

# Gender Mainstreaming Forced Migration Research

■ Guita Hourani and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous

Guita Hourani, Associate Director, Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC)  
Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC)

Doing research on sensitive topics<sup>1</sup> can be a difficult undertaking even in the most conducive of circumstances. Attempting to integrate a gendered perspective while studying migration during the Summer 2006 War in Lebanon, has certainly proven to be daunting.<sup>2</sup> In the following study, the seemingly insurmountable difficulties involved in carrying out applied social science in wartime and during the immediate postwar period will be briefly portrayed. Special emphasis will be placed on the difficulties that the Lebanese Emigration Research Center faced in obtaining valid data on the experiences of women fleeing a war situation.

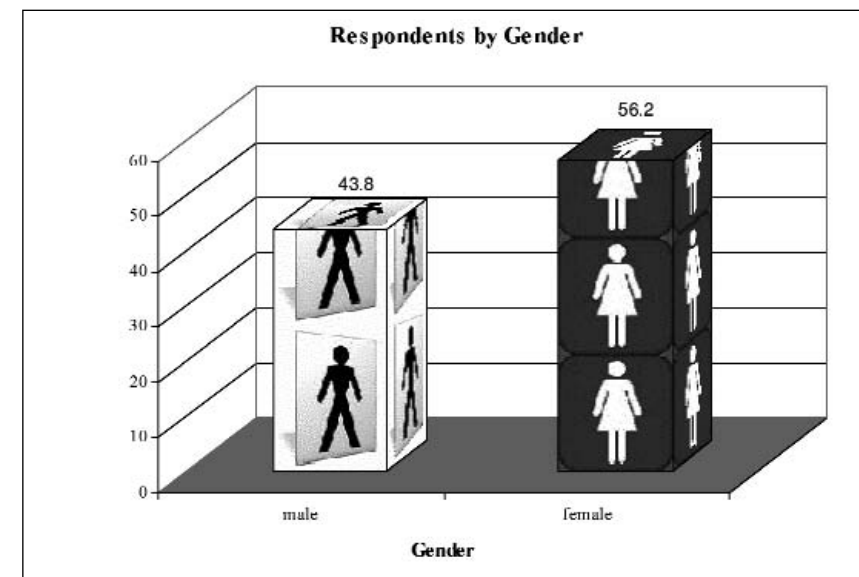
## The Intentions of the Evacuation Study

This report is concerned with both the re-migration and emigration of Lebanese residents and migrants during the Summer 2006 War. It was initiated during the last days of the war and completed over a month after the ceasefire. It aimed at understanding the impact of the war — as it was unfolding — on two target study groups, i.e. those Lebanese expatriates (dual nationals and permanent foreign visa holders) who were living (semi-) permanently in the country, as well as those who were only temporarily in the country between July 12 and August 14, 2006, at the height of hostilities.

Firstly, this study offers an immediate insight into the assisted departure of Lebanese expatriates and foreigners of Lebanese origin during and following the war. It deals with the situation in Lebanon as a place of departure, as well as with events and developments in the transit and host countries. It also incorporates a comprehensive media overview and feedback from a handful of embassies.

Secondly, the study has also permitted those forced to leave to give accounts of their personal experiences during and immediately after the war. These insights into the evacuees' opinions and assessments of their own situation with respect to Lebanon are unfiltered by the problematic political events which occurred in the months immediately after the cease-fire. With regard to the dynamics of the highly fluid political, economic, and social situation in Lebanon, the study is now definitely of historical significance. It is a spotlight — as it would seem — on a now fading period in Lebanese history.

With respect to the retelling of personal experiences during the Summer 2006 War, emphasis was placed on discovering what it meant to be a woman in a country at war. A special section of the questionnaire developed for this



1- Percentage of respondents by gender (43.8 % male and 56.2% female participants in our survey)

study was dedicated to gender issues. This section included nine questions clustered around the following themes: marital status, difficulties encountered while leaving Lebanon, and the psychological effects of the war. At the end of the questionnaire, both males and females were asked to respond freely to an open-ended question that rounded up the survey; and a few actually did so. The self-administered questionnaire helped to provide information on the Lebanese who left, concerning the impact of war on their decision to leave, on their health, as well as the conditions necessary to convince them to consider returning to their country of origin. Respondents were assured of anonymity in order to encourage them to be frank.

The questionnaire used in this study was augmented by official national and international accounts of the evacuation of Lebanese citizens, highlighting reports that included information on the experiences of dual nationals. It also reviewed news stories in six major Lebanese newspapers, and examined the international print media and broadcast coverage.

