THE EVACUATION OF LEBANESE-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE 2006 WAR

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Abstract
The 2006 war in Lebanon that erupted between Hezbollah and Israel marked the largest evacuation of Americans abroad since World War II. This article captures the experiences of Lebanese-American women and investigates how gender identity was expressed during these evacuations. Presented from the point of view of a participant-observer and personal interviews, findings show that gender became a master identity that influenced these women’s choices regarding how to escape the country and return to the United States. Some embraced dependency upon masculinist exercises of power while others claimed agency as they determined their own fate and carried out their own evacuation without waiting to be rescued by the state or male kin members. The evacuation stories in this article confirm and illuminate the complexity of ethnic citizenship and gendered agency.

Keywords
Lebanon, 2006 Lebanon Israeli war, women’s agency, evacuation, gender identity, womenandchildren, feminine vulnerability, patriarchy and militarism, kinship, gender performance

INTRODUCTION

On 12 July 2006 a war erupted between Hezbollah\(^1\) and Israel, and led to massive destruction of infrastructure and loss of lives in Lebanon.\(^2\) The war was marked by the largest evacuation of Americans abroad since World War II: the American military evacuated 14,000 people while an additional 11,000 Americans fled Lebanon on their own (Global Security 2006). The majority of the American evacuees from Lebanon happened to be women.
As is customary for Lebanese-Americans, and other ethnic groups in the United States, many of these women were mothers with their children visiting relatives for the summer. Some were dual Lebanese-American citizens, while others were either Americans of Lebanese descent or spouses of Lebanese citizens.

Stranded for weeks in a war zone, these Lebanese-American women lived through a situation in which the “international” became embedded in the national and the local, and the “political” became private (as Enloe describes it in Cohn 2003). Little is known about these 24,000 American evacuees. Their stories did not trigger academic or governmental interest. As one of the evacuees, I turned a self-healing exercise of sharing evacuation stories into a research project that captures the experiences of these women. My and others’ stories reveal two main themes of evacuation strategies that these women undertook: agency, by which some women self-actualized their own and their children's evacuation, making and carrying out their own plans; and dependency, by which other women relied on social and political actors, such as family and the state, to rescue them. These findings suggest a counterintuitive understanding of “women and war,” and this article addresses a significant sociological dilemma of gender and politics in the modern world: how is gender performed during evacuations?

In light of the complexities underlying this framework of agency and vulnerability (Stephan 2010), my aim in this article is to see how women internalize being framed as victims in a combat zone. First, I discuss my methodological approach, focusing on the challenges I encountered in interviewing evacuees in the post-9/11 world. Then, I address the nuances in gender identity that determine agency and dependency in terms of family relations and gender identity. In doing so, I place the behaviors that women followed along the agency–vulnerability spectrum demarcated by three defining points: first were those who embraced feminine vulnerability and depended on authority (state and family) to rescue them, while the second group enacted their agency in their evacuation plan. The third group fell somewhere in between these two ends of the spectrum, and experienced a complex blend of emotions ranging from frustration to retreat and renewal in their “positionality as women” (Cockburn 2010, 140). Let me first set the stage by telling how the war broke out and why these American women were in Lebanon that summer.

WAR AND EVACUATIONS

The Lebanese-American community, whose numbers are estimated to range from half a million at the low end (Brittingham and de la Cruz 2005) to nearly 1.3 million at the high end (Kasem 2005), comprises up to one-fifth of the Lebanese global diaspora, and from 25 to 39 percent of Arabs in the United States (Arab American Institute 2008). Lebanese-Americans have
been in the United States since the early 1870s. However, before the formation of the modern Lebanese state in 1943, Lebanese-Americans were classified as Greeks, Turks or Syrians (Suleiman 1999). After World War II, the United States Census Bureau recognized Lebanese-Americans based on their country of origin; since 1980 they have been classified among the white ancestry groups in the American population.

Each summer hundreds of thousands of Lebanese and their descendants living in the diaspora visit their homeland. Returning Lebanese come from the United States and many other countries around the globe. Carol Haddad writes about the ritual of this visit: “Although my parents were U.S.-born of immigrant parents, they retained and took pride in their culture. Each summer we visited our long-distance grandmothers, cousins, aunts, and uncles, and felt a sense of community and belonging as we attended *haflis* (picnics) sponsored by the Melkite Catholic Church” (Haddad 1994, 218–219). Haddad’s description is recognized by thousands of Lebanese-Americans who, for a combination of reasons – beaches, resorts, summer camps, country life, busy nights in the city, quiet starlit evenings and the deep pull of family – visit Lebanon each year.

Wednesday, 12 July 2006 was an unusual day in Lebanon. Hezbollah had kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and many people were anxious about the repercussions. The next morning, Israel bombed Beirut’s airport. My children and I were trapped in Lebanon at the outbreak of the thirty-three-day war, along with thousands of other Americans, four million Lebanese citizens, and many other foreign nationals. Initially, Lebanese public opinion leaned toward the thought that this was another move in the endless human chess match between Hezbollah and Israel. Common was the belief that Israel and Hezbollah will work it out between them because they always do. Israel and Hezbollah, who “always” engage in these kinds of military maneuvers, were expected to end up negotiating an exchange of prisoners; and after the war was over, that is just what they did.

