms of women and their gender roles. For a start, this is when domestic violence most clearly tends to increase. On average, the KAFA helpline for victims of gender-based violence receives around 15 calls a week, but during the war in July/August 2006, only three calls were received, while, as soon as the war ended, 52 calls came in during only one week. This tendency was corroborated by Ms. Asma Kurdahi of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA): A rapid assessment study conducted in Southern Lebanon after the war in 2006 had indicated a clear increase of physical violence against women in the post-conflict phase. Ms. Laura Sfeir of the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECORVAW) reported similar findings: After the 2006 war, as well as after the Nahr al-Bared crisis in May 2007, the number of telephone calls to the helpline increased. Her conclusion was that, after the acute phase of the conflict is over, several factors, socio-economic as well as psychological, concur to activate violent behavior inside families.

Ms. Habbouba Aoun of the University of Balamand (UOB) described how violence has started to permeate society, with a notable increase after the war of 2006. Through her involvement in a psychosocial programme encompassing 88 out of 1,400 Lebanese public schools, she had seen how the barriers surrounding physical beating had been eroded and violent and risky behaviour had increased. Children themselves would say: "If you don't beat us, we don't understand", echoed by even more shocking statements from mothers, claiming that being beaten was, at least, a sign that they existed and were taken note of.

Beating had become more and more accepted; teachers would beat children and children would beat each other. Children would challenge each other as to how many beatings they could take before starting to cry; they would be involved in mischief, as in other societies, but with the important difference of an *intention to hurt*; they would even find ways of riding their bicycles in violent ways. So automatic was the physical response that during a meeting to discuss the violent behaviour of one boy, his mother started beating him on the spot in front of the people called to discuss the problem.

While the increase in violence was still an impression, reported by teachers and parents as

well as the police, who were increasingly called in, more systematic documentation of violence in schools had now been instigated; 2010 would be the base-line for future reference.

Economic problems in the post-conflict phase were also mentioned as an important source of domestic violence. Traditional sources of income would have disappeared. Unemployed men, unable to provide for their families but taught not to show weakness, would take out their frustration on their "nagging" wives. In other cases, causing another set of problems, men would be forced to go abroad looking for jobs leaving women as provisional but not fully empowered heads of households. Economic constraints would increase the number of school dropouts, girls would be forced into early marriages. The representative of the Rassemblement Démocratique des Femmes Libanaises (Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering, RDFL), Ms. Joumana Merei, reported that many families in the North of Lebanon, as well as the Bekaa valley, had been forced to sell their daughters into marriage in order to repay debts after the war.

For Palestinians, one way of getting money would be to join political factions, thereby increasing tension in the camps. For instance, brothers could end up affiliated to different parties – women would stand in between and tend to be the scapegoats in this situation as well. Ms. Olfat Mahmoud of the PWHO told us that the organisation had criticized i.a. the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) for accepting children as members. She also reported signs of post-war depression, questions raised as to the purpose of it all. People used to be motivated by the Palestinian cause but were now losing hope. Early aging signs were seen among the refugee population, with an increase in chronic illnesses such as high blood pressure and heart problems. This would affect the whole family, particularly the children, and add to the economic problems. On top of all this came increasing drug abuse, a phenomenon that political leaders preferred to sweep under the carpet. Ms. Abla S. Kadi of the Lebanese Council of Women (LCW), added that an increased cancer rate could be yet another burden on the families. This had been observed after the 2006 war in the South: "The villagers were reporting to us that they were observing an increased rate of cancer among their relatives and in the villages, causing stress within the families".

Another type of frustration would be created when women, who had taken on non-traditional tasks during the conflict phase, would again be relegated to traditional roles after the conflict. Some rights would have been gained but soon relinquished.

On the other hand, in the general turmoil of gender roles, women would have to find new ways of communicating with children who no longer saw them as authority figures. Displacement and chaos during the acute conflict phase tended to disrupt family patterns in a lasting way and, after the conflict, women could not pick up from where they were. This was particularly true when displacement was prolonged, as with the population of the Nahr al-Bared camp, still living under provisional circumstances since the conflict in May 2007. Mr. Colin Lee of the International Medical Corps (IMC), working with Iraqi refugees, agreed that the longer families stay under provisional arrangements waiting for a sustainable solution, the more cases of domestic violence are seen. The IMC would examine areas where some refugees are located in order to determine if there are any links between increases in abuse and the availability of alcohol and drugs in some parts of Lebanon. NGOs felt that the uncertainty facing the Iraqi population outside of Iraq might lead to increases in abusive behavior and were increasingly building preventative measures into their programs.

