

Lebanon's women leading change

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The last decade has made it clear that women are a key resource for promoting development, peace and stability. There is strong evidence that women's empowerment and gender equality are linked with harmony and solidity in society. In particular, when women influence decisions about war and peace and take the lead against extremism in their communities, it is more probable that crises will be resolved without resorting to violence.

A causal relationship is not yet clear, but it is evident that gender equality is a better indicator of a state's peacefulness than other factors like democracy or gross domestic product. Similarly, gender inequality has been revealed as an indicator of violent conflict in a number of empirical studies, whether measuring conflict between states or within states.

Women experience war differently from men. They experience firsthand the impact that conflicts, increased militarization and violent extremism have on their communities, their families, their children and themselves. They are often the first to identify signs of radicalization or evidence of sliding into civil wars, and act to contribute to the transition from the cult of war to the culture of peace.

As the world continues to seek solutions to build sustainable peace, marches by Lebanese women in the last few weeks serve as a reminder of the many ways women are working to prevent conflict and secure such a peace.

Whether they are actively involved in street confrontations or simply going about their daily routine, major questions emerge. What does a mother say to her son when he plays with a toy gun? How does she teach her child what she has learned from war? How much courage does it take for a woman to break the glass ceiling and stand at the forefront of maintaining national unity and peace?

Analysis shows that strengthening women's political and social participation diminishes the chances of conflict relapse after war. Research demonstrates that women's inclusive approach to governance in postconflict environments and the perception of trust associated with them in turn correlates with conflict prevention indicators.

Lebanese women marched in Jal al-Dib, and then Ain al-Rummaneh and Chiyah, speaking out about the threat of sectarian conflict. This is exemplary of how women can bridge divides and mobilize coalitions against fears of sectarian tensions in neighborhoods that used to be on the opposite sides of sectarian demarcation lines during the horrific 15-year Civil War. Christians and Muslims participated in the women-led rally, in a display of coexistence and solidarity against sectarianism and violence.

The march, welcomed wholeheartedly, demonstrated women's ability to promote dialogue and build trust among their communities. The distrust that once existed was gone and fear was broken by the will of Lebanese women and their persistence in maintaining peace. The women in the march were mothers who survived the Civil War and refuse to see their children, and the nation, go through it again.

In the city of Sidon, Lebanese women marched from Al-Qanaya roundabout to the Elia intersection under the slogan "Women against war, corruption, discrimination and intimidation." It was followed by another women's protest coordinated by "Women Uprising," which began Saturday from Moseitbeh, to demand a fast and feasible alternative to the waste crisis and a better future for the next generation.

Women have taken further steps to preserve national unity, with courageous actions that prove they have not forgotten war and violence and do not want the next generation to be victims of it again. The Burj al-Ghazal and Al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq rally on Nov. 30 was not the only activity Saturday, but it was still as effective and necessary to reaffirm the unity of two Beirut areas and communities that have different views of how the protests should be approached. These clashing views have built up into conflicts that have ignited frequently between supporters and non-supporters of the uprising, in Riad al-Solh Square, Martyrs' Square and the "Ring Bridge."

Today and after all the marches, Lebanese women have shown a stubborn determination to preserve the nation's unity and prevent strife. They have put themselves on the front line, refusing to let sectarian conflict degenerate into a war once again. Standing strong, they have raised issues that are vital for peace.

They have broken the conflict trap through their broad societal participation. They moved into the streets to make sure that they were heard, "killing them with kindness" and showing how unity and peace come hand in hand with love and accepting one another.

Lebanese women have been able to give the social uprising a sense of peacefulness and warmth. They have been being a bridge of unity that joins communities that without doubt have chosen peace.

After many nights of tension that have brought out collective memories of war, Lebanese women are leading the show of unity, in the hope of not allowing history to repeat itself. Chanting "No war, no violence, no sectarianism," they have demonstrated that what is crucial is not to learn about the past, but to learn from it.

Lebanese women, acting as a unifying factor against conflict, have proved that they know how to defuse hate and exchange it with great love!

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