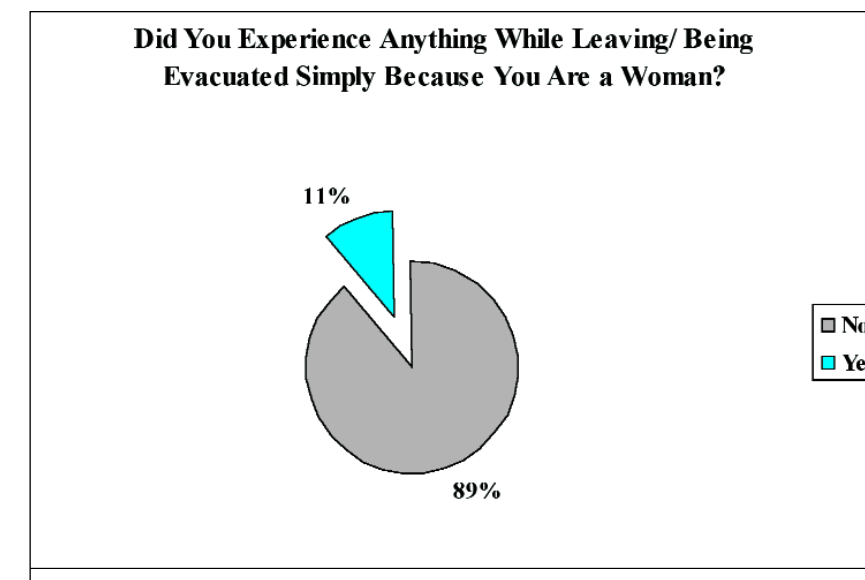
Despite the good intentions of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center, documented in our attempt to discover and analyze the specific

experiences of female evacuees and migrants, the results of this study contradicted our expectations. Considering the high percentage of female participants in the survey process, it is indeed surprising that the war experiences reported by both men and women seemed to be quite homogenous.

More women (56.2%) than men (43.8%) completed the questionnaire. Obviously, this was not considered indicative of the actual percentages of women and men who left or were evacuated, rather that there was a greater interest by women in responding to the survey. As shall be illustrated below, very few female respondents reported on negative experiences that occurred due to being women. On the contrary, several of the gendered experiences were extremely positive, highlighting the protection that Lebanese women should be able to expect in a crisis.

## Quantitative Results of the Survey

The majority, or 70 percent, of women surveyed were married, while 26 percent were single, and 4 percent were widowed. Most women (89%) said that they had not had any experiences that could be ascribed to gender alone, however, 11% indicated that they had been confronted with a predicament that was relevant to gender.



2- Experiences related exclusively to being female

One woman said that she was faced with the probability of not being able to take her husband with her when departing because he did not have the proper papers. Another woman was unable to reach any of the evacuation sites because she was stranded in the south of the country. Both problems, not directly related to gender, were solved and the women were evacuated.

None of the women surveyed, married or single, stated that they had experienced difficulty in convincing husbands, fathers, or male heads of family to take them with them when leaving. Similarly, none were denied assistance in evacuating, refused entry into a country after evacuation, or sought a change in legal status after arriving at their destinations. Most importantly, none of the women gave a positive response to the question asking whether they had gender-specific fears about returning to Lebanon.

A few questions were related to psychologically stressful situations during evacuation or forced migration during the war. These questions were not meant to measure the presence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which requires a proper medical evaluation, but merely to gain some insight into the impact of the fighting on women's ability to cope and function. Most of the women (60%) said that they did not feel significant residual stress following their departure, but (30%) indicated they did. Most women (59.3%) felt that the war had not affected their ability to function; however, some (18.5%) said that it affected their ability to do their jobs, while others indicated that it affected their ability to take care of their families (11.5%), or even themselves (11.1%). In one individual case, a female participant pointed out what it felt like while leaving Lebanon on the land route via Syria, i.e., that she was shocked at how sexist this neighboring country proved to be. Two other women pointed out the positive aspects of being female, emphasizing that they enjoyed special care because one was nursing an infant and the other was in the late stages of pregnancy.

Based on the anecdotal evidence the

authors gathered outside the survey process, e.g. having lived through the Summer 2006 War and shared either firsthand or secondhand knowledge of migration experiences during the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War, the results mentioned above must be considered skewed. For future reference, it will be necessary to evaluate why so few women were willing to acknowledge the specifically gendered aspects of the evacuation process. However, it is indeed likely that the nature of the questions, in the highly sensitive setting in which they were asked, led to these inaccurate responses.

