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ARTICLE

What's Sex Got to Do with It? Traffic and Protection in Lebanon's Civil War

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Abstract

What kind of weapon is sex? Scholarship on the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90) has broadened the "war story" by foregrounding women's perspectives as fighters and by adding complexity to militiamen's narratives. Yet, while gendering the analysis, scholarship has not examined the role that sexual relations and sexual practices played in the war. Meanwhile, Lebanese Civil War–era cultural production, including films, novels and popular magazines, display sexual transactions and sexual violence as if they were common instances in the war. In this article, I engage an intertextual ethnographic reading of sex and sexual violence, combining the civil war's cultural archive with oral histories that I conducted with former militiamen and militia women across Lebanon's political spectrum, and with cis- and trans-women who had transactional sex with militia members, as well as urban participatory mapping and interviews with other participants in the war. Mapping the sex economy and sexual relations in the war reveals the central roles that sex played both as a traffic in and of itself, and as a tool of political governance of civilians, through a traffic in women. I argue that militias used sex and the threat of it for multiple purposes: as a form of mobility that enabled other goods to circulate more smoothly; as a tool of intra-sectarian extraction and coercion and as a weapon of patriarchal governance that kept civilians in their designated neighborhoods. While sex enabled cross-sectarian connections, the violent use of sex thus also reinforced sectarian social boundaries. My findings build on scholarship that has foregrounded the political economy of the war and on intersectional feminist analyses of political governance in Lebanon. The article is indebted to this scholarship as well as to ongoing civil society efforts to document sexual violence in the war.

Keywords: Lebanese Civil War; Lebanon; patriarchy; political economy; sexual violence; sectarianism

One afternoon in the early 1980s, three teenagers are running through the empty streets of war-torn Beirut, holding up a bra as a form of laissez-passer to prevent snipers from shooting them. They are trying to reach Zaytouna Bay, close to the demarcation line that divided Beirut during the civil war. They have heard about Um Walid's, a place where women sell their bodies and fun is to be had. This scene, depicted in Ziad Doueiri's film *West Beirut* (1998), is a fictional account of a war that was all-too real, as was the brothel in which it is set. Um Walid's brothel was located across the Green Line that divided wartime Beirut into a Christian-identified East and a Muslim-identified West. The protagonist, Tarek, stumbles upon the place earlier in the film, when he seeks refuge inside a car that happens to drive him right into the brothel's parking lot. The car has a bra flanked on the car's side, "a code to snipers," as the driver explains. At the entrance to the brothel, machine guns are lined

up. Inside, Tarek encounters men of every fighting faction drinking, smoking, and sharing stories while women dance around him. Um Walid, the female custodian, tells her young visitor, "There is no East or West in this place … it's Beirut, period!"[1]

Um Walid's statement should not be interpreted to imply that sex stopped the war because opposing factions met and partied inside. Quite to the contrary, I argue that the war continued by other means inside brothels right from the start of the Lebanese Civil War, when militia fighting broke out close to Beirut's red-light district, which prompted brothel owners to move their business to the western side of the city. This move proved lucrative both for brothel owners and for militias, who demanded fees from brothel owners in return for keeping their businesses safe from sniper attacks. Civilians, like the teenagers in Doueiri's film, soon learned that displaying oneself as a customer of the brothels provided a mobility otherwise denied in a war divided by checkpoints. The sex economy therefore allowed for other traffic to flow, of people, goods, and information.

I engage the concept of traffic to understand how militias used sex to govern the city, and how they governed civilians through a parallel traffic in women, a patriarchal system of protection through which they maintained power over their constituencies.[2] In conversation with former militia fighters and with civilians, I argue that the way militias governed sex as an exception to the war and yet central to its traffic parallels the way that they governed civilians in the war: dividing them into sectarian-based zones under their control and "protection," while extracting from them. Sex, like civilians, therefore appears hidden and protected from the war, neatly tucked away into brothels and homes, when in fact the political governance and extraction of sex enabled the war to go on.

The roles of sex and sexual violence in the war appear hidden, too, in scholarship on the war. Although scholars have pushed conversations on gender roles in the war by foregrounding the experience of women and examining the role of militiamen and soldiers as both perpetrators and victims of the war, sex itself has been left unexamined.[3] In contrast, Lebanese cinematography and literature particularly provide a rich archive on sexual relations and sexual violence in the war. What do we make of this seeming disjuncture between the normalization of sex in Lebanese war-era popular culture and its silencing in academic knowledge production?

In this article, I engage critically with the war era's cultural archive through an intertextual ethnographic reading, combining cultural texts with oral history interviews and urban mapping that I conducted with former militiamen and militiawomen from opposing factions, and with cis and trans women who had transactional sex with, or were married to, militia

[1] Beirut was not carved up into "east" and "west" sectarian sides before the war. Although there was a majority of Christians living on the "east" side and a majority of Sunni Muslims living on the "west" side, mainly due to the prominence of certain landowning families, many areas of central Beirut, including Hamra, were considered multiconfessional.

[2] Traffic in sex should not be confused with sex trafficking. I imply here traffic in sex as the economy of transactional sex, which I distinguish from traffic in women as a system that reproduces patriarchal power through marriage. This concept was first developed in Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 3 (1975): 290–313. I am indebted to Rosalind Morris for emphasizing this distinction in personal correspondence.

[3] Miriam Cooke, *Women Write War: The Centering of the Beirut Decentrists* (Oxford, UK: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1987); Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, *Women and War in Lebanon* (Gainesville, FL: Florida University Press, 1999); Sune Haugbolle, "The (Little) Militia Man," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012): 115–36; Floriane Soulié-Caraguel, "Quand les Miliciennes Devenaient Femmes: Le Façonnage des Féminités dans les Milices Chrétiennes pendant la Guerre du Liban," *Critique Internationale* 93 (2021): 9–28; Rania Abisaab and Elizabeth Hartmann, *Women's War Stories: The Lebanese Civil War, Women's Labor, and the Creative Arts* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2022); Jonathan Hassine, "Masculinity in Contention: Performance, Language, and Gender in the Lebanese Army during the Civil War," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 4 (2022): 647–67; Jennifer Eggert, "Revisiting Women's Roles in Conflict and Peace: Female Fighters during the Lebanese Civil War," *al-Raida* 47, no. 1 (2023): 105–15.

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members.[4] Building on materialist readings that foreground the primacy of cross-factional trade in the war, I propose an intersectional reading of the war that combines the political economy and the sexual as interlinked zones of governance.[5] I map what I call the political economy of sex in the war, moving from brothels and gay cruising of public beaches, through checkpoints into neighborhoods and civilian homes, which militias invaded under the guise of protecting them. My argument is twofold, according to this movement.

First, I argue that militias used sexual violence, and the threat of it, as a tool of economic governance within "their" neighborhood constituencies, through taxing and preying on civilians, under the guise of protecting them from enemy attack. This violence of protection allowed for a sectarian-based and gendered division of space for the stated purpose of keeping neighborhoods and civilians "intact" from enemy invasions. The price of this relative protection was an entitlement to those civilians. For example, I show how families who faced economic hardship would sometimes marry their daughters off to militiamen at a young age, in the interest of protecting them, through a logic that reinforced sectarian boundaries and perpetuated patriarchal power structures.[6] These marital constellations with militia fighters placed young women in a predicament of economic dependence on and exploitation by the militias that, in the case I examine, continued long after the war was declared over.

