

Women of Lebanon: interviews with champions for peace

NELDA LATEEF

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Women of Lebanon is an interesting addition to literature on women in the Middle East. A collection of interviews by journalist Nelda Lateef, the book looks at war and peace in Lebanon, as lived by 42 women.

The author has not limited herself to those women involved in formal politics. The result is an interesting examination of the different ways in which these women work to make Lebanon into the country they believe it should be, a nation of multiple cultures and religions. The book includes an interesting range of careers amongst its interviewees. It is divided into five sections: Arts and Literature; Education; Government, Law, and Social Work; Media, Communications, and Business; and Medicine. Lateef has organised the book in the form of transcripts of her interviews, which serves to allow the different women to emerge as individuals. In her introduction Lateef writes, "I sought, therefore, in my interviews with these accomplished women, to plumb their lives contextually - as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, career women - and not simply, to abstract causes and effects of seventeen years of bloodshed". Her questions are kept to a minimum and are very open, leaving the interviewee to determine the tone of her own interview. This is the great strength of the book. In reading the 42 interviews, the reader is aware of 42 separate women with different priorities and interests. Some focus quite personally on their roles as wives, or on their careers. Others choose to discuss primarily the broad issues of Lebanon, the war and the current peace. By choosing not to include politicians to the exclusion of others or focus only on women's formal political activities, the author presents a much more textured portrait of the women and the integration of Lebanon's history into their own identities.

The shortcoming of the book is in the limited scope of women the author has chosen to interview. Although they span a variety of careers, they are not diverse geographically or economically. To be fair, it was not Lateef's intention to portray a cross-section of Lebanese women. She writes in her introduction that understanding the culture of the élite in a society should be of no less worth and importance than understanding the masses". While Lateef has done an excellent job of giving us women of different careers and interests within that élite, the book might have been more interesting if she had widened her interview base somewhat. Of the 42 women interviewed, only a few of the women who currently live in Lebanon (several of the women live in the United States or Europe) live outside of Beirut. One of the most interesting interviews in the book is with Anissa Najjar, the President of the Village Welfare Society, about her work with rural women in Lebanon. A few more similar interviews, looking at life for women outside of Beirut, would have given the book greater depth.

It is worth noting that Lateef has achieved impressive religious diversity in her interviews. She includes women from all the many religious communities in Lebanon. More importantly, the women represent different religious lifestyle choices. In some interviews women make no mention of their own religious identification. Other women, such as Rabab Sadr Charafeddine, sister of the disappeared Shi'ite Muslim leader Imam Musa Sadr, discuss the important role of their religious communities in their lives.

Lateef writes that "What makes these women special is that they have all risen above the pull of confessionalism and embraced humanity. They are Lebanon's salvation. With their considerable contributions, what is happening in Lebanon today is nothing short of the rebirth of a nation, reclaiming what it lost during the period 1975 through 1990. These women are determined to defeat the intolerance and narrow-mindedness that resulted in such massive death and displacement". They are an impressive group of women, and *Women of Lebanon* allows them to tell their own stories, both about themselves and about their country. These stories provide the reader with illuminating insights into an influential part of Lebanese society.

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