For Americans of all backgrounds, waiting for the chess game to play out was not an option. Despite the variations among the stories I collected, many shared the same trajectory of events: with the advent of war came various levels of anxiety; then came the stage of seeking help and advice – which involved contact with US government offices or local family members; and finally, for some, when the idea of waiting for a solution became unbearable, there came the time to devise and execute an evacuation plan. Given that the American government could not act fast enough to evacuate its citizens from Lebanon, many Americans – including myself – opted not to wait, but to find our own routes out of Lebanon. Others, however, did wait.

The first 900 American citizens were evacuated by the American government on 19 July, a week after the war started. Between the beginning of the war and the commencement of the evacuation, at least 25,000 American citizens in Lebanon had been subject to the hazards of war, which included the
bombing of Beirut, the bombing of numerous bridges in the country and warfare between Hezbollah and Israel in the south of the country. As these stories show, Lebanese-American women were faced with a dual task: that of redefining their identity in terms of their gender consciousness, and that of ensuring their own and their family’s evacuation to safety.

FEMINIST VOICES: METHODOLOGY

To portray how Lebanese-American women were forced overnight to become rescuers and heroines, I take up Cockburn’s (1998) suggestion that feminist research on violence and war reveals how violence against women exists on a continuum from the bedroom to the battlefield. Approaching this subject from a reflexive research perspective, I ask questions about the conditions of women in contexts that have previously ignored them. This article portrays these evacuation stories from a participant-observer’s point of view, informed by “feminist curiosity” – “not taking for granted […] the relationships of women to families, to men, to the state, and to globalizing trends” (Enloe 2007, 10). In addition to my personal evacuation story, I present findings from interviews with a number of the Lebanese-American women evacuees, in which I asked about their methods of survival as well as their thoughts and feelings, both at the time and retrospectively.

This method thus arises out of my own concrete experience, which plays an important role in the way I have operated as a participant-observer. I was in Lebanon conducting fieldwork in 2006 when I became an evacuee. After I safely evacuated with my two children, I wrote down my own story. Sharing my story with other evacuees naturally led to a research project in the ethnography of traumatic experience. I knew well that this was not only scientifically valuable work, but it was helping me recover personally from my own traumatic experience.

Using a snowball sampling method, I conducted in-depth interviews with twelve American citizens living in the United States. The majority of these women clustered in mid-size south-western cities, with one on the East Coast and one in Lebanon. These are Sunni, Shiite, Maronite Catholic and Antiochian Orthodox women, coming from middle-class families. Most of them have a college education and the financial means to have paid for their evacuation, although some were prevented from using those means due to war-related logistics, such as the lack of safe routes and transportation. As Americans, albeit Lebanese-Americans, these women were privileged to evacuate, while their Lebanese family members did not have that option.

Six of the respondents were in Beirut when the war started; five were in northern Lebanon, and one in the south (where heavy bombing occurred). Only one respondent was single (although her boyfriend was with her); the rest were married with children. Six of these women were accompanied by their spouses, while the other six were not (though some of these husbands
who were in the United States had planned to come to Lebanon but were unable, due to the war). The men who were in Lebanon with their wives did not take any part in combat or humanitarian efforts. All men were American civilians (except for one Lebanese citizen) who supported their wives’ escape back to the United States.

The sample in this study is narrow in scope, featuring the small group of women to whom I gained access. The data fall short of representing the voices of evacuees with diverse age, class and sexual identification. For instance, the experiences of homosexual men and women, the elderly, children, individuals with disabilities or single or married heterosexual men were not captured in this study, although they too endured the affliction of this war. For the most part, men and non-heterosexual women are silent in this study, although a more thorough gender analysis could examine these groups’ agency as prompted by the sudden outbreak of war. However, I feel that conducting such an analysis would shift the study beyond its current scope.

Another limitation to the study lies in gaining access to respondents. A number of potential respondents refused to grant me interviews because they feared that my having their data could jeopardize their security. Ironically, spouses of these women were the source of much of this paranoia. It has been my experience in conducting interviews with Lebanese-Americans in the United States that interviewees are often concerned about their anonymity, given the political atmosphere surrounding Middle Easterners in the United States. After the events of 11 September 2001, thousands of Arab-Americans were allegedly “rounded up and held without due process, often on flimsy immigration charges” (Barrett 2007, 45). Often, however, my personal rapport with interviewees was rewarded with access to their uncensored stories. Filling my part of the bargain, I assured my respondents that I would respect their anonymity by guarding any information I collected and by assigning western pseudonyms to respondents and their relatives.

