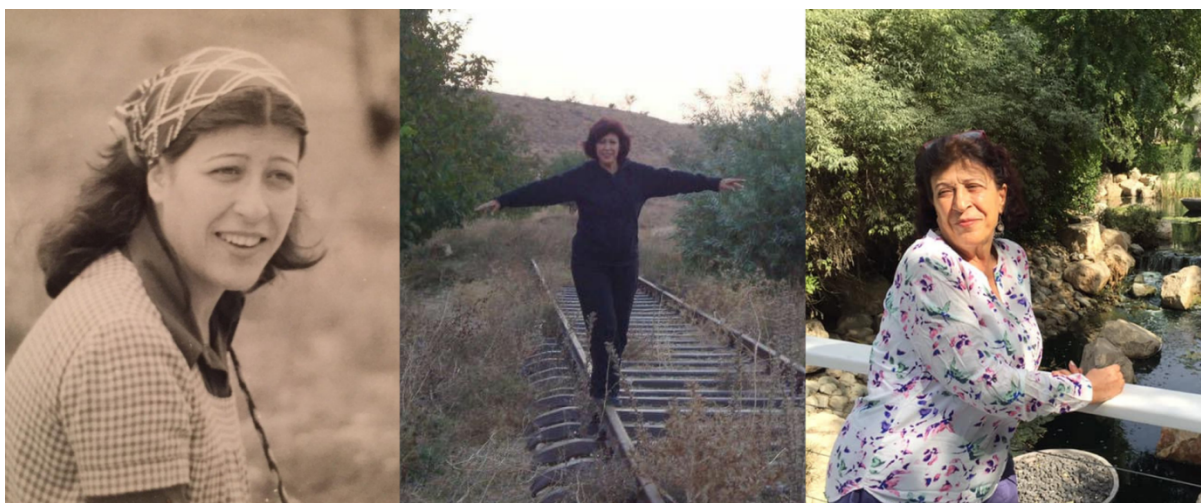




The metamorphosis of a female fighter into a peacebuilder



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23 April 2019: The story you're about to read is that of armed conflict and gender, ideologies and the business of war, self-criticism and healing, peacebuilding and education. It is that of a woman who went from being a fighter, to fighting for peace. It is a story that proves how easy it is to get caught at a young age in the labyrinth of war, and how hard it is to detox oneself.

"I practice nonviolence and believe in the power of peacebuilding. I want to live in peace and help young men and women do so. I tell my story hoping to be a catalyst for change."

Salwa Saad is a retired Lebanese educator. Instead of resting, she takes every possible chance to promote the role of women in peace education and peacebuilding as well as convincing vulnerable youth not to fall for sectarian discourses that end in armed conflict.

"I hate killing", she told me when I started the interview with a perhaps rude question. I asked whether she got involved in killings directly. She answered: "I didn't kill. Something inside me prevented me from taking lives although I was as good as any man in shooting... Some female fighters were notorious like their male counterparts. They still don't show any remorse... As for me, I cried for years."

She added: "When we became combatants, we cancelled the others' rights; we didn't perceive them as humans... After the war (1975 – 1990), I met fighters from the other end. It wasn't easy to reach out to people who used to be enemies. They had their cause and I had mine. I disagree with their thinking, but they have another version of the story of the war."

A villager in the war

Salwa was a rebel child in a mountain village. At the age of ten she experienced gender inequality without knowing this discrimination had a name. Her conservative father sent her to a public school whereas her brother was enrolled in a private one despite the fact that she was a better pupil.

At the age of 14 or 15, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) that had headquarters in her village started military training for young women. **She used to watch secretly and dreamt of being among them, out of her support for the Palestinian cause and admiration to the equality between male and female freedom fighters.**

Salwa is Muslim Shiite by birth. When I told her that I have to mention this to help non-Lebanese readers understand the motives of a young woman in a sectarian and still divided country, she was reluctant out of her secularism and refusal to be defined by inherited traits she didn't choose. She only agreed when I told her I would write she was "Muslim by birth" instead of "Muslim".

Early in the morning of Sunday April 13th, 1975, the Kataeb (Phalanges) Christian militiamen opened fire on a bus carrying Palestinians passing in the

suburb of Ain Al-Rummaneh, killing over 30 people. Retaliation happened shortly after on a nearby church. The war erupted.

Salwa was then enrolled at the public university studying to be an educator. Shortly after, some communist colleagues invited her and other female students to visit their party where she would later sleep over by herself in the ammunition room.



Salwa in 1976

A fighter

At first, female volunteers were assigned "womanly missions" such as cooking, cleaning and communication. Within months, and due to the growing scale of hostilities, the women had no choice but to receive compulsory military training.