Ms. Laura Sfeir of the LECORVAW summed up the situation: During war, violence against women comes from external actors, after war, it reverts to domestic violence.

### **III.2.4** Circular conflicts

Since 1975, conflict phases in Lebanon have been recurrent to the extent that they tend to feed into each other, with few breathing spaces of illusive stability. During the field trip, tension was again building up and rumours were rife of an imminent attack by Israel. Many interlocutors pointed to this political situation as the root cause of violence within the families. Ms. Abla S. Kadi was, perhaps, the most explicit: "As long as arms production and the sale of arms goes on in the world, with the millions of bombs and mines spread in the South during 2006 and the refusal of Israel to hand the Lebanese Government a map of where these are placed, we feel threatened all the time. People are still being maimed in the South of Lebanon."

The unending cycle of violence in a region looking for sustainable solutions since 1948, is reproduced on the micro-level, in the families. Men beat women, who beat children, who beat smaller children, who are growing up to reproduce this pattern of physical violence. The longer this goes on, the deeper the pattern becomes. As Ms. Olfat Mahmoud of the PWHO observed: "Before, women had fewer rights but they felt more secure. Domestic violence would be condemned by the extended families, men who were violent would be put to shame by the society and their own relatives would turn against them. Nowadays, people have lost faith in the future and they are very depressed."

# III.3 Observations made during the interviews, sorted into themes

## **III.3.1** Reasons for domestic violence

While, on a macro-level, the regional, political situation could be regarded as a root cause of domestic violence, a number of more accessible causes were also highlighted during the interviews. Prominent among them was the prevailing patriarchal system and its contingent honour culture. As pointed out by Dr Jamile Khoury of the University of Saint Joseph (USJ), women would be unable to leave abusive relationships unless they were backed up by their fathers or brothers, and they would prefer to stay in order to preserve their dignity, as well as the dignity of the group.

The patriarchal system was seen as based on a notion that women are men's property and, therefore, men would also have the right to punish women who are not fully subordinate. Most often women tended to accept their lot. They would not strive for their rights. They would convince themselves that things are in order and that, unless they are backed by members of their families, they should not complain even if they experience all kinds of abuse at the hands of their hubands. By the same token, when some women were more empowered, that would also originate from the will of the family. In this vein, crimes against women remained a family affair, beyond the responsibility of society, hence the ongoing campaign for a law regulating violence against women.

Within the scope of this value system, early marriages – in the Shia sect, the minimum age for girls to be married off is nine – and forcing girls to drop out of school could be used as economic regulators during times of hardship, leading to unequal marriages with an increased risk of domestic violence, extending into following generations[11].

The patriarchal traditions would be further enhanced by increasing religious fundamentalism, as noted in conflict areas all over the world. When the state does not deliver, people turn to religion. When the West, and by extension modernity, is seen as the enemy, people go back to religious roots, or what is perceived as such.

Ms. Olfat Mahmoud of the PWHO described how "people became more religious after 9/11[12] – then again it worsened after the Hariri murder[13].– maybe because people are protecting their identity." Like the political factions, fundamentalist groups had access to money, "I don't know from where." She also described how women could be frightened with primitive interpretations of the Quran: According to one such interpretation, couples with problems should first separate for a while. If that did not work, they should bring in a third person to mediate and if that did not work either, the husband should beat the wife into submission. But the correct interpretation of the Quran, as explained by a female, religious scholar during a PWHO workshop, would land in the exact opposite: If both separation and mediation had failed, the husband should give the wife her freedom. Organising workshops on this kind of subject would, however, risk criticism for being "Western". Right or wrong, men liked to stick to their understanding of the meaning of the text,