GENDER AND FAMILY IN ARMED CONFLICT

While this study addresses a sociological dilemma of gendered citizenship, its transnational focus engages the international relations literature on women and war. Within the field of international relations, the discourse on global gender politics underscores how wars strip women of their agency and either constructs them in a feminine fashion or sums them up as “women and children” (Sjoberg 2009; Peterson and Runyan 2010). Women and children become a single object of protection whose creation is facilitated by what Fluri (2008) calls “wartime femininity.” Women are viewed as vulnerable and “childlike insofar as they are seen as less likely to be culpable agents of social forces and should thus be shielded from them” (Carpenter 2006, 33, italics in original), while children are often regarded as “invisible” or “inciden-
The women and children construction fits the profile of the “the protected” not only by their need for protection but also for their need of “somebody who can think strategically and act in [their] best interests” (Enloe 2007, 61). Indeed, as some of the evacuation stories show, a number of women depended especially on their families, mostly their husbands and fathers, to think for them and deliver them to safety. In doing so, they minimized their own and their children’s exposure to the distress of that war.

Scholars like Fluri (2008) have suggested that saving victims during war requires a “protective force of violent masculinity” and a responding feminine vulnerability. Women sometimes believe this myth about wartime vulnerability and give in, not perceiving that their consent to fill the victim role denies them agency and silences them. However, not all women consent to being rescued, nor do all of them believe in this myth. As feminists, we realize that women in war can think strategically, too. Hence, compliance with wartime norms involves a contentious aspect of agency that takes into consideration the reward of being rescued – and that should not be neglected. As Enloe (2007, 60) observes, “It is much easier to be silenced and to accept that silencing if one absorbs the self-identity of The Protected.” The question of incentives here certainly applies to some women who were rewarded for their consent. Complying with their gender roles made their evacuations safer and less traumatic. However, in most of the stories in this article, men and women fall along a spectrum between hero and victim, rather than entirely as one or the other.

The protective masculine and vulnerable feminine model represents a broad view that sometimes abstracts the changes that are taking place on the global level. Patriarchy ought to be seen “not only as an arrangement of political institutions, but also, and perhaps even primarily, as a broadly understood value system that revolves around identity constructs which support and entrench gender-specific hierarchical visions of society” (Bleiker 2000, 32). Looking at the 2006 war from the micro level, I find that the binary relationship that international relations feminists claim in their model of patriarchal violence does not always apply, or applies only in a rigidly logical way. The stories in this study show that women, men and children were all victims of military aggression. However, in some cases, women were the only agents available to save the children; in other cases, representatives of the patriarchal order, such as fathers or fathers-in-law, were either left behind or uninvolved. While the men did protect the women and children in some instances, women, who subscribed to their gender roles as mothers and wives, acted in instances when men were impotent to act, thus in a sense protecting the men also. While some would argue that these women’s performances lie outside the realm of gender norms, one could clearly see that such binary distinction is not possible.

The interpretation of Lebanese women’s agency is further complicated by a common western image that construes Arab women as subordinate by nature. Western scholars and media have also fabricated an all-encompassing Middle
Eastern social structure, fed by Islamic fundamentalism and other “traditional” forces, that construes women as so disempowered as to be unable to exert any agency that conflicts with their patriarchal settings (Charrad 2009). Hence, against this background of conflicting frameworks, I use this ethnographic study to explore women’s agency in the 2006 war, taking up the issue of how gender identities were framed and reframed as the war commenced.

CLAIMING GENDER IDENTITY

Can we determine how patriarchy governs the assignment of gender roles during armed conflicts? Enloe argues that in patriarchal settings, the protectors are “the natural controllers” because they possess physical and intellectual fitness. The masculinization of international relations “flows directly out of the patriarchal belief that one has to be ‘manly’ in order to be rational enough to be responsible for the security of ‘women and children’” (Enloe 2007, 61). Thus, patriarchal structure persists in war as it continues to impose an openly coercive framework in which women are transformed into victims, and their inferiority as such is both justified and exploited. Such transformation allows men to exponentiate the protector’s role, which can be viewed as a natural extension of the patriarchal protective duties they assume during peacetime.

It was peculiar of the situation in Lebanon at the outbreak of the war that many men in the Lebanese-American group were not present; nor was there a strong American military presence. Thus, the traditional “rescuers” were crucially absent during the first week of fighting, and thousands of “victims” found themselves obliged to gather their physical strength and emotional balance to think strategically about how to escape this unfamiliar and hostile situation. The war triggered women to reflect on their gender identity, role, and position vis-à-vis their families and state. They began reconsidering the assumptions that had oriented their identity as women, who ought to be saved during wartime. While some deconstructed their gendered wartime identity as disempowered victims, others found that the war reaffirmed the satisfaction that came from the successful but complex negotiation of their agency and dependence.

Lebanese-American women’s identities follow various contours such as class, age and degree of assimilation to American norms. In order to examine how the fusion of their gender identities reinforced Lebanese-American women’s association with their gender groups, I use a three-paradigm approach to organize the enactment of gender identification and agency. As mentioned above, some women depended on others for their rescue while others exerted their own agency, with a middle position characterizing the third group. Some discovered new gendered attributes about themselves and their relationships with their family members while others found that the war triggered regrets and revived horrifying old memories.