Relatedly, I examine how the traffic in sex and the traffic in women manifested as a spatialized class divide. The militiamen I spoke to tended to distinguish between women based on their social position as either civilian "neighborhood women" (*nisaʾ al-ḥayy*), whom militias "protected" and violated through marriage, in contrast to women on the street and widows, whom they considered sexually up for grabs, and in contrast to sex workers, whom militias transacted with through a traffic in sex. Militiawomen who shared experiences of intimacy and solidarity with their male comrades in the barracks represent yet another category within this gendered hierarchy of violence and protection.

[4] In this article I do not offer a deep analysis of these literary and cinematographic works but rather cite them to show the extent to which sex and sexual violence were documented in Lebanon's cultural production. On reading cultural production as public memory, see, for example, Aseel Sawalha, "After Amnesia: Memory and War in Two Lebanese Films," *Visual Anthropology* 27, no. 1/2 (2014): 105–16; and Karim Abuawad, "Elias Khoury's Little Mountain: The Lebanese Civil War and the Aesthetics of Revolution," *Studies in the Novel* 49, no. 1 (2017): 90–108.

[5] On the political economy of the civil war, see Salim Nasr, "Lebanon's War: Is the End in Sight?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (*MERIP*) 162 (1990), https://merip.org/1990/01/lebanons-war; Georges Corm, "The War System: Militia Hegemony and Reestablishment of the State," in *Peace for Lebanon? From War to Reconstruction*, ed. Deirdre Collings (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 215–30; Elizabeth Picard, "The Political Economy of Civil War in Lebanon," in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed. Steven Heydemann (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Samir Makdisi, *The Lessons of Lebanon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004); Fawaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); and Najib Hourani, "Capitalists in Conflict: The Lebanese Civil War Reconsidered," *Middle East Critique* 24, no. 2 (2015): 137–60.

[6] This insight comes from Maya Mikdashi, who has observed that "the very category of 'sect' is a patriarchal inheritance" and argued that patriarchal power is reproduced through sectarian difference-making; Mikdashi, *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 25. See also Suad Joseph, "Descent of the Nation: Kinship and Citizenship in Lebanon," *Citizenship Studies* 3, no. 3 (1999): 295–318; and Michael Johnson, *All Honourable Men: The Social Origins of War in Lebanon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004). On the Ottoman origins of modern state sectarianism, see Mahdi Amal, "On the Sectarian State," in *Arab Marxism and National Liberation*, ed. Hisham Safieddine (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1986), 85; and Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000). On sectarianism in post–civil war Lebanon, see Joanne Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Rima Majed, "'Sectarian Neoliberalism' and the 2019 Uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq," in *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*, ed. Rima Majed and Jeffrey Karam (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 76–88.

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Second, I argue that the militias marked out violence committed by the enemy faction as political violence proper, which worked to excuse or disguise sexual violence committed within the sectarian, or "sextarian," unit of the militia-family.[7] This sectarianized logic of protection underscores an already existing social hierarchy of sexual violence, not unique to Lebanon, in which domestic violence is invisibilized, whereas forms of spectacular and politicized violence gain more attention.[8] In making this observation, I build on the pioneering work of Lebanese feminist scholars and civil society. In 2022, a watershed report on sexual violence in the civil war, based on interviews with 150 women, found that sexual violence in the Lebanese Civil War was systematic and widespread, and took place both within and across sectarian enemy lines.[9] My discussion of this material also contributes to current transnational debates about the politicization of sexual violence in armed conflict.[10]

Research Methodology and Ethics

I conducted oral history and cultural archival research in Lebanon between April 2023 and March 2024 with four groups of interlocutors: former militia members, civilians who had sex with them, cultural producers who documented sex in the war and, finally, civil society advocates from feminist organizations. First, I conducted individual as well as focus group interviews with six former militiamen and four former militiawomen who had fought in opposing factions, and who are now members of the civil society organization Fighters for Peace.[11] Interlocutors included former members of the secular, cross-sectarian Lebanese Community Party (LCP), the secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Druze-based Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Shiʿite-based Amal Movement, and the Maronite Christian Lebanese Forces (LF). Together, these former fighters provided a diversity of perspective on the war from different geographical, gendered, and class backgrounds. I mention the sectarian identification of my interlocutors only to establish the diversity of the research participants, stressing that the sectarian and political-ideological differences between the militias did not have any qualitative impact on my analytical treatment of them. In addition to oral history interviews, I also conducted participant urban mapping with several of these former fighters, in which we walked together in the city while they recounted memories from the war pertaining to those sites.

As a second group, I interviewed five civilian women who had grown up in the war—including a trans woman who had transactional sex with militiamen during the war—all of

[7] Mikdashi, *Sextarianism.*

[8] On this point, see ibid., 76.

[9] Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) and UN Women, "They Raped Us in Every Possible Way, in Ways You Can't Imagine: Gendered Crimes during the Lebanese Civil Wars," 2022, https://www.legalactionworldwide.org/wp-content/uploads/They-raped-us-in-every-possible-way-23.05.2022.pdf.

[10] Laleh Khalili, "Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency," *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 4 (2011): 1471–91; Jacqui True, *The Political Economy of Violence against Women* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lauren Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); Lila Abu-Lughod, Rima Hammami, and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, eds. *The Cunning of Gender Violence: Geopolitics and Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023). I depart from previous culturalist and psychoanalytical readings of sex and violence in Lebanon as symptoms of moral decay or cultural perversity. See, for example, Issa Makhlouf, *Beyrouth, ou, La Fascination de la Mort: Essai* (Montreuil, France: Les Editions de la Passion, 1988); and Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War* (New York: NYU Books, 1990). Also see True's critique, in True, *Political Economy.*

[11] Fighters for Peace (website), 2016, https://fightersforpeace.org. All names of research participants have been altered to protect their privacy. This research was conducted with permission from The New School for Social Research's internal review board and in accordance with their ethical research codes. All interviews were conducted by me in Arabic, and translated by me.

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whom I recruited through personal relations. The research participants included the generation who came of age during the civil war, as well as the generation who was born after the war. This approach enabled an intersectional examination of how women were differently positioned and sexualized in the war, based on their social status as civilians, militia members, widows, or trans women.

I conducted interviews with both groups in different spaces based on their preferences, including offices where they worked, coffee shops, and domestic spaces when they invited me to visit them. Although the difference between these semipublic and private spaces may have impacted our conversation, I established a degree of confidentiality with my interlocutors across the different settings. My position as a foreign woman who has lived in Lebanon for years and speaks Lebanese dialect with an accent enabled, perhaps, a different kind of access and ease with former militia members, because I do not carry intergenerational trauma from the war. My gender position perhaps also allowed for a different confidentiality than that of male-to-male research encounters, in which acts of performative masculinity often become heightened.[12]

As a third group, I interviewed Lebanese filmmakers, writers, and artists whose documentation contributed to building an alternative cultural archive of sex in the war. Finally, I interviewed members of civil society and feminist organizations in Lebanon—Kafa, Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), and UN Women—which enabled me to establish a comparative framework between contemporary and past practices in sex work legislation and sexual violence.