11. This was corroborated by research done by the UOB, pinpointing the level of education of the mother as one of the most important indicators in connection with domestic violence. The level of education of the father would be less important in terms of reducing violence within the family.
12. The al Qaida attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001.
13. Rafic Hariri, recurrent Prime Minister of Lebanon between 1992 and 2004, was assassinated in Beirut on 14 February, 2005, an incident which sparked the Cedar Revolution and led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

overlooking those women's rights which are, in fact, prescribed by the Quran. For the Palestinian women, "the Cause" – land lost – would add to the burden of traditional thinking. In a situation where men had lost control of everything, they could at least control their family. "The Cause" would also entail an obligation to have many children, not only in wartime (as pointed out in section 2.2).

The general lack of awareness, observed Ms. Zeina Mezher of the NCLW, coupled with the taboo surrounding the subject of domestic violence, blurs the vision not only of women victims; men don't see the full scope of it either. Therefore, sensitising men in general, and community leaders in particular, was a very important part of her work, carried out i.a. through participatory theatre. After performances, men would come forward to say that this was the first time they heard about domestic violence.

The complexity of the Lebanese system: sectarian conflict, the war with Israel and the fact that every sect has its own priorities, were factors complicating this effort. Education and long-term hope for political stability would be the keys to success.

Ms. Bouthaina Saad of the Association Najdeh also underlined the lack of awareness: "A lot of women, as well as men, think that violence is normal, don't even know that it is violence." In this context, Ms. Asma Kurdahi of the UNFPA underlined the importance of making it possible for women to assess their needs from their own perspectives in order to define their own priorities. If the silence surrounding domestic violence were to be broken, it was crucial to empower the women and then to involve decision makers who could facilitate the process.

Ms. Anita Nassar of IWSAW-LAU stated: "Because of this reality, and because officers and staff members at police stations tend to treat domestic violence as a private family matter, women hesitate to go to police stations and file a complaint when they are abused. It is common knowledge that, most likely, no serious action is going to be taken to punish the perpetrator."

The economic crisis hitting people already living on the margins of their economy was seen as the other principal cause of domestic violence. In many cases, women simply could not afford a divorce, even if they lived under almost unbearable conditions: Who will feed me and my children? I have to bear everything for my kids, they would reason, according to Ms. Mahmoud. The fact that international funding for Iraqi refugees is dropping, was cited by Mr. Colin Lee of the IMC as a reason for increased domestic violence, while Ms. Aoun of the UOB mentioned the increase in the number of women-headed households (in which case male relatives would be the likely perpetrators of violence).

### **III.3.2** Gender-specific exposure of women during conflict

Rape as a means of demoralising the enemy had not been a general characteristic of the wars in Lebanon. Ms. Joumana Merei of the RDFL was the only one mentioning it – in the context of the civil war in the 1970s, when women would be raped and sometimes killed by factional fighters, regarding this as an achievement. Later on, Israeli soldiers had also raped women but never in a systematic way and on a mass scale. In any case, however, rape victims would be stigmatised and facing difficulties reintegrating into families and society.

The psychological exposure was underlined by Ms. Olfat Mahmoud of the PWHO: Women are the ones who care for and protect their children under all circumstances; they suffer more than anybody else when they know that a message of a son's death in combat can reach the family at any time. The compounded difficulties of running women-headed households during times of war and economic hardship were also underlined by several interlocutors. Furthermore, it was pointed out that, where domestic violence was already in place, it would tend to worsen with the stress of war.

### **III.3.3** Effects of the patriarchal system aggravating the situation of women during conflict

When rape during war did occur, the effects could be compounded by religious notions. Problems linked to the concept of *zina* were mentioned by Ms. Joumana Merei of RDFL. In traditional Muslim societies this means that, instead of the perpetrators, rape victims are punished, on the grounds of adultery, if she was married, or "fornication", if she was unmarried. It would be this type of thinking that would force rape victims to marry their rapists (as mentioned in section 2.2).

Another aspect of the patriarchal system, permeating much of the discussion, was the difficulties for women who have been perpetually relegated to a secondary role to cope with injustice, encroachment on their rights or abuse in general, coming with or being enhanced by the armed conflict. Similarly, the low standing of the women would enhance the difficulties of taking over responsibilities normally incumbent on the men, during periods when men would be off fighting. Finally in this particular cycle, disappointment would also be acute when, once women did manage to extend their responsibilities, these would again be taken away when the conflict was over and men returned.