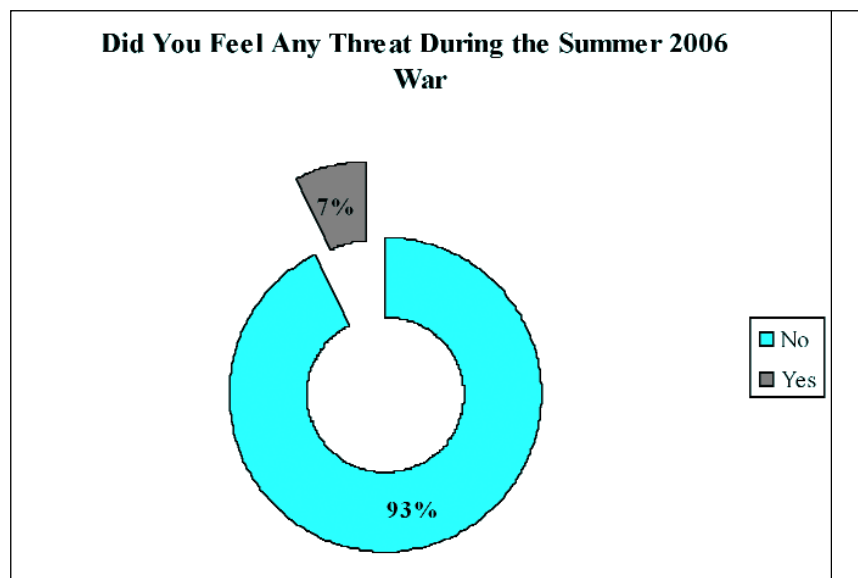
**Dual nationality was often experienced as both a blessing and a curse during the war...**

**Qualitative Results: Women Relate their Personal Experiences**

Interestingly enough, very few female respondents used the open-ended question at the conclusion of the questionnaire to reflect on their experiences as women. However, the limited results do offer a window into the war and its impact on the lives of girls and women.

The following passages have been lifted verbatim from the evacuation report in order to provide the reader with a feeling for what it was like to leave Lebanon against one's will, often for the second or third time.

The Summer 2006 War led to devastating consequences — especially in the immediately affected areas — for people of all ages. It brought to the fore the experiences of 1975-1990 civil war and threw the "Lebanese dilem-



3- Threatening experiences as a woman

ma" once again into the public arena. It reminded many of the terror of 1982 "where I lost my husband who died instantly due to the brutal non-stop Israeli bombing that affected even the basement floors, where civilians were hiding. Many of my family members and relatives, including myself, suffered severe wounds because of shrapnel from the cluster bombs,"<sup>3</sup> said one of the women respondents. Those directly affected by the systematic blanket bombing "came to understand very well the feeling of losing one's house and becoming a refugee in your own country,"<sup>4</sup> she added.

The mass evacuation affected practically all foreign nationals, including Lebanese migrants with dual nationalities. It was a huge undertaking that included the governments of a variety of countries of immigration, their embassies and international organizations. It required precise synchronization and the open arms of neighboring safe havens.

For those fleeing, evacuation by road was a difficult drive over dangerous terrain to Damascus and Jordan, or by sea to Cyprus and Turkey. These countries became safe havens either through official agreements made by foreign governments or the unofficial action of Lebanese refugees themselves.

"It is quite a humiliating experience, when you have to leave everything behind, put your entire world into one backpack. Even more humiliating is when you have to wait hours at the border until some illiterate and useless bureaucrat, smoking and drinking coffee, signs your papers over his big belly. It is also humiliating to arrive at your destination to find a plastic bag with a sandwich, a carton of milk, another of juice and a cookie for the road ahead, handed to you by a young military boy, with good will in his heart, but pity in his eyes,"<sup>5</sup> said one female evacuee.

"When I left Lebanon, Israeli warplanes were targeting the roads. My kids and I actually saw the damage right in front of us. This proved an extremely dramatic experience for my kids to go through,"<sup>6</sup> said another woman describing the harrowing trip her family endured, but as defiantly as so many then added, "however we will never give up on our country, and we do plan to return soon on a visit..."<sup>7</sup> "We, as Lebanese, have been through many hard times in the past, but we refuse to think that this is the end. We are hopeful of being able to invest in Lebanon and we always

keep an eye for opportunities to move back,"<sup>8</sup> said the same woman on her aspirations to invest and return.

Dual nationality was often experienced as both a blessing and a curse during the war; it split up families and created envies in some, while providing a means of escape to others. However, according to the study, dual citizenship fired up a debate in the countries of immigration. Controversy began when the public in some countries, Australia and Canada for example, learned the 'stunning truth' about the number of their own nationals trapped in Lebanon when war broke out: approximately 20,000 Australians and 40,000 Canadians.