Salwa was sent to areas of active conflict, sometimes as the only female fighter, and defied objections on the presence of women or "skirts" in military fields. Here too she refused to accept sexism, especially in a leftist environment that preached equality. She objected to the exclusion of female

fighters from political meetings. She was "in charge of the girls because their parents trusted me." When I asked how conservative fathers embraced their daughters' military training, she explained they were led to believe it would protect them from aggression and sexual assault.

Between 1975 and 1983, Salwa was leading a double life. The war continued on and off, thus she was both a civilian and a warrior. In one instance, she went back to her village in a military vehicle and was perceived as a "community defender". She felt strong, "equal to men and as competent as them", even though her parents were not proud of her military role. At another point, she was a new mother in Beirut, displaced by the conflict and struggling to find milk in a devastated city invaded by the Israeli army.

Perhaps she could shift between her identities as a fighter and an educator because she didn't kill anyone. Ironically, she excelled in training, yet, on the front line she didn't shoot targets directly even if her life was at stake. When a close friend was murdered, a fellow combatant took her to shoot a Christian male hostage in revenge. As angry as she was, she simply couldn't. Although he was blindfolded, she told me she could see the horror in his eyes. She still does.

A turning point

Everything changed when she gave birth to her daughter from a fighter husband. Shortly after, the house was targeted by snipers. Salwa experienced fear as a parent, not as a fighter. **She realized she had to give up her military duties, out of motherly affection, and for practical reasons.** Believe it or not, she never received an allowance as a fighter. It wasn't a job, and she discovered she needed one to raise her child.

She taught chemistry at one of Beirut's public schools. It was the mid-eighties in a divided city, even among the allied Muslim and Palestinian militias. Some students had guns instead of books. She found death threats targeting "all communists" on the classroom chalkboard. She knew it meant her and wasn't surprised when she found the tyres of her car slashed. She survived fierce battles, got injured once, and didn't fear being killed by those youth. In fact, she thought she should help them. "If I could change the mind of only one, that would be enough. Keeping them in class was a challenge because they would become child soldiers had they dropped out", she told me.

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Building peace with yourself and others

When the war ended, the family sought a fresh start in Canada. It was the first time in fifteen years Salwa lived in a peaceful society. Ironically, in a capitalist country, she saw the ideals of communism implemented and had the chance to critically reflect on everything she believed in thus far.

When she returned to Lebanon in 1994, she struggled with depression and kept questioning the reasons for the war. With a sad look, she admitted to me she felt useless and dissatisfied with herself. It broke her heart that comrades died in vain because they were all puppets in a dirty game of warlords' interests.

Her daughter, once more, offered her a turning point. Wanting to distance herself from her parents' communism, she threw herself into meditation and spirituality. Fearing she might lose her, Salwa followed her daughter's lead. She now believes a hidden spirituality within prevented her from killing, and that her own daughter helped uncover this aspect of herself. Like a bolt of lightning, it was an overwhelming revelation. It took her five years to heal herself from old ideologies. **Never again would she take part in a war.**

She denounced political activism and was ready to meet "the others". A former "enemy" is currently a friend. This made her a better person, and thus a better educator. She turned book clubs into a safe haven for students to develop critical thinking so they don't blindly follow warlords turned into politicians. History shouldn't repeat itself.

Salwa went back to university and studied sociology, working for peacebuilding through education. I admired a sparkle of pride in her eyes when she told me she had finally found some inner peace.

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critical thinking so they don't blindly follow warlords turned into politicians. History shouldn't repeat itself.

A fighter for peace

As one **Fighter for Peace**, she reached out to Syrian women. After long discussions, she convinced a Syrian friend that violence ruined the just cause of the opposition. She conveyed that message in workshops to Syrian women from different ethnic backgrounds. She recognized her old self in them. At first they exchanged accusations, were angry seeking revenge and unable to admit everyone was losing in the war. **However, she spoke to them about accepting each other despite all the bloodshed. She encouraged them to communicate, listen and forgive so they start peacebuilding, no matter how unpopular that is.** She was not judgmental and touched their hearts and minds by embracing their uncertainties. These women are now inside Syria working for reconciliation and advocating for peace.

"I practice nonviolence and believe in the power of peacebuilding. I want to live in peace and help young men and women do so. I tell my story hoping to be a catalyst for change", she said. Would she have denounced militarization if someone spoke to her in 1975 about the dangers of violence? After some silence and a deep breath, she replied: "Yes, I could have reconsidered if I were encouraged to perceive matters differently. I might have taken another path".