Generally, these problems were more acute for the Palestinian women than for the Lebanese. The representatives of organisations working with

Palestinians immediately recognised the links between armed conflict and domestic violence, while some representatives of Lebanese organisations could see no such link at all. As Ms. Bouthaina Saad of Najdeh pointed out, Palestinian women are discriminated in three ways: they are refugees, they are stateless (in a society where a whole range of rights and services are tied to the citizenship) and they are women. In Lebanese society, on the other hand, conditions vary widely. Ms. Habiba Aoun of the UOB explained that in some areas, 80 per cent of the secondary school students are girls, in a few areas women are traditionally dominant relative to men, while in other areas women can hardly open their mouths: "We have to be careful about what we mean by empowering women. Projects have to be area-specific."

Rising religious fundamentalism as a consequence of conflict (as mentioned in section 3.1) is not necessarily linked to the patriarchal system but it could be said that the patriarchal system provides a fertile ground for those strands within religious fundamentalism that target and discriminate women. Statistics compiled by LECORVAW covering the period 2008-2010 indicated that domestic violence had been more prevalent in the religiously more conservative areas of Lebanon. It also showed that 60 per cent of the battered women registered belonged to the Sunnite religious sect. While, due to the sensitivity of the demographic balance, no census figures on different sects are available in Lebanon, this can still be assumed to be an overrepresentation.

Furthermore, in the case of the Palestinians in Lebanon, the rise of fundamentalism has been accompanied by a gradual reduction of the services of UNRWA[14], to some extent leaving the provision of social services such as humanitarian relief and education in the hands of NGOs, among them well-funded fundamentalist groups. For the individual rights of women, the result is retrogression; young girls are more restricted than their mothers and grand-mothers were.

During earlier periods, women, especially older women, were involved in decision-making at the community level. Today, said Ms. Olfat Mahmoud of the PWHO, "it is only men who make decisions. Women will say no to being represented on the popular committees, saying: ´That is men's work`." This development had started in the 1980s: "After the invasion of 1982[15], everything collapsed." In order to challenge the system, she added, workshops should be organised to teach women analytical skills. As a result of the prevailing atmosphere, women confined themselves mentally. They would prefer to stay in the camp, although there were no checkpoints or anything else preventing them from going out.

Ms. Zoya Rouhana of KAFA added that, during the war of 2006, women were not in charge of decision-making even in the displacement centres (where husbands would be absent). Representatives of political parties had taken over those functions. This had not been the case during the civil war in the 1970s and 80s. According to her analysis, on the macro-political level, the existence of Israel in the region, as well as the policies of the United States were factors at play in the rise of fundamentalism. Earlier, there was also anti-imperialism, socialism to motivate people to fight against Israel. The only option now was to become more and more religious.

## III.3.4 Acccess to weapons as a factor aggravating domestic violence

Ms. Habiba Aoun of UOB pointed out that Lebanese women do not necessarily regard the presence of weapons as negative: "In the South, you cannot do awareness against weapons. Weapons are your instruments to get your land back and they can be used as decorations in the homes." After the 2006 war, land mines and cluster bombs had also become "very normal"; an integrated part of the culture. "Don't blame the armed people," added Ms. Abla S. Kadi of the LCW, "as long as the political situation in the region remains threatening, possessing weapons to protect our country is normal". Ms. Olfat Mahmoud of the PWHO, on the other hand, agreed that women would have a strong interest in getting rid of weapons in the homes. But in order to organise around an issue like this, they would first need to be empowered. Ms. Zeina Mezher of the NCLW also noted a clear link between the presence of weapons, not only real ones but also as toys for the boys, and domestic violence.

## III.3.5 Women's participation in conflict resolution

Generally, the need for women's participation in conflict resolution was recognised. For instance, Ms Olfat Mahmoud of the PWHO stated: "Because only the military are involved, political solutions never last. Take the water issue – only women can see it properly. Men look at the big issues, women see the details. When women are excluded from

14. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency in charge of providing stateless Palestinians with social services otherwise not accessible to them.
15. This war began on 6 June 1982, when the Israeli Defence Force invaded southern Lebanon.

the process of conflict resolution, you don't see the details which would support peace." And she added: "Security must be bottom-up. People know when their needs are met and they feel secure."