Adding Sex to the Equation: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Civil War

"Sex is the bread of war," declared Hisham, a former PFLP fighter.[13] Animated and chain-smoking, he drew a map with his hands on the coffee table between us, displaying the different economies that fueled the war. Hisham grew up in South Lebanon but moved to Beirut for college before the war and worked at the port. There, he witnessed a constant flow of contraband goods; he also saw militias trading with one another. "Nothing was one thing only in this war, and nothing was as it seemed," he told me. "Everything was *mushabaka*" (networked or connected in Arabic). The Black Saturday massacre of 6 December 1975, when the Christian right-wing Phalangists attacked Muslim workers in Beirut's port, was a turning point for him. After witnessing his coworkers being killed, and almost facing death himself that day, he joined the PFLP, whose cause he identified with, having grown up with Israeli military aggression in the south.

In photographs from the civil war, militia fighters often appear anchored in their neighborhood barracks, hiding behind sandbags from which only their heads (and guns) peek out to shoot at occasional enemy movement.[14] Although these depictions certainly capture some experiences of the war, a different image presents itself when we follow the traffic of the war and the labor that sustained it. After all, what is a neighborhood worth in political economic terms if nothing and no one crosses through it?

Hisham's account of the war economy as interconnected correlates with scholars who argue that militias relied on trading across enemy lines, even as they maintained those lines territorially, and that civilian movement across the demarcated city presented a primary source of extraction.[15] This insight correlates with comparative scholarship on militia rule

[12] Hassine, "Masculinity in Contention."

[13] Interview in Beirut, 11 April 2023.

[14] See for example the work of Fouad Khoury and George Azar.

[15] Corm, "War System"; Picard, "Political Economy"; Makdisi, *Lessons of Lebanon*; Traboulsi, *History of Modern Lebanon*; Hanf, *Coexistence*; Sarah Parkinson, *Beyond the Lines: Social Networks and Palestinian Militant Organizations in Wartime Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

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in other international contexts where militias gain power through cross-territorial mediation, rather than through holding static territorial sovereignty.[16]

Scholars of Lebanon's civil war have periodized it by two phases.[17] In its first phase, from 1975 to 1982/83, the war did not disrupt so much as exacerbate the political economic system of hypercapitalist clientelism that had characterized Lebanon in the 1960s.[18] Yet although the national economy remained somewhat intact, militias gained ground through a form of "organized chaos."[19] This chaos relied on "pillage, seizure, occupation, forced taxation, smuggling and other forms of forced transfer."[20] "A modern form of piracy" took hold first in Beirut's souks and in the port, as Fawaz Traboulsi has described it, with militias storing and smuggling clandestine goods and pillaging at their whim.[21] Militias "inflicted U.S. $20 billion to $30 billion of destruction on public and private property through intentional, blind shelling of civilian targets," Georges Corm observed.[22] Already, during the first years of the war, their operations expanded from "banditry" to "organized extraction"; as Elizabeth Picard wrote, "Militia fighters were relentlessly seeking to destroy the very infrastructures they also sought to appropriate for themselves."[23] The logic behind this destruction was twofold: first, destruction of shared infrastructure to fracture the country into communal enclaves, and second, ensuring these communities' reliance on militia rule through distribution of resources. Militias exchanged goods internally and resold looted goods at a higher price to civilians.

While militias profited from this trade, "the standard of living of most Lebanese remained stable or even improved" during the first years of the war. Salim Nasr suggests that a number of national economic and geopolitical factors led to an increase in growth at this time. The regional oil boom of the 1970s attracted Lebanese labor power, whose remittances contributed considerably to keeping the national economy afloat, not to mention the "political money" that poured into the country from various transnational actors in support of the different militias. Adding to this, militias recruited manpower mainly from the country's peripheries, who experienced "substantial social mobility" through a "redistribution" of wealth that largely benefited "the popular classes at the expense of the old bourgeoisie."[24] Leading up to the war, social disparity had grown along Beirut's frontiers, to which the rural population had been displaced from the diminishing agrarian sector, and this growing class was recruited to the ideological struggles of the war.[25]

The militias' redistributive system enabled "mini-states" that by the mid-1980s employed "one-third of Lebanon's population," according to Picard. By this time, the militia-run

[16] See Louisa Lombard, "Navigational Tools for Central African Roadblocks," *PoLAR Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 36, no. 1 (2013): 157–73; Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Peer Schouten, *Roadblock Politics: The Origins of Violence in Central Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022); and Joshua Craze, "Rule by Militia: Africa, War and National Security," *Boston Review*, 2024, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/rule-by-militia.

[17] Scholars disagree, however, over when the second phase began. Some count the shift beginning with Israel's military invasion of 1982, which displaced the Palestinian leadership, institutions, and labor force, whereas others argue for 1984 rather than 1982 as the turning point, due to the split in the army and the fiscal crisis, which both occurred in 1984.

[18] Salim Nasr, "Backdrop to Civil War: The Crisis of Lebanese Capitalism," *Middle East Research and Information Project* (*MERIP*) 73 (1978): 3–13; Picard, "Political Economy"; Makdisi, *Lessons of Lebanon.*

[19] Hanf, *Coexistence*, 350.

[20] Salim Nasr, "Lebanon's War."

[21] Traboulsi, *History of Modern Lebanon*, 241.

[22] Corm, "War System."

[23] Picard, "Political Economy," 294.

[24] Nasr, "Lebanon's War." Nasr observed, "In the early 1980s, this inflow of political money reached an estimated $300 million a year, some 6 percent of GDP."

[25] Nasr, "Backdrop to Civil War"; Traboulsi, *History of Modern Lebanon.*

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"parallel economy" had outsized the state's functions; Lebanese currency, which had remained stable until 1982, devalued at a bewildering rate, and incomes plummeted.[26] In the end then, "It was the average Lebanese who paid the price."[27]

How did sex figure into these processes of extraction and class disparity? Scholarship on sex work and sexual violence in other civil war contexts has emphasized how sex functions as an economic weapon.[28] In Lebanon, sexual transactions contributed to an economy of traffic, characterized by cross-factional trade and checkpoint control. To understand how sex became "the bread" of this war, as Hisham put it, let me first map the brothel economy as it appeared on the eve of the war.

The Traffic in Sex

"Um Walid used to run her business from the third floor of this building," Hisham told me as we passed by the Starco building in downtown Beirut on a spring day in 2023.[29] Um Walid closed her brothel around 1995, when the state's postwar reconstruction forced many residents and shopkeepers out of the area.[30] Hisham's comrades whom I spoke to remembered Um Walid vividly.

"You had to say a code word to enter," Malek, a fellow Lebanese PFLP member, recalled of his time at Um Walid's brothel.[31] Malek was rejected on his first visit there in the late 1970s, when he was 12 years old. On his second try a few weeks later, he came better prepared, having memorized the code word. The women were older than him and a lot more experienced. He managed to lose his virginity that night to a woman named Jocelyn. What Malek remembers most vividly from this visit is not the sex itself, but the smell that permeated the room: "Smoking, drinking, men's sweat, drugs everywhere."

"Um Walid was nothing like how Ziad Doueiri portrayed her [in the film], that's a romanticized image. In reality, she was vulgar, and violent! Slapping people left and right," Malek recalled. Yet he agreed with Doueiri's Um Walid that inside the brothel, "there is no east or west Beirut," and customers did leave their guns outside the door before entering. He saw snipers from opposing factions laughing together. Someone poured him a glass of champagne, which made him very tipsy. The next day, his mother grounded him after discovering spots of dried sperm in his pants, thinking that he might have made a girl pregnant.