Along with the massive cost of evacuation, these dual citizens, or "hyphenated Lebanese", left behind a nation under siege to arrive back home and face questions on their loyalty and merit. The debate was especially virulent with respect to Lebanese-Canadian and Lebanese-Australian residents of Lebanon; i.e. should the considerable expenses needed to evacuate them ultimately be taken out of domestic taxpayers' pockets? This led to a rekindling of debate on the issue of dual citizenship and the rights and responsibilities of dual nationals living (semi-)permanently in their countries of origin. According to the Canadian Embassy, these polemics will in no way threaten the Canadian citizenship status of Lebanese dual nationals living long periods in Lebanon. However, discussions have indeed begun within the government with respect to setting up a commission or study group in order to reassess the privileges and obligations of dual nationals living permanently outside the country.<sup>9</sup>

**It is quite a humiliating experience, when you have to leave everything behind, put your entire world into one backpack.**

Although the love of Lebanon runs deep in most of the women questioned, the security of life abroad is always appreciated, "You then get the surprise of your life as you are treated decently as a human being: a host government giving you health insurance, medications, insurance against accidents, and an allowance,"<sup>10</sup> said a woman who seems to have lost all faith in Lebanon. She further emphasized, "I hope I can regain faith again in this country but seeing how it was demolished because of one person's

miscalculations and seeing this person treated like God, I doubt it."<sup>11</sup>

"I don't see myself returning permanently to Lebanon in the near future since my kids will probably be better off in the US for their education and the normal process of life. Maybe in 25-30 years I will return to Lebanon, when

it is time for me to retire,"<sup>12</sup> said one woman referring to the discouragement caused by political and economic instability in Lebanon.

There were, however, a few examples of respondents who did indeed bring up gender related issues pertaining to migration. One woman, who grew up in the West, reflected on what it means to live most of your life outside Lebanon, and thus become unwilling to accept the injustices inherent in society back home. Highlighting the differences in mentality as one concern important to women, this female respondent said that despite the war, "I may consider returning to Lebanon to live, but until the Lebanese government and general public politically, legally, and socially accept the children of Lebanese women as equal to the children of Lebanese men, I'd rather not live there permanently but consider living there semi-permanently."<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly, the war and evacuation brought out emotions simmering underneath the surface. "War is evil and wicked. There are never winners in war. The Summer 2006 War caused me to question my life making me realize how valuable life really is... war was a trigger for me. It sent me searching for bigger and better chances to make my existence more fulfilling and meaningful. Yes, that meant leaving Lebanon and going back to where I was born and came from, South Africa,"<sup>14</sup> said a woman intent on leaving Lebanon and changing the course of her life.

This study also surveyed the conditions necessary for permanent return. "Certainly the experience that I endured last summer will affect any revisit with my family," said one female respondent. She also added: "the current political instability and economic situation are very discouraging to say the least. However, I do sincerely hope that the situation will stabilize and UN forces together with the Lebanese army can control the southern borders and hopefully prosperity and peace will endure."<sup>15</sup>

"The war itself may affect the decision to return in the short term," said another woman questioned. "However in the long term, the most important element that affects the decision to return is political stability. Political stability drives economic stability, which may then create economic prosperity... an equitable political system, and equilibrium based on an authentic representation of the people in the central power. This would absolutely attract

most of the Lebanese to return, whether to live permanently or to invest or even to visit frequently,"<sup>16</sup> she concluded.

In summary, doing applied social science in a crisis situation offers enormous opportunities to understand the drastic impact that war has on women and men. However, it will take further discussion in order to determine how to avoid the apparently skewed results that this survey was confronted with. Designing, developing and implementing qualitative and quantitative research methods when at war can lead to new insights with respect to gender roles in the Middle East; it can result in knowledge unattainable after the fact, when peace and stability have returned. In order to achieve this goal, social scientists will need a complete new bag of tools, better suited to understand the situation appropriately. We are now at the beginning of a protracted but promising discussion on the merits and drawbacks of gendered research "under fire".

**... war was a trigger for me. It sent me searching for bigger and better chances to make my existence more fulfilling and meaningful.**

### Endnotes

1. See *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*, London: Sage, for insights into the methods used by the Lebanese Emigration Research Center in this survey.
2. Hourani, G. (2006). *The Impact of the Summer 2006 War on Migration in Lebanon: Emigration, Re-Migration, Evacuation, and Returning*, Zouk Mosbeh: NDU Press.
3. Guita Hourani, *The Impact of the Summer 2006 War on Migration in Lebanon: Emigration, Remigration, Evacuation and Return*, Notre Dame University Press, Lebanon, 2006, p. 96.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 67-72.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 96.