Reality, however, was far from what would be needed on this score. Women in any kind of political office were scarce, and were often women who either lacked clout or had chosen not to represent women's issues. The political structure was hampered by the confessional system and difficult to change for the same reason. For instance, Ms. Zoya Rouhana of KAFA explained, the women's wing of Hezbollah was not in favour of a law on violence against women (as Islam respects women and all you have to do is abide by it).

Several interlocutors underlined the need for women themselves to do more in order to change the system. This process could be started immediately, said Ms. Mahmoud: "We should not leave the floor open to the fundamentalists. They are not popular. Fundamentalism does not go deep with the women, who miss the pleasures of, for example, dancing and will take any chance to enjoy themselves once they are outside their community. But inside the community, fundamentalist gestures make living easier. For instance, some relief items are distributed only to women who are veiled."

Ms. Rola Masri of the Collective for Research and Training on Development – Action (CRTD.A), underlined that "women have to be held accountable for discriminating between male and female children". This gender division was later cemented through a hidden curriculum in schools, pictures in the school books, etc.

One positive example did come up during the interviews, but it did not concern the opening up of space to women within the male-dominated field of security-related conflict resolution. Ms. Joumana Merei of the RDFL mentioned an incident where women had been "able to change how people think around honour crimes": A girl in the Bekaa valley had married without the consent of her family, which threatened to kill her for it. Then the women of the village had gone to her home and surrounded it, thereby physically preventing family members from hurting her, until they were made to think otherwise.

Thus, women had been able to mobilise within the realm of family matters; as we have seen, violence against women is still classified as a family affair in Lebanon, beyond the reach of state institutions. The next step would be for women to make their voices heard also when it comes to conflict resolution in the broader sense. If waiting to be invited to political negotiating tables proves futile, women may have to invite themselves, in a way similar to that which happened in the Bekaa valley.

# IV. Conclusions

• The link between domestic violence and armed conflict was very clear in the case of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, less uniform in the Lebanese society at large;

• Of the phases of conflict, the link to domestic violence was the most obvious in the post-conflict period;

• During conflict, there were contradictory patterns: on one hand, families would be more united than in non-war times, on the other, existing patterns of violence could be enhanced;

• The notion that the pattern of domestic violence could serve as an early warning sign of upcoming conflict was not supported in the Lebanese context;

• Secondary effects of armed conflicts, such as the divisiveness of the society and the confessional quotas introduced to balance this, affect the possibilities of women to challenge the system and increase their rights in a negative way;

• The rise of fundamentalism noted in many parts of the world, partly in response to Western policies regarding a number of unresolved global conflicts, pushes the rights of women backwards;

• The regional conflict situation in the Middle East also has direct, negative effects on the possibilities of Lebanese women to empower themselves;

• International recognition of the need to engage women in processes of conflict resolution and peace building has had no effect on the ground in Lebanon.

# List of organisations and institutions interviewed

**IMC - International Medical Corps**, is working with Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. They are working to provide health care as well as psychological or social aid. Mr. Colin Lee is Lebanon Country Director of IMC. The interview took place in Beirut on March 16, 2010.

**IWSAW-LAU – Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World**. The history of the Institute is closely linked to that of the first women's college in the Middle East, the America Junior College for Women. Ms. Anita Nassar is Assistant Director of IWSAW. The interview took place in Beirut on March 15, 2010.

**UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund.**
In collaboration with the National Commission for Lebanese Women, UNFPA is supporting the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325. Asma Kurdahi is Assistant Representative of the UNFPA in Beirut. The interview took place in Beirut on March 15, 2010.

**UOB – University of Balamand** is a private university located in Beirut. The university is committed to the development and democratization of the region and works actively to teach human rights and a Christian-Muslim understanding. Ms. Habbouba Aoun at the Faculty of Health Sciences has been doing research on violence among children at schools, and she has also been involved with the Landmines Resource Center for Lebanon. The interview took place in Beirut on March 10, 2010.