Um Walid's famed brothel has inspired many accounts like this one, but Lebanon's history contains many lesser-known tales of transactional sex that are just as suggestive of how sex entered the war economy. Sex workers provided a "key" to the war, Hisham told me, because they allowed for things to flow and circulate, at the same time as they were a source of "venting" (*tanfīs*) for fighters, a "fishing rod" (*ṣayed al-samak*) to another kind of life, as he put it. His comment underscores that militia fighters were young and often from poor class backgrounds, who entered a world they did not have access to prior to becoming men of arms and cash.

[26] Picard, "Political Economy."

[27] Hourani, "Capitalists in Conflict," 21.

[28] Dara Cohen, "Explaining Rape during Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980–2009)," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 3 (2013): 461–77.

[29] Ethnographic participant mapping in downtown Beirut, April 2023.

[30] The neighborhood was reconstructed by the company Solidere after the Lebanese Civil War; Saree Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1997): 660–705.

[31] Interview in Beirut, 13 April 2023.

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For young militia recruits, the sex industry provided a path to another kind of life. A communist fighter who was interviewed for a documentary after the war describes going to downtown Beirut during the war and encountering "another world," where "porn cinemas, drugs, thugs and fighters" were lined up next to one another. "At night, I felt like hanging around in risky places, in this environment of another world," he recounts to director Randa Chanda Sabbag in her 1995 documentary, *Our Heedless Wars.* Little did these men know that this wondrous new world would soon become theirs to control.

Hisham's description of sex workers as a "fishing rod" for fighters also suggests the fetish power of sex. Sex as a commodity has the peculiar characteristic of being at once clandestine, like drugs, while at the same time being common to all; most people cannot live without it, and it is the source of endless fantasy and desire. The war's traffic played into this demand and kept fighters awake and on edge with pleasurable and addictive economies running ad libitum.[32] An Israeli Mossad agent brags in his memoir of visiting Beirut's fancy nightclubs where belly dancers entertained guests, in the company of Lebanese "casino kings" and petty crime "smugglers," whom he reportedly recruited to his side.[33] As his account suggests, the traffic of clandestine goods bled into the traffic in sex across different sites of the city.

Brothels, casinos, and "super nightclubs" that hosted sex workers were important both as a source of extraction, including the bribes that brothel owners (*patronas)* paid to militias, but also as a cover for other transactions that took place inside. A class hierarchy operated in the sex-war economy between militiamen who socialized across enemy lines in sites of the city, and their leaders who preferred the privacy of their homes, where sex workers were sent out for "delivery" at a higher hourly rate. Snipers and foot soldiers from different militias went to the regular brothels as well as to bars where women sold sex and to hotels and super nightclubs north of Beirut, which are still known for their sex enterprise. Sex-working women reportedly also were sent to work in militia barracks, where they would "train" young recruits in the arts of sex.[34] Women who sold sex may have preferred these alternative sites to working in the brothels, where *patronas* reportedly kept their employees in prison-like conditions.

Many of the women employed in the sex economy were foreigners, including Arabs, Europeans, and East Africans. The writer Yusef Bazzi, who fought in the war with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), recalls in his memoir buying an hour with a "blond woman from Aleppo" and later with an Egyptian woman, both of whom he met in a bar in Hamra, the busy heart of West Beirut.[35] Fighters became infatuated with these women, yet they never trusted them, according to Hisham. He spoke of one famous Italian "Bianca" who was reportedly working as an undercover agent for an Italian leftist guerilla group in the 1960s and 70s and fled Lebanon once her double play was revealed. Like Bianca, women working in the brothels were often accused or suspected of spying for their clients and punished for it; many were even killed because of these associations.[36] "The woman's body became her weapon in the war, but it also was used against her," Hisham observed. The *patronas*' iron hand may then have been a preventive act of protection as well.

[32] On the impact of drug trade in the war, see Jonathan Marshall, *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[33] Yair Ravid, *Window to the Backyard: The History of Israel–Lebanon Relations: Facts and Illusions* (Petach Tikva, Israel: Ofir Bikurim Press, 2016).

[34] Monika Borgmann told me that she met a woman working at PFLP's office in Beirut who had performed sex work for PFLP recruits during the war; personal correspondence, March 2024.

[35] Yusuf Bazzi, *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me and Smiled: Diary of a Fighter*, trans. Rasha Salti (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2005), 23.

[36] Yussef Bazzi mentions in his memoir one "beautiful young woman" who is accused of being an "Israeli collaborator" and is detained and "disappeared"; ibid., 47.

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The name *patronas* points to the patron-clientelist form of capitalism that informed Lebanon's economy preceding the war, but which scaled up to a militarized system.[37] Small business owners survived by maintaining clientelist relations with militias.[38] *Patronas* had to pay fees to the militias that controlled the areas where they operated, and at the same time maintain business relations across this political spectrum. An anecdote from the first phase of the war (before 1982) reveals this balancing act. When neighbors complained about the surging business at Um Walid's brothel, Fatah, the Palestinian faction who controlled the neighborhood around Starco at the time, threatened to bomb the place to appease their constituency. Yet Um Walid made a swift phone call to the faction leader, and the attack never happened.[39] This incident was not the first time that brothels were subject to military aggression in the war, as I observed in the opening.

Sex workers who ventured outside the brothels faced an altogether different degree of violence. In Lebanese dialect, brothels are often referred to as *karkhana*, which in Ottoman Turkish means "factory."[40] This meaning explains why this term was used to designate women who worked in the silk factories in 19th-century Mount Lebanon.[41] The word gained a stigmatizing association with women who worked outside the house.

A classist perception of women with female sexual promiscuity on the street enters the frame in *Beyrouth ya Beyrouth*, Marwan Bagdadi's film about the student strikes in Beirut following the 1967 war. In one scene, a group of young leftist students pick up a young woman in their car and take turns having sex with her. Although we never see a monetary transaction take place, the scene suggests that the sex is transactional; the woman enters the car with little persuasion, and the men do not ask for consent before grabbing her. Their male-entitled behavior is strikingly different from how they interact with the film's main female character, the bourgeois Hala, who is taken out to respectful cafés, quiet dinners, and long walks by the Corniche, without ever being stripped naked. The film underscores a class divide between women whom militiamen encountered in their homes and considered marriage-worthy (even if they violated them), and women whom they encountered on the streets and at checkpoints and therefore considered theirs for the taking.

A brief look at the history of sex work in Lebanon reveals that this classist demarcation of transactional sex as separate from bourgeois civilian life did not emerge in the civil war era.

The City As Brothel

Where there is militarized labor, there tends to be an increased demand for sex work, and Lebanon was no exception to this pattern.[42] Prostitution had been an active economy already in late Ottoman-era Beirut, and during the French Mandate rule (1923–43) the French legalized prostitution, primarily to serve the needs of overseas soldiers who were stationed in Beirut.[43]

[37] Nasr, "Backdrop to Civil War." On Lebanon's clientelist capitalism, see also Michael Gilsenan, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Johnson, *All Honourable Men.*

[38] Nasr, "Backdrop to Civil War."

[39] Yusuf Bazzi recounts another incident from 1981, when he and comrades from the Syrian militia SSNP did a "clean-up" of "prostitution and drug-dealing" around Riad al Solh; *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me*, 8.

[40] Hannah Scott Deuchar, personal correspondence.

[41] Akram Khater, personal correspondence.

[42] Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Lucia Carminati, *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said: Labor Migration and the Making of the Suez Canal* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2023).