Although the three gendered roles may seem somewhat rigidly demarcated, women moved between them, particularly given the changing intensity of the
Evidence below shows that one cannot assume clear demarcation between the groups. For instance, Lauren’s gender performance as a daughter empowered her to exercise her agency and save her parents and little children from being killed by a bomb that targeted their house – by moving them from Beirut to the mountains. However, she was emotionally and psychologically incapable of making a decision whether to leave without her husband and son. As a wife and a mother, she could not bring herself to leave Lebanon not knowing whether her husband and their son would make it out alive. Nonetheless, three general scenarios of gender performance are discernible: embracing wartime feminine vulnerability; assuming agency; and retreat and renewal.

Embracing Wartime Feminine Vulnerability

Women who followed the course that their families designed for them expressed the greatest sense of security and normalcy. It is noteworthy that the routes, timing and manners of evacuation were not always appropriate or rational. By putting their safety in the hands of their family members (some of whom happened to be experienced war survivors) these women did not feel as strained, nor did they seem as exposed to feelings of humiliation, suffering and displacement. Despite the security and normalcy that these women felt from submitting to society’s expectations of them as vulnerable feminine victims to be rescued, they ultimately forfeited their agency. Rachel forfeited her agency by leaving evacuation plans to male relatives of her husband’s extended family, Margaret by accepting her husband’s evacuation plans without questioning their viability and Lauren by being overcome with debilitating fear and confusion.

Rachel, an Antiochian Orthodox Christian from Jordan, is a medical technician who moved to the United States after her marriage in 2000 to Eric, a Lebanese-American. She became a naturalized American citizen in 2002. Every year, Rachel and her three children spend the majority of the summer in Jordan and join Eric on a short trip to Lebanon for a few weeks to visit his family. On 7 July 2006, Rachel and her children arrived in Lebanon expecting to enjoy a break with Eric, who would meet them a few days later. But war broke out before he arrived.

Immediately after the bombing of the airport, Eric’s family took Rachel and the children from Beirut to their vacation house in the mountains and they later arranged with relatives for them to be delivered to safety in Jordan by way of Syria. Still, Rachel was worried about her children: “I felt the responsibility for my children and that’s what worried me.” But Eric’s family made sure that the children did not know what was going on. At all times Rachel was accompanied by a family member who took care of her and her children. Because women like Rachel were protected at all times by patriarchal agents, they did not have to confront a nasty border security officer or look for food or shelter. In return, they displayed total vulnerability, surrendering to the plans
designed by their family. They women were not involved in planning their evacuation; they did what they were told. Some were not even consulted in the evacuation plan. In retrospect, this seems to have been the best thing these women could have done – much better than taking off on their own or trusting the state to evacuate them.

Like Rachel, Margaret had an easy trip out of Lebanon, such that she did not even feel the need to pack snacks for her children because she was confident that her husband Michael would take care of everything. Margaret, a Maronite Catholic, high school graduate, and mother of four, is originally from a small town in northern Lebanon, where her parents and in-laws still live. Going on their annual trip to Lebanon to visit their family, Margaret, Michael and their four children had been in Lebanon since June and were due to leave two weeks after the war started. After a bomb destroyed a bridge in their small town, Michael decided to leave immediately and took the family through Syria to France where they vacationed for a week and then came back to the United States. Had Margaret not had the children with her, she said, she would have stayed in her hometown through the war; and if Michael had not been with her, she also would have stayed with her family, not risking evacuation by herself or through the American Embassy. Thanks to Michael, Margaret and the children ended up vacationing in Paris instead of enduring the bombing of their village. One might argue that Margaret did not endure any hardship during the evacuation, as she was sheltered by her husband’s care, but Margaret enacted total vulnerability and did not feel the need to initiate any efforts, as long as she was being protected by her family. Some men like Michael took charge and jumped readily into the rescuer position, guaranteeing the safe delivery of the women and children. However, not all women were in a position to rely on their spouses or trust their decision.

Lauren’s case was similar but not exactly so. Although she enacted her agency at first, as mentioned earlier, she later decided to wait to evacuate with her husband. As one of seven children who grew up in the city of Sidon in southern Lebanon, Lauren, a Shiite piano teacher, moved to the United States in 1990 after marrying Randy and became a naturalized American citizen in 1995. In early May 2006, Lauren with three of her four children went to visit her parents in Lebanon. Her eldest son, Matt, stayed behind to finish summer sports training. Matt and Randy flew to Lebanon on 10 July, but they opted to stay with Randy’s parents, about thirty miles from Lauren and the other children, until Matt’s birthday party on the afternoon of the day that the war broke out. Unfortunately, a bomb hit the only bridge out of their village, and the family was separated again for about ten days, until Lauren sent a brave taxi driver who found a way to fetch them. When the family was finally reunited, they left immediately through Syria, then to Dubai and finally back to the United States.