**USJ – University of Saint Joseph** is a private university located in Beirut. Its main focus is on medical education. Dr. Jamele Khoury is an instructor and researcher at the school of social work. The interview took place in Beirut on March 8, 2010.

**Organizations working with Palestinians:**
**Association Najdeh** - is registered with the Ministry of the Interior as a Lebanese NGO, headquartered in Beirut. The organization is working with Palestinian women refugees and their families. Najdeh's vision is a Palestinian community enjoying national and human rights, social justice and equality between women and men. Bothaina Saad is its Project Coordinator working with domestic violence issues. The interview took place in Beirut on March 11, 2010.

**PWHO – Palestinian Women's Humanitarian Organization** is located in Bourj al- Barajneh, a Palestinian camp, in Beirut. The organization's main focus is to promote empowerment of women, as well as improving the psychological and physical wellbeing for women and children in the camp. Ms. Olfat Mahmoud is the Director of the organization. The interview took place in Beirut on March 10, 2010.

**Lebanese Organizations:**
**CRTD.A - Collective for Research and Training on Development – Action**. The organization works all over Lebanon to promote gender equality, as well as awareness of women's invisible and informal work. The organization also works to change the Nationality Law in Lebanon. Ms. Rola Masri is its Nationality Campaign Coordinator. The interview took place in Beirut on March 15, 2010.

**KAFA (Enough)** is directly addressing gender-based violence in Lebanon. The organization has set up a hotline for women in need. Ms. Zoya Rouhana is the Director of the organization. The interview took place in Beirut on March 12, 2010.

**LCW – Lebanese Council of Women** is working towards a unified, sovereign Lebanon, where all citizens -men and women- have equal rights and opportunities. Ms. Abla S. Kadi is their Social Developer and Project Coordinator. The interview took place in Beirut on March 12, 2010.

**LECORVAW –Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women.** The organization deals directly with on-going cases of violence against women. It also works to raise awareness and lobbies for legal reforms. Ms. Laura Sfeir is the President of the organization. The interview took place in Tripoli on March 16, 2010.

**NCLW – National Commission for Lebanese Women.** Ms. Zeina Mezher is Project Manager and Program Coordinator for WE PASS (Women Empowerment: Peaceful Action for Security and Stability), a cooperation between the UNFPA and NCLW. The project was launched after the July war in 2006, targeting communities affected by the war, in cooperation with municipal councils, women committees, and social development service centres of the selected communities. The interview took place in Beirut on March 15, 2010.

**RDFL – Rassemblement Démocratique des Femmes Lébanaises.** Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering is a secular women´s organization working towards gender equality, and to harmonize local legislation with international agreements. Ms Joumana Merei is Coordinator of Domestic Violence Against Women at RDFL. The interview took place in Beirut on March 10, 2010.

# Questions handed out before the interviews

What type of a discussion on gender-based violence (GBV) do you have today in Lebanon? As you know, one of the aims of "Kvinna till Kvinna" is to highlight the potential of women´s participation in conflict resolution and peace building. Do you have a similar debate in Lebanon?

**Lebanon has suffered recurrent political violence during several decades.**
**Against the backdrop of this history:**
Are there periods during which you have observed an increase/decrease in GBV?
If so, can these fluctuations be related to any of the phases of surrounding political conflict
– pre-conflict, during conflict, post-conflict?
Can you identify any specific factors which would be relevant in this context?
What would be the immediate causes of increased GBV and what would make it go down?

**Assuming that there is a link between gender-based violence and the level of armed conflict in the surrounding society. From your perspective:**
What measures, not yet taken, could you identify which could serve to deal with the situation?
Are there, for instance, political, legal and/or psychological actions which could influence the situation and serve to alleviate the problem?

**Aspects relating to the type of environment in which Lebanese women´s organizations are situated:**
Has the experience gathered by your organization on GBV, its causes and possible remedies, been tapped by political actors dealing with conflict resolution?
Are there ways in which you could contribute to a more peaceful society that have not been taken advantage of?
If so, what actions need to be taken for this to happen?

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The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation supports women during times of war and conflict to increase women's power and influence.

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