[43] Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Jens Hanssen, "Public Morality and Marginality in Fin-de-Siècle

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The city's growing sex economy attracted rural-urban migrants who came to the city in search of work, and cultural production has captured some of their stories. One such migrant was "Aunt Naziha," a fictionalized character in Alawiya Sobh's novel *Maryam: The Keeper of Stories*, who came in the 1940s with her sisters from the remote southern village of Bint Jubail to work as maids in Beirut. They shared an apartment with other young women in the mixed neighborhood of Zuqaq al Blat. Some of those girls flashed jewelry which, it turned out, they had acquired from working nightly for *patronas* on al-Mutanabbi Street, where, as mentioned, Beirut's red-light district was located before the war (close to the now reconstructed Saifi district).

Naziha, eager to change her fate, soon joined this labor force at the brothels, where she scrubbed floors and waxed hair for the more experienced women. Naziha eventually built a career in the brothels, and disappeared from her family and her surroundings, "with no documentation but a prostitution license."[44] Contemporary cultural productions have, like Sobh's novel, strived to recover the stories of women like her. A cabaret show staged at Beirut's Metro al-Medina theater in 2024, for example, brought to life the sex workers on al-Mutanabbi Street.[45]

In the 1950s, following international abolitionist trends and growing public concern over Beirut's booming sex economy, the Lebanese government stopped issuing legal licenses to brothels, but it continued to give so-called "artistes" work permits to sex workers; many also began working "freelance" outside the fold of the *patronas*.[46] "It's like a souk with prostitutes for sale," recounts the Yemeni feminist protagonist in Sonallah Ibrahim's *Warda* of her visit to Beirut in the early 1960s. "Posters are lit up in red: Mareika, Sonia, Firecracker."[47] The fire cracked in more than one sense when war broke out in 1975 around the corner from the brothels.

A growing sexual liberation discourse emerged in the decade leading up to the war, and sex work gained a new audience as literary magazines began to feature half-naked pin-ups on their covers, and published noir stories of sex and murder in the city and reviews of cabaret shows, which hosted many of the city's sex workers.[48] These magazines brought Beirut's nightlife performers into homes that could not afford to attend the shows. Many young men, who would soon become fighters in the civil war, learned the names of sex workers first from reading magazines and, later, from visiting pornography movie theaters. Bazzi, the SSNP fighter (also known by his nom de guerre, Devil), recalls seeing "the first pornographic scene" of his life in a cinema in downtown Beirut and later in Hamra, where "the audience

Beirut," in *Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, ed. Eugene Rogan (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 183–211; Liat Kozma, "Women's Migration for Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East and North Africa," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 93–115; Camila Pastor de Maria Campos, "Performers or Prostitutes? Artistes during the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon, 1921–1946," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 2 (2017): 287–312; Pascale Graham, "Sex Work, Containment, and the New Discourse of Public Health in French Colonial Levant," *Medical History* 65, no. 4 (2021): 330–47; Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal, "War, Women, and Sex Work in Occupied Istanbul, 1918–1923," *Journal of Social History* 57, no. 4 (2024): 491–519. Lebanon's prostitution law, which was adopted from French colonial law, still restricts female migrant workers who are employed under the "artistes visa" from reproductive rights and free movement; Kafa employee, personal correspondence.

[44] Alawiya Sobh, *Maryam: The Keeper of Stories*, trans. Nirvana Tanoukhi (Kolkota, India: Seagull Books, 2016), 183.

[45] Metro al Medina, *Souq al-Oumoumi*, staged in Beirut, March 2024.

[46] Samir Khalaf, *Prostitution in a Changing Society: A Sociological Survey of Legal Prostitution in Beirut* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1965); Ali Reda, "Sex Workers As Workers: A Critique of Abolitionist Approaches to Sex Work in Lebanon," *Kohl Journal for Body and Gender Research* 6, no. 1 (2020): 60–75.

[47] Sonallah Ibrahim, *Warda* (2000), trans. Hosam Aboul-Ela (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 61.

[48] Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Alfred Tarazzi, *Memory of a Paper City* (exhibition), The Hangar, Beirut, 2023. The female sex workers in Beirut whom Samir Khalaf interviewed in the 1960s complained about a decline in their business, which they linked to the increasing sexual and social freedom in 1960s Lebanon, which made it easier for men and women to meet at university and in public spaces outside traditional kin networks; see Khalaf, *Prostitution.*

consisted of more than 300 fighters outfitted with their entire arsenal," who "unzipped their pants and fondled themselves." The smell of the place stayed with Bazzi, "reeking of accumulated mold, urine, semen, warm breath, and congealed filth."[49]

In novels set in the war, the city becomes a stand-in for all kinds of sin and desire.[50] "Beirut syphilis-carrying whore," "this center of all prostitutions," decried the queer feminist writer Etel Adnan about her hometown in her writings from the late 1970s and 1980s.[51]

"I played with my body as we did with the wounded city," observes Maryam, the female protagonist of *Maryam: The Keeper of Stories*, Sobh's novel in which sexual play often blends into violence.[52] Beirut becomes an extension of the destroyed and destroyable woman in several civil war–era novels, in which militiamen discover their own sexuality through the destruction of the city's women.[53] In Bazzi's memoir, the "fantastical appearance" of a woman staggering alone down the street late one night provokes unsolicited desire in him and his SSNP comrades. They argue over who gets to "have a go" at her first. Yet, to their surprise, the woman fights back, and after a while they give up.[54] The raped or "rapable" woman remains unidentified—nameless and, notably, sect-less. Rather than intersectarian violence, sexual violence is displayed here as individual acts symptomatic of a moral crisis of excess and masculine entitlement.[55]

"Beirut is like a whore," declares Elias Khoury's protagonist in *Little Mountain*, which describes the city as an extractive economy to which the man falls victim.[56]"What a city—a whore of a city. Who could imagine a whore sleeping with a thousand men and continuing to live?"[57] What prompted this widespread cultural association of Beirut with female sexual promiscuity, and the consequent destruction of it (or "her")? And how were the city's residents gendered through this violent cultivation of masculinity and femininity?

For Khoury's protagonist, "The total and violent destruction of this woman is seen as the only way out of an inextricable situation," Evelyne Accad suggests in her reading of the novel, implying by "woman" the generalized figure of the city.[58] Toward the end of *Little Mountain* Khoury's protagonist is surprised to find that the city is still standing: "She wasn't destroyed."[59] This surprise observation that the city-as-woman has agency recalls another familiar stereotype of Beirut—and of its residents—as a phoenix who can rise from the ashes of armed conflict, seemingly unharmed despite suffering multiple traumas.

In contrast to fictional writing and memoirs, sexual violence does not count among the forms of violence that key scholars of the war list in their assessments.[60] It is telling, then, that rape emerges as an analogy in Salim Nasr's analysis of the war as an illegitimate child of Lebanese society, and a product of nonconsensual sex, when he writes:

[49] Bazzi, *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me*, 9, 23.

[50] See also Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra* (New York: Anchor, 1980); Darina Al-Joundi, *The Day Nina Simone Stopped Singing*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (New York: CUNY Press, 2011).

[51] Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose*, trans. Georgina Kleege (Beirut: Post-Apollo Press, 1982), 121; Etel Adnan, *Arab Apocalypse*, trans. Etel Adnan (Beirut: Post-Apollo Press, 1989), 20.

[52] Sobh, *Maryam*, 25.

[53] Ghenda Hayek, personal correspondence.