Lauren became dysfunctional after being separated from her husband and son. She could not eat or think straight. Her fear of evacuating alone with her three little ones was just too strong to overcome: “Although my
husband had told me to leave without him and Matt, I couldn’t. I got scared. I was scared that God forbid we get shelled, or that one of my children dies but not me. I did not want to take the blame, or assume by myself the responsibility of my children’s safety. I also felt that I would be leaving my husband and son behind and I wouldn’t do that. I wanted for all of us to be together deciding our fate. If something happens, I would rather we be all together.” I sympathize with Lauren’s fear, as any decision to leave involved tremendous risks due to Israel’s arbitrary bombing of civilians. However, her need to evacuate with her husband was strong, and her inability to escape without him may reflect how some mothers felt about bringing the family together. But it also reflects weakness in her ability to execute an enormous decision of going on the road alone with her children.

Is a woman’s choice to keep the family together a sign of acquiescence to feminine vulnerability? My research suggests that at times the choice to keep the family together is an embracement of feminine vulnerability and other times it is not. However, a number of women evacuees dreaded the burden of evacuating the children on their own, especially because the children’s father was not present. Fear of being blamed is an aspect of agency that falls short of assuming full ownership of the decision and its consequences. It also reflects that women still assume a secondary position in the family regarding decision making.

Some of these stories reveal a calculated submission to a vulnerable feminine role, one in which the woman is an object of care. In accordance with the feminist international relations literature, some women embraced a vulnerable position as women, and some as women and children. However, what the literature did not predict is that evacuees in this category seemed to benefit the most from following conventional gendered assumptions. Those who showed strength and resilience, and thus belonged more closely to the group who reject the expectations of the vulnerable feminine, fared less well than their “vulnerable” counterparts.

**Assuming Agency**

Womanhood and motherhood were sources of empowerment for women who became rescuers as they prepared their escape plans and navigated the emotional turmoil of evacuation. It is noteworthy that these women did not necessarily have better resources than women in the other groups. Rather, they proclaimed a proactive gender performance of agency. In these cases, the husband was not present, mentally or physically, to rescue the women. Moreover, not once did these women fall into the vulnerable feminine position. They acted almost mechanically to choreograph the evacuation scene. In envisioning their gender identity, I see Stephanie and Emily as warriors, and Bess and Claudia as mothers-in-command. With various degrees and expressions of agency, these women orchestrated their families’ journeys to safety.
Although Bess’s escape was planned by her husband and his relatives, she felt that she was not the weakest link. Bess was born in Mexico to an American mother and a Catholic Lebanese-Spanish father. She moved to the United States at the age of 16 to attend college, where she met her Lebanese-American husband, Kenneth. Bess and Kenneth take their two teenage girls to Lebanon every summer: “They made friends from all over that come there in the summer, so to them they can’t wait to go.” Bess and the girls, along with her sister-in-law and nephew, were visiting in 2006 while Kenneth and his brother were supposed to arrive the day the airport was bombed. Bess spent her summer between her in-laws’ house in the mountains and their condo at a beach resort. After a bomb went off outside their church in the mountains, Bess decided that she had had enough stress and asked her husband to help her leave. Her evacuation route through Syria to Turkey was arranged by her husband and his family, and she traveled with her Lebanese-born sister-in-law.

Staying strong helped Bess strengthen her daughters: “There were no options for me to ever feel weak or helpless or anything because of my kids; this was my responsibility for them, but supportive more than anything that it’s going to be okay.” She felt the need to show her daughters that she was firm, unemotional and focused, although deep inside she was relying on her husband’s moral support. His words reassured her “that if whatever I am doing as superwoman doesn’t work, superman will come and get me out.”

Despite the fact that Bess’s evacuation plans were arranged by her husband and his family, she was involved every moment in deciding the safety of each step she and the girls took. Women like Bess felt that, as mothers, they could not appear to be weak or scared. Worried that their own anxiety might further scare the children, some women suppressed their feelings and emerged as strong undefeated women. This performance of gender role as “superwoman” – which Bess coins above, to describe how she remained strong and determined, coordinating with the family and comforting the children during the evacuation process – proved empowering not only to family members but also to the women themselves.

Unlike Bess, Claudia knew that her superman was not leaving his base in the USA. His strategy was to remotely support the operation that Claudia made with her family. But first, Claudia had to overcome her need for protection and the fear caused by the absence of her husband: “As a mom you feel that you have to do something, but what adds to the problem is that their [her daughters’] father is not there, so it made things harder because he was talking to us always but he felt that he was not with us and was unable to protect us, and this is our culture.”

Born and raised in Lebanon, Claudia, a Maronite holds a doctorate degree in political science and her husband Lance is a general surgeon. She moved to the United States after marrying Lance, and became an American citizen in 2006, a month before leaving to spend the summer in Lebanon. She had arrived in Beirut with her two daughters on the eve of the war and was expecting
Lance to follow them on 3 August. During the war, and knowing the danger that was ahead, Claudia still preferred to stay in the mountains rather than to leave with the American government, because things were too chaotic for her. However, after her youngest fell seriously ill and needed immediate medical attention, she and her mother and daughters evacuated with the assistance of family and friends.

