Writing the History of the Lebanese Civil War from a Gendered Perspective

Nour Hattit

This article was born from memory. The memory of a child who witnessed the devastation etched into her father's thigh in the form of a bullet wound from the Lebanese Civil War, and the burns across his face that erased some of his features from when a fuel tank exploded in front of him while he was serving as a soldier in the Lebanese Army's Sixth Brigade.

Writing imposed itself on me, compelling me to explore the political distance between myself and my father. I had not anticipated the difficulty my research into the history of the Lebanese Civil War would bring. While my father often used his own past to lend legitimacy to certain views, I approached the subject without nostalgia, driven instead by my desire to look beyond the narrow sectarian box I was born into.

In school, history stopped with the Ottoman period. Time itself seemed to freeze there across all Lebanese schools: the Civil War had no face, no place, no trace. I am not an advocate of a single, unified history of the war. I was born after it ended, only to realize later that memory itself remains the driving force of the present in this land. Every community clings to a mythologized past, mobilizing memory to reinforce the very sectarian enclosures that still shape our lives.

When I listened to my father's stories of the war, I assumed it was a war reserved only for men. Women were rarely mentioned, except in a few autobiographies I read later or in scattered oral accounts that surfaced years afterward. Women were always pushed into the background, into the shadows, as though the erasure of their stories was itself a deliberate feature of every faction's collective memory project.

And so the question "How does gender shape the organization of historical knowledge?" became

my entry point for imagining a different understanding of the Lebanese Civil War, one that brings to light the groups and experiences sidelined by dominant narratives.

Reading Means Re-reading

I am not here to revisit the theoretical debates around gender and the organization of historical knowledge. What interests me is how "feminist historiography" raised questions that fueled my curiosity to read and research the war: Why must we view history through women's eyes? Did women participate in the Lebanese Civil War? And in what ways?

The Civil War, which dragged on for fifteen years, was largely told as a sectarian conflict, written from the perspective of dominant powers and grounded in their experiences. Women's diverse roles were largely ignored. And when mentioned, it was often through stereotypes that reduced their contributions to private, domestic acts of care. Yet the testimonies I present here reveal otherwise, proving their voices were far more than "personal details."

In "Women in the Lebanese Civil War – The Power of Guns," Dr. Rosemary Sayigh recounts the story of a Sunni Muslim woman who, alongside her -18year-old daughter, joined the Red Cross to provide relief during the war. The mother describes her harrowing encounters at checkpoints, particularly in Christian-controlled areas, where her family name — tied to one of Lebanon's founding political figures — repeatedly saved her and her children from being killed.

Her daughter recalls how tireless her mother was in hosting displaced families, providing them with food and shelter, caring for her own children, and tending to the wounded. She recounts one day when, on a simple errand to buy coffee, an explosion erupted. By sheer luck, she survived, shielded by a nearby pillar. As the smoke cleared, she saw corpses and bleeding survivors. Instinctively, she grabbed headscarves from nearby women and used them to bandage wounds, trying to save whomever she could.

Understanding women's roles in war requires dismantling the binary that separates the private from the public sphere. When women's experiences — with their bodies, lives, and relationships in wartime — are brought to the center of history, they become political and social issues, even those linked to care work. Feminist historiography is founded on this very shift. It insists that women's stories are not marginal but central to grasping

the true impact of their diverse participation in the war, especially given their erasure from official narratives.

Lebanese author Regina Sneifer, in her memoir "Je dépose les armes – une femme dans la guerre du Liban," tells of her experience as a woman who lived the Civil War, fought within a Christian militia, and ultimately resigned, leaving the war and the country behind.

In another example cited by Dr. Sayigh, a -13year-old girl named Michelle, from the Ashrafieh district, recalls how she was drawn into the war. Her father was a member of the Kataeb Party, led by Pierre Gemayel. With a checkpoint stationed outside their home, she was recruited to handle radio communications for the party, later receiving weapons training and carrying a gun.

On the other side of the divided city, in West Beirut, Dalal al-Bizri, in her book "Journals of the Lebanese Civil War," recounts her involvement with the Lebanese Communist Party and her collaboration with Palestinian factions, even participating directly on the frontlines. She describes how her responsibilities extended beyond cooking for comrades to executing external missions — her war work far from confined to the domestic sphere.

Women were also at the forefront of peace activism, like teacher-turned-activist Iman Khalifeh, who called for protests against the atrocities committed by militias. Though her efforts were largely suppressed by the armed groups that dominated public space, her activism resonated abroad, sparking solidarity demonstrations in London, Paris, and New York demanding an end to the war.

The Importance of Oral Testimony in Feminist Historiography

More than two decades after the war ended, the organization

Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) published a groundbreaking report in June 2022 based on women's testimonies gathered through interviews. When asked why their stories had never been documented before, the women responded: "Because no one had ever asked us."

The report bears the title: "They Raped Us in Every Possible Way, in Ways You Can't Imagine: Gendered Crimes During the Lebanese Civil Wars." It sparked public outrage, exposing the systematic use of sexual violence by militias during the war.

This report reminded me of the centrality of oral testimony in feminist historiography. Oral history is not an optional supplement; it is essential to rewriting the history of the Civil War from a perspective that reveals the richness of women's experiences. The report underscores that women's memories — whether personal or collective — expose the dynamics of power and domination within the war narrative, while opening space for discussions about transitional justice.

How Does a Gendered Reading of the Civil War Shape Our Future?

Re-reading the Civil War through a gendered lens helped me understand how militias and the powers that documented history perpetuated exclusion and discrimination in the society I lived in for most of my life.

For me, feminist historiography is vital as a woman who dared to step outside the cloak of sectarian identity I was raised in. It provides tools to analyze both public and private spheres without silencing women's roles. It gives me language to craft a post-sectarian discourse, one that demands justice for everyone marginalized, excluded, or victimized by wartime atrocities, regardless of their sectarian background.

As I wrote this article, I remembered the words of French writer Jean Genet: "Writing is the last refuge of those who have betrayed." I wrote because I betrayed — I betrayed the first narrative, the narrative of my sect and my surroundings — in favor of what little remains of this homeland.