[54] Bazzi, *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me*, 46–47.

[55] Rosalind Morris, "The Mute and the Unspeakable: Political Subjectivity, Violent Crime, and 'The Sexual Thing' in a South African Mining Community," in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 57–101.

[56] Elias Khoury, *Little Mountain*, trans. Maia Tabet (London: Picador Press, 1989), 94.

[57] Ibid, 107.

[58] Evelyne Accad, "Guns and Roses: On Sexuality and War," *Little Magazine* 2, no. 1 (2001): 1–7.

[59] Khoury, *Little Mountain*, 135.

[60] See, for example, Nasr, "Lebanon's War"; Corm, "War System"; and Picard, "Political Economy."

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> Certainly, the emergence of a war system in Lebanon implies an accumulation of tensions, contradictions, and imbalances in the pre-war social and political order (and in this sense, war is a child of that society). But to what extent is it a *legitimate* child—or the product of a rape—even if significant segments of that society were consenting or at least complicit?[61]

Indeed, "War is a relationship," as ʿAli, a member of Amal, told me over coffee one morning.[62] How did sex figure into the relational traffic of the war, I wondered? When I asked civilian women who grew up in the war whether and in what contexts they experienced the threat of sexual violence, several mentioned everyday encounters with militias that involved monetary extraction. The threat of rape was particularly heightened at checkpoints, where militiamen worked long hours for little pay and where they demanded customs fees from those crossing. A scene in Bazzi's memoir features a Christian woman "driving from east to west" whom his militia, the SSNP, intercepts at their checkpoint. When she talks back, accusing them of sectarian harassment, the commander scolds her: "I'll fuck the seed that brought you into this world. Shut up, you whore!" then detains her and drives her away.[63] Like so many other women who were forcibly disappeared in the war, we do not learn of her fate.

The City As Checkpoint

Female and femme sexuality became bargaining chips in an economy of need and consumption, where sex was interchangeable with other desired commodities. Jana, a trans woman who experienced the sex economy firsthand during the war, understood that women could gain mobility or essential supplies such as gas, bread, and fuel by tapping into the war's traffic.[64] She would bring home-baked *mana'ish* (plural for *mana'oushe*, a form of flatbread) to militiamen guarding the checkpoint to be allowed to cross from West to East Beirut, whenever she had to visit friends on the other side of the city.[65] "They must have been hungry!" I remarked when Jana told me this story, surprised that a piece of bread was enough to cross a militarized checkpoint. "They could not resist my zaʿatar," she responded, laughing.

Jana and her friends would cruise and gather around Beirut's seafront Raouché and the public beach Ramlet al-Bayda, which Jana described as "a safe space of sorts" for queer people and sex workers, who picked up customers there. Their experience, as she recounted it to me, suggests that trans women and gay sex workers had more mobility than both neighborhood women, who were kept indoors by militias, and brothel workers who were

[61] Translated from the French:

> Certes, il est évident que l'émergence d'un système de guerre au Liban implique une accumulation de tensions, de contradictions et de déséquilibres dans l'ordre social et politique de l'avant-guerre (donc, d'une certaine manière, la guerre est enfant de cette société) mais est-ce—et dans quelle mesure est-ce—un enfant légitime ou le produit d'un viol, même si des segments significatifs de cette société étaient consentants ou au moins complices?

Salim Nasr, "Anatomie d'un système de guerre interne: le cas du Liban," *Cultures et Conflits* 1 (1990): 2.

[62] Interview, downtown Beirut, September 2023.

[63] Bazzi, *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me*, 42.

[64] Ariella Azoulay makes a similar observation in her brilliant reading of testimonies by German women rape survivors after the Allies' capture of Berlin in 1945; see Ariella Azoulay, "A Natural History of Rape," *Journal of Visual Culture* 17, no. 2 (2018): 166–76.

[65] Interview, Beirut, March 2024.

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kept by their *patronas.* Yet trans women also faced many risks on the street. "Militias would target us because they knew we were *tantes*"—especially militiamen who had sex with them, she clarified.[66] "One militiaman told me after we had sex, "If I ever run into you on the street, I will kill you."

Jana recounted with dry humor how "One of the girls went with a guy and came back looking like a street cat."[67] Experiences like this prompted them to move in groups: "If one of us went up with a customer, the rest of us would wait nearby to make sure she came back down alright." For the same reason, they preferred to make their income as "delivery girls" at clubs and at private parties, where members of the elite, including diplomats, often hired trans women to perform.[68]

Women who sold sex were differently positioned than women whom the militias protected, violated, and traded through marriage. In her work on nationalist political violence, Veena Das describes a distinction between the "chaste woman" who is "protected"—albeit not from violence within her marriage and family—and the sexually "loose" woman, who is not deserving of protection.[69] As a sex worker, and as a trans woman, Jana was positioned outside the traffic in women-as-kin, which gave her a different degree of mobility, while exposing her to violence on the street. Women whom the militias considered kin, meanwhile, faced a different threat of violence within the domestic traffic of the neighborhood and family.

The War's "Little States" and the Traffic in Women

"If you're studying sex and prostitution in the civil war, you have to look at rape too," Tony, who fought with LF, told me, raising his eyebrows. He mentioned in passing that he had participated in the Shatila and Sabra massacre of 1982, which his militia carried out against Palestinians. We were sitting at one of Beirut's old cafés by the waterfront with Hisham, from the Palestinian faction, and their friend Lamia, who had fought with the communists.[70] Representing opposite factions and ideologies in the war, the three had since become close friends through their work with the civil society advocacy group Fighters for Peace. Just a minute before Tony's comment about rape, they had been joking with each other. Now, Lamia interjected: "Rape only took place between enemies." But Hisham disagreed: "Rape took place among friends, too." I asked him to elaborate.

"Militias used rape for different purposes: to attack the enemy, by taking their women, for territorial control in neighborhoods, and to make money for their own survival," Hisham

[66] *Tante* (sing.), *tantāt* (pl.) is a Francophone Arabic term, which means "aunt" in French and became popularly used to designate unmarried women in Lebanese Arabic; it also became associated with trans women in Lebanon, and Jana still defines herself as a *tante*, preferring this term to more contemporary Arabic terms for transgender. In West Beirut Tarek addresses the sex worker he encounters as "tante," to her delight.

[67] I am translating this loosely, as Jana literally said, "she came back looking street-ish," which in English makes less sense in this context. On the other hand, street cats are socially valued and cared for in Beirut, so this term would not make sense in the local context.

[68] In a special issue of *Cold Cuts Magazine* that features trans women's stories from the Lebanese Civil War, Tarek Zeidan describes how *tantes* were more tolerated in the Lebanese public in the 1980s and 90s, perhaps because they identified as women who adhered to straight-sex norms; Mohamad Abdouni, "Treat Me Like Your Mother," *Cold Cuts Magazine*, March 2002, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f5a5074c07e78623808803a/t/628b6ab50d787675f32770bd/1653304040604/Treat+Me+Like+Your+Mother+-+Digital+Pressing+%28web%29.pdf.

[69] Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), ch. 1. For a similar point, see Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[70] Focus group interview, Corniche-Beirut, April 2023.

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told us. He continued: "Neighborhood women were the most exposed to sexual violence because they were the heads of household. Also from members of their own sect."

By instilling fear in the neighborhood residents, while also transmitting a sense of mutual obligation, the militias both exploited civilians and ensured the continuation of loyalty. Tony seemed to agree with this take. He reckoned that "civilians feared their militias, but they preferred them to the enemy militia."