Although the task at hand was difficult, Claudia impressed even herself with the power she mustered to face the challenge. She felt driven mostly by her motherly instinct: “I felt that I am responsible for them and I have to keep them safe and make sure that they remain safe from harm’s way. [. . .] I am proud of myself, I was so strong and I handled this, I mean even with my daughter being really sick and not knowing what’s going to happen to her. Even my husband agrees. He says, ‘Wow!’” Like Claudia, I too found that in evacuating I discovered exceptional strength and perseverance in myself that I had never experienced before.

Against conventional wisdom to flee when in danger, Claudia decided to ride out the war. Lance did not initially support this decision. However, Claudia was convinced that she did the right thing, albeit with some reservation, as we see in her reference to the absence of her daughters’ father. The task was not easy, but Claudia felt the confidence to perform the role of the heroine. Ultimately, the decision was hers. Claiming her agency, Claudia’s gender performance portrays her as an empowered woman in every move she took, even when faced with a medical emergency.

In Claudia and Bess’s stories, the men reacted to their wives’ claims of agency. They supported them and respected their decisions instead of doubting them or trying to change their minds. Like Lance and Kenneth, my husband accompanied me on the phone through every step of my evacuation plan. He lifted my spirit and kept me going, but I was the one in charge at all times. While Lance, Kenneth and my husband supported their women in their exertions to rescue the children, others were much less helpful. Some women became frustrated with their husbands’ inability to take charge or deal with the war in a mature manner. Instead, they found themselves mothering their own husbands, who had fallen prey to anxiety and delusion.

Emily discovered that David was more idealistic than she had ever thought him to be. He was excited to be present while history was being made, but retreated mentally to the coping mechanism he had developed during the fifteen years of civil war that he had survived in his youth. To him, coping was a game of denial and defying death. He went out with his friend a few times to pubs in downtown Beirut, apparently reliving “the way he was living when he was an adolescent in Beirut.” David repeated the tricks that had helped him cope during the civil war, which took place between 1975 and 1990. Emily remembers: “We had this game we used to play that we’ll never die; that death is not going to happen to us; a complete delusion.” Emily understands that this was David’s way of trying to make sense of
what was happening. “Maybe it is a denial of reality because the reality was so awful that you had to run away from it, psychologically and physically.”

Emily, a Sunni artist with a PhD in linguistics, has been an American citizen since 1988, although she grew up and attended college in Lebanon. Every year, she visits her father and takes her son Alex to see his cousins. Emily and her son were supposed to rendezvous in Lebanon with Emily’s sister, Sara, and her two little girls, who live in Canada. Emily, David and Alex did not evacuate until three weeks after the war started. They took a route that went through Syria to Turkey and then home.

Like Emily, Stephanie became distressed with her husband Nathan’s coping mechanism, which was not as self-conscious as David’s. Nathan was frustrated with the war because he was anxious to go back to work (or as Stephanie translated his feeling, Nathan was anxious to go back to safety). Stephanie thought that the invasion surely brought back bad memories to Nathan, but she also felt that “he could put up with it, so what? Maybe he felt that the war would last for a while after seeing all the destruction.” Stephanie admits that Nathan’s anxiety was the main motivation for her to pursue a speedy evacuation.

Stephanie reacted mechanically and practically to the war, perhaps drawing on instincts she developed during her fifteen years of experience of the civil war. As a warrior, she thought strategically about her family’s escape. Stephanie, a Protestant Christian, was born and raised in Lebanon and later moved to the United States to pursue her graduate education in chemistry. There, she reconnected with and married her Lebanese friend Nathan; they have two boys. Almost every year, Stephanie, Nathan and their two boys go to Beirut to visit their grandparents. Stephanie and her family were among the first evacuees, as Stephanie falsely told the American evacuation crew that they were called by the Embassy to board the first ship out of Lebanon.

As a civil war survivor, Stephanie knew that the situation was not going to improve any time soon. However, this time she had an American passport and she used it. As a task-oriented and astute woman, she focused on finding the most efficient and least taxing way to evacuate. This level-headedness came possibly from knowing that she could not depend on Nathan to get them out of Lebanon. Aside from complaining about being late for work if the war persisted, Nathan showed no initiative in taking any action to evacuate the family.

Here, another gender identity emerges, that of a care-manager. Whether frustrated with their husbands’ inability to handle the evacuation properly or driven by their urge to protect their children, women in this group claimed their agency throughout the entire experience. Both Emily and Stephanie had to manage the irrationality of their husbands’ responses to the war. It is noteworthy that Nathan and David’s responses were very different from Michael’s, whose determination put the least strain on his wife and kids. These women overcame hardships and challenges and never submitted to a plan designed by other social agents. They were proactive in pursuing and designing their evacuation plan. The literature on international relations has
not paid attention to such women. The behavior of women in this category contradicts conventional theorizing on wartime femininity and feminine vulnerability in armed conflict. However, as mentioned earlier, these behaviors cannot be rigidly viewed as a dichotomy. Wartime femininity is much more complex.