The militias acted like "little states," as Racha, a Lebanese journalist who grew up in East Beirut's Ashrafiyeh during the war, told me.[71] Residents were reliant on militias to provide basic services such as water and electricity, and this involved paying a monthly tax, or "protection fee," to the militias in charge.[72] Racha recalled the militia visits with dread. "Ahrar, Marada, Kataeb, LF, they all came to our house, acting like the state," she said, listing the names of the Christian right-wing militias who operated in the neighborhood where her family lived. The faces of the men changed with the shift in power between the militias, but the visits continued.

During the war, Racha's father worked in Kuwait and her mother was alone with her and her sisters. "She told us to stay inside, not to sit on the balcony, because she didn't want the men to see us. It was understood that if we could not pay, they would take us." Like Racha's mother, many Lebanese women became the main household providers during the war, in the absence of fathers, husbands, and sons who were disappeared or killed, or working abroad.[73] As Jonathan Hassine has observed, different sorts of capital operated in the war economy, and "if a family lacked these capitals, the (threat of) violence was heightened."[74] A female-only household lacked a certain masculine patriarchal capital, which had to be compensated for with socioeconomic capital. Racha's family's relative economic power spared her the violence that others, who could not pay, experienced.

That intrasectarian violence was more prevalent than intersectarian violence in the war, although less reported on, has been noted by scholars.[75] "Contrary to common representations," Picard observed decades ago, "the danger came from within, from the routine exercise of intimidation and criminality by the very people who represented themselves as providers of security."[76] Militias in effect reinforced a sectarian kinship logic whereby they would threaten women from "their" community under the guise of protecting them from violation by men from an enemy faction. Another example of this is a scene in Khoury's *Little Mountain* in which a Christian militiaman enters a Christian household and tells the mother, "We're here to protect people, not to loot," as he invades her home in search of her leftist son, whom they consider a traitor to their cause. "He is not here," the mother tells them over and over again as they search his room, penetrating the home as an extension of the woman.[77] With the same logic that allowed for a conflation between the "raped" city and the "rapable" women living in it, the neighborhood and its women remained "intact" through this logic of protection.[78]

[71] Telephone interview, August 2023.

[72] On militia rule and service provision, see Judith Harik, *The Public and Social Services of the Lebanese Militias* (Beirut: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1994); Hanf, *Coexistence.* On militia taxation, see Nasr, "Anatomie"; and Picard, "Political Economy."

[73] Natalie Khazaal, *Pretty Liar: Television, Language, and Gender in Wartime Lebanon* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018).

[74] Hassine, personal correspondence.

[75] On this point, see also Nasr, "Anatomie."

[76] Picard, "Political Economy," 304. Corm, in "War System," makes a similar observation.

[77] Khoury, *Little Mountain*, 27.

[78] On the violence of protection, see also Jatin Dua, *Captured at Sea: Piracy and Protection in the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

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The militias' violence of protection, although sometimes overt, also relied on more subtle techniques, such as neighborhood-based surveillance, societal regulation, and institutional inscription; a disciplinary violence that kept families like Racha's in line.[79] This "privatization of public order," by which militias governed families through the regulatory violence of sex, can be understood as a form of state-making, in the absence of the state.[80] In this lens, Racha's perception of the militias as "little states" can be read as a critique of the militia state that reveals a desire for a different kind of state, as a governing body that might protect her.[81]

The militias' use of sectarianizing disciplinary protection created a hierarchy of sexual violence, which marked out sexual violence committed by an outsider/enemy as political violence proper. This materialized in conversations with former militiamen who blamed the other part for participating in the sex economy. For example, when I asked a former prominent fighter of a Christian faction, who is now a member of the Fighters of Peace, about the brothels, he said: "Only one type of soldier went to those places in Zaytouna, not us Christians."[82] Hisham made a similar accusation the other way around, when he casually associated sexual crimes with "the Christians," making the accusatory discourse almost comical in its circularity.

What this sectarianized logic disguises, meanwhile, is sexual violence committed in the home or "within" the sectarian (or what Maya Mikdashi calls the "sextarian") family unit, which is rendered a necessary violence of protection.[83] A similar pattern can be traced in the UN's action framework, which, as Jacquie True observes, "prioritizes sexual violence as a threat to security when the perpetrators of this violence are from a belligerent party," but often leaving violence committed in private and between civilians in the dark.[84] As Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian has observed, "The consequence of equating the raped woman with the 'dishonoured' country, is that all members of the 'enemy' army are viewed as rapists," and this reinforces a sectarian logic of division.[85]

The sectarianized protection clause also became a recruitment tactic for militias, when they faced a waning political motivation and increased their pressure on civilians to supply men to the front "as if obliged, like they were family," as Ronny, a former LF fighter, told me. His observation emphasizes how militias stressed the kinship bond for gain. Some militias also used the threat of sexual humiliation as a recruitment strategy, by threatening women in the families of the recruits.[86]

The division between political and "private" violence is reproduced spatially in the carving up of the private as a (feminine) safe space and the public as the (masculine) space of warfare. Yet the home, of course, was not protected from the violence of the street; rather, the effect of this violence was kept hidden by the stubborn association of

[79] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

[80] Picard, "Political Economy," 304.

[81] Mikdashi, in *Sextarianism*, defines the state's power to "protect" as a key feature of how "sextarianism" operates in Lebanon.

[82] Telephone interview, 6 April 2023.

[83] Mikdashi (*Sextarianism*) also shows how a hierarchy of sexual violence in contemporary Lebanon informs queer rights and feminist advocacy, which for example condemned forced anal examinations committed by the state as torture and a human rights violation, whereas forced hymen or virginity tests have gone unnoticed. In South Africa, Rosalind Morris has observed a shift in the criminal justice discourse on sexual violence, from being considered a political violence (during apartheid) to an individualized and depoliticized crime in the postapartheid period; Morris, "The Mute and the Unspeakable," 61.

[84] True, *Political Economy*, 119.

[85] Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian Case-Study* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 131.

[86] LAW and UN Women, "They Raped Us."

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the home with feminine safety.[87] Another zone that broke the binary illusion of public and private comprised the shelters, built into most of Beirut's apartment buildings, in which residents hid during the frequent bombardments, sometimes for whole nights. The atmosphere of tension, combined with the low lighting, invited all forms of sexual encounters in the shelters, both consensual and coercive, according to different fighters I spoke to.[88]

Although the brothel upheld a law of disarmament that allowed it to appear as a zone of nonviolence (although it was not), in the home, arms could and did enter at any time. Whether by armed men entering the house, or bullets crashing through the walls and windows, the home became a war zone.

The City As Widow

In a war in which militias "produced social and economic devastation for the communities that they claimed to represent and protect," the classed aspect of sexual violence revealed itself for those who could not afford militia protection.[89] Poorer families sometimes chose to marry their teenage daughters off to fighters who operated in their neighborhood or village, to gain militia protection and to prevent them from being violated by militiamen outside the house.[90] Yet marrying militiamen placed women in a relationship of economic dependency with the militias; a dependency that, for widows, often continued long after the war officially ended.