Retreat and Renewal

In their evacuation efforts, women did not behave or identify themselves in a binary way, as either dependents or agents. Some felt it impossible but to retreat to the past, as Emily and Leah testified. For others, like Grace, Mary and me, the evacuation was an opportunity to discover or rediscover relationships.

The war revived Emily’s and Leah’s vulnerability and took them back, as though they were little girls again, to their feelings of helplessness. Emily confided that “the frustration and the nightmares that came back were things that I had completely forgotten. I felt that I was back in the [civil] war as a 20-year-old again.” She combated this frustration by keeping busy: “I wasn’t sitting around, I was always working. I took charge. I cleaned up the house. I [emptied] all the closets and decided what goes and what not.” Emily’s case, with its retreat to the past, clearly shows that these paradigms of agency and vulnerability are not rigid, because she was also able to claim agency and help evacuate her family and mine, despite her own psychological suffering.

Leah also explains that the war “brought back so many memories that I don’t want to remember. Every time we left Lebanon during the 1982 Israeli invasion, we escaped through Syria. Each time there [was] a problem in Lebanon, we’d leave through Syria; very rarely, during the war, did we leave directly from our airport. So I felt that within a few hours, I went back to 1982.” However, in contrast to the past, this time Leah felt responsible for her own safety. Previously, her parents had made all the evacuation decisions.

Leah, a Sunni with an MBA degree, was raised in Beirut. Wanting to temporarily escape the civil war in 1989, she moved to the United States. After enrolling in graduate school, she ended up working and living in the USA permanently and became an American citizen in 2006. On 12 June, Leah and her Lebanese-American boyfriend, Tom, went to Lebanon on vacation. It turned out that they also got to escape together. Leah, who was staying with her father, and Tom, who was in a hotel, both in Beirut, evacuated through arrangements made by Tom’s hotel. They traveled through Syria to Jordan and then back to the United States.

Retreat to childhood is a way to escape the harsh reality and the need to confront it. Over the years, Emily and Leah had suppressed the feeling of vulnerability they had experienced as little girls. However, the war revived this vulnerability in them and their need to be dependent on someone. This time, however, parents who had taken charge of their evacuation before were vulnerable themselves: their fathers had aged, their mothers had passed away.
and their partners were incapable of playing the role of rescuer. Although these women claimed agency by actively engaging in their own and their families’ evacuation, they did so only reluctantly because they had no alternative – their parents were not there to save them, and they were no longer little girls. In other words, they were pushed to perform the role of the feminine rescuer despite their vulnerability.

Others experienced waves of renewal. The evacuation renewed Grace’s, Mary’s and my own existential commitment to our motherly roles. Grace’s daughters suddenly grew up: “They were helping me because they felt that they were responsible. Each was pulling her suitcase. I felt that they were my companions, not my children.” Grace, a college-educated Maronite from Beirut and an American citizen since 2003, lives permanently outside Beirut with her Lebanese husband, Ford. Grace’s father and brother are Americans and live in the United States, while her four sisters live in Lebanon. Grace evacuated with her daughters on one of the last ships that the American government arranged, leaving behind her husband, who to this day refuses to apply for American citizenship or get a Lebanese passport. Grace’s feelings toward her daughters were those of a companion. She learned to appreciate them as equal, emerging women, who claimed their agency early on, although not by choice. In executing her plan to escape Grace revealed that she felt “a special connection to her daughters that Ford can never understand.”

Mary also felt renewal as a mother. A Maronite entrepreneur with an MBA from Lebanon, Mary runs a small home-based business. She joined her husband in 1996 in the hope that they would only stay in the United States for a couple of years until her husband’s tech start-up took off. It never did, and she, her husband and their two children remained in the United States. Mary evacuated with her two small children on the very last American ship out of Lebanon. In the past, Mary had sometimes felt that her daughter behaved as a spoiled brat who had little tolerance for life’s inconveniences, yet during evacuation she became mature and acted with resolve. During the evacuation Mary felt a special friendship with her daughter, whom she considered from that point forward as a companion. Mary’s identification with her daughter as a friend marks her own growth from a dependent little village girl who cuddled with her four sisters, to a mature woman who enjoys a friendship with her own responsible daughter. Now, Mary’s daughter has replaced her sisters as her new trusted friend. Again, this represents a renewal in the gender identity with which Mary and Grace identify: mature women connecting with emerging women, their daughters.

I too was transformed as a mother, but differently. Previously, I called myself a “part-time mom,” but in the evacuation, “I became very close to my children, who I felt grew up suddenly. After the evacuation, my love and attachment to them grew in a very special way; I was their savior. After the war, I had to help my children overcome their post-traumatic stress syndrome. They became aggressive and afraid of every loud noise. A part of their childhood was lost with their inability to sleep, hardship in digesting their food, and
flashes of panic. Unable to explain my bouts of tears, my sudden overprotection of my children, or my newly acquired fear of planes and airports, I tried to normalize my life and theirs in the United States as much as possible but not without remembering that we were once refugees.  

My connection with my children replaced the vulnerability I felt as I lost my claim to agency, not only as an assertive woman, but also as a naïve American citizen in an international context. The war connected me with my children through the bond of survival. I can barely hold back my tears as I remember how the three of us escaped together. Had I not had my children with me, I do not know that I would have had the courage to escape. My connection with my husband also grew through the evacuation, but in a different way. After five days of traveling from Beirut to Damascus, then to Rome and finally to the United States, “I called my husband crying from John F. Kennedy Airport. I told him that I am exhausted and that I have gone beyond what is humanly possible and that I could not go any further. He reminded me that I am almost there and encouraged me to hold on for just a few more hours. He gave me a moral push.” In evacuating, I was able to find my agency despite my self-inflicted sense of vulnerability. I was also able to finally embrace my motherhood as a part of my womanhood.  

Gender became a master identity for the women making choices regarding their journeys back home to the United States. The fusion of the gender identity of motherhood that Lebanese-American women expressed during the 2006 war was a mixture of responses that were forced upon them by difficult circumstances. Some stayed level-headed, others panicked. Some felt like saviors, others waited to be saved. Some were care-managers and others were cared for. Their evacuations were turning points in their gender roles, as well as in their identity as survivors.  

CONCLUSION  

In analyzing the gender identity of Lebanese-American women during their evacuations from Lebanon in 2006, I have examined a slice of the sociological dilemma that traverses contemporary politics as the nation-state copes with the complexity of ethnic and gendered citizenship. Agency and vulnerability determined the positionality of Lebanese-American women whether they took on the task of rescuing their children or waited to be rescued by their families or government. Although the overall motivation for many of the women with children was seeking to deliver their families to safety, their performance of gender on the scale of dependency and agency varied widely. The variation was not due to differences in available resources (i.e. whether they had the financial means to pay for a comfortable evacuation), or the presence or absence of a male partner, as was clearly the case with Emily and Stephanie. However, women varied in how they claimed their agency and their gender identity according to their unique circumstances within their family settings,
relationships with their family members and geographical location during the war.

Regardless of the route they chose, the gender construct was an important survival strategy. However, an apparent discrepancy exists between theory and lived reality. Most of the women I interviewed justified their decision to evacuate and the route they followed according to their perception of their gender roles as “shepherds” of children. I believe these cases show an “augmentation” rather than a “transformation” (Dombrowski 1999) of the women’s gender consciousness of their relationship to other women, men, family members and patriarchy in general. Womanhood and motherhood were sources of empowerment for women who evacuated on their own as well as for those who were evacuated by their families or the state, but each experienced these identities differently.

The fusion of the gender identification that Lebanese-American women expressed during the 2006 war shows that women stepped outside the role which they are often assigned by International Relations feminists. Their positionality, as neither heroes nor victims, challenges social assumptions these scholars hold about the social construction of wartime roles as mutually exclusive categories. Women, like Rachel and Margaret, who totally forfeited agency fell on one end of the spectrum while Stephanie and Claudia fell on the other end and seized their agency to coordinate their and their family’s evacuations (although Stephanie evacuated with the US government and Claudia with her family’s assistance). The rest of the women I interviewed are positioned between agency and dependency, some coming in and out of one end to the other while others experienced some agency complicated by feelings of retreat or renewal. Lauren at times assumed agency and at others vulnerability; Bess declared herself superwoman but was comforted to label her husband as superman; and the indecisiveness of Grace, Mary and Leah prompted their evacuations that can neither be categorized as acts of agency nor as acts of vulnerability or dependency. This study differs from the International Relations’ binary construction of victims vs heroes by providing a spectral description that was dictated by situational circumstances and personal backgrounds. Contrary to conventional perspectives in the literature, this study presents a counter-intuitive argument showing that gender roles during wartime are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, motherhood adds a level of complexity to this construction. Ironically, gender identities, especially that of mother, motivated women to occupy positions across the spectrum of wartime roles.

Just as women’s voices are often silent in the mainstream international relations, they were also absent from the reports that reached western audiences about the 2006 war in Lebanon. In the same fashion that Youngs (2006, 3) differentiates between change “for women” and change “by women” – “the former too often denying women’s agency, and the latter asserting it” – this study reports on the evacuation of women as well as evacuation by women. However, instead of presenting their agency in a dualistic
manner, this article demonstrates women’s “sense of war” as both “systemic” and as occupying “a continuum” (Cockburn 2010, 139). The stories in this study show that, whether agents or dependents, some women’s overarching motivation for choosing their evacuation route was the obligation they felt to deliver their family to safety.

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Notes

1 Hezbollah literally means “the party of God.”
2 Israeli citizens also felt the impact of the war and Hezbollah’s attacks.
3 This quote is extracted from the story I wrote after I safely evacuated with my two children in 2006. It is presented as a quotation to distinguish it from the current analysis and preserve its authenticity as an auto-ethnographic piece.
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Acknowledgments

The author wishes to recognize Mounira M. Charrad and the late Michael Suleiman for their valuable comments, Jana Suleiman for her assistance with the research and the evacuees for sharing their experiences. Research for this article was supported by PEO International and AAUW. All translations are the author’s, except when a translated document or interview is cited.

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