For Aya, the violence of the war continued well into the 1990s. She had married a sniper from the Druze militia, the PSP, who died in the late 1980s. Aya had grown up in Jal al Bahr, an ethnically mixed neighborhood by Beirut's seafront next to Ain Mreisseh, and her Druze parents were terrified that she would date men of other sects. "My mom used to beat me if I came home five minutes later than promised," she shared. They married her off when she was 17 years old to prevent her from being sexually abused by militiamen. But by 1989, at the age of 19, Aya had become a widow when her husband was killed in an ambush by the Lebanese Army. Their toddler son was playing on the floor in their apartment in Beirut when she saw on TV that a number of PSP fighters had been killed; her husband's name was listed among them. He had "terrorized" her during their short-lived marriage, and the tears she shed at his funeral were not out of sorrow for him, she assured me, but for her son's future.[91]

When I asked Aya when her husband died and she responded "at the beginning of the war," I first thought that she had misunderstood my question, since he died in 1989, approaching the end of the war. But as she recounted her story, I understood that for Aya, the real war only started after his death and continued well into the next decade. The party stepped in for the father and took on some administrative responsibilities, ensuring that her son would not be considered an orphan. But this support brought her into an exploitative and violent bond with the party. "Widows were considered sexually available, but we were not considered attractive for marriage anymore."

Aya started working at the PSP's office in Beirut. She was the only woman in the office and her male colleagues would make sexual advances on her. The PSP employee responsible for distributing widow support for the party was "the worst harasser," she recalled. She needed a paper signed by the party to register her son in school at the beginning of each semester. The

[87] "The house is a woman," as a military sergeant tells Hassine; "Masculinity in Contention," 662.

[88] See also Bazzi, *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me*, 37.

[89] Corm, "War System."

[90] Palestinian women in Lebanon who Jehan Helou interviewed corroborated this tendency; see Helou, *Making Palestine's History: Women's Testimonies* (Nottingham, UK: Spokesman Books, 2009.

[91] Interview in Beirut, 9 August 2023.

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first time she went to collect the paper, the employee responsible for this locked the door and forced her to have sex with him. His advancements continued for three years straight. Twice a year she went to collect the paper, and he would rape her every time. There was no room for negotiation, and no one in the party whom she trusted to report this to. The stigma of rape was so pervasive in her community that some women who had been raped were sent away; some of them reportedly ended up forced into prostitution.[92] Because sex outside marriage was socially stigmatized, Aya only ever shared her traumatic experience with one friend, who had an affair with a married man and therefore, she thought, would not judge her.

After three years, Aya could not take it anymore, and she quit relations with the party. "I worked night and day, but it was better than working for the party."[93] To raise her son on her own, she had to work four different jobs at the same time. She worked as a cashier in an ice cream parlor, as a caretaker at a home for the elderly, as a hotel receptionist, and as a nanny. She stayed single for a long time, but in 2000 she met a man who was willing to raise her son and she married him "out of convenience, not out of love." Their two children are now in their twenties and know very little about their mother's experiences. Her son, who as a martyr's son is an honored member of the PSP to this day, has no idea of her experiences with the militia.

"This was a widow's suffering," Aya reckoned. "What happened to me happened to so many women in the war." Her story is suggestive of how the traffic in women through marriage to militiamen did not protect women.[94] Civilians were trafficked for their sacrificial value in a war that was waged as a war between men (even as some women fighters participated), but became in effect a war against women. Aya's story also shows how sexual violence was covered up and enforced with a secrecy that made it circulate as rumor rather than fact in its aftermath.

When Rape Becomes Rumor

"Rape didn't happen in the war," Ronny said, shaking his head, when we met in his office in downtown Beirut.[95] He had fought in the Lebanese Forces and might have been Tony's comrade in the war. "Some women worked as double agents, and they were punished for it, but that's it," he explained.[96] I pointed out that brothel workers in particular were often accused of spying for the enemy, due to their contact with customers from opposing factions, and, as other militiamen told me, they were sometimes punished for this social position. "It was an ugly war, yes, but we were not like Boko Haram or ISIS, who rape women systematically," Ronny responded, evoking the African Muslim war rapist as the racialized specter of sexual violence.[97] When I told Ronny that I was not making a judgment on anyone, he loosened up a little. "Of course it happened, but on individual occasions here and there, it was not systematic at all," he said. I then told him a story that a young woman had shared with me.

[92] Malek, the PFLP fighter, recounted that a group of Druze women had been sent to a convent after being mass raped, but I was not able to verify this story.

[93] The party had paid her 150.000 Lebanese lira per month as a secretary, which in the early 1990s amounted to around 75 USD, according to the inflation rates mentioned in Picard, "Political Economy."

[94] A reminder of the feminist anthropological insight that marriage, rather than avoiding war, is an act of warfare by other means. Rubin, "Traffic in Women"; Morris, "The Mute and the Unspeakable."

[95] Interview in Beirut, August 2023.

[96] Ronny mentioned the famous case of the Christian-born activist Souha Bechara, who was imprisoned for ten years in Khiam prison and sexually tortured by Israeli and South Lebanon Army (SLA) forces, after attempting to assassinate Antoine Lahad, the Christian leader of the SLA.

[97] See Danny Hoffman, "Culture by Other Means: An Africanist Anthropology of Political Violence and War," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Africa*, ed. R. R. Grinker, S. C. Lubkemann, C. B. Steiner, and E. Gonçalves (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), 173–97.

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Nada, a Druze woman in her twenties, was born a decade after the war had ended, but in the Shouf Mountains where she grew up, the threat of violence continued to structure what women could and could not do, and what people said about them.[98] "Don't stay out late, the *quwāt* (Lebanese Forces) might take you!" Nada's grandmother would warn her whenever she went out with her friends. Her warning was made in reference to the kidnappings of young women, which the LF carried out during the so-called War of the Mountain between Christian and Druze forces in the Shouf.[99] For Nada's family, who had lived in relative isolation up in the mountain during the war and often married cross-cousins, sexual violation by a stranger from a different sect meant social suicide for a young woman. Faced with this threat, her grandfather told her grandmother that, if ever she heard the men coming, "kill the girls and then kill yourself." Nada was raised amid the intergenerational repercussions of this warning.[100] The fear was so ingrained in her grandmother that, Nada reckons, she really did believe that the men could come back at any point.

Although civil society actors have made efforts to document forced disappearances in the war, kidnappings like the one Nada's grandmother recalls have been rendered rumors, in contrast to the publicly documented massacres in the civil war.[101] One obvious reason for this imbalance in documentation is that journalists were present in public places, whereas violence in domestic and semiprivate zones was not accessible to them, did not attract photographic attention, and consequently left no public trace.[102] Another reason sexual violence was not documented during the war is that the perpetrators held the power. After all, as Rosalind Morris observes, "in the case of sexual violence … secrecy is sought and presumed mainly by those who can identify with the ideal forms of political subjectivity operative in the public domain."[103]

The report by LAW and UN Women breaks this silence by documenting both the spectacular instances of cross-sectarian sexual violence, when militias raped to humiliate and terrorize the enemy, and everyday forms of sexual violence that occurred during the war. Fatima Shehadeh from LAW, who coauthored the report, told me that all the militias, as well as the different national and foreign armies involved, sexually violated women "systematically" and for different reasons: to evict groups from neighborhoods where they were taking control, to extract information and money, and to terrorize and shame the enemy. Some militias also used the threat of sexual humiliation as a recruitment strategy, by threatening women in the families of the recruits. The report therefore suggests that rape for the purpose of recruitment and extraction also happened within sectarian communities. This point correlates with what I learned.

The former militia members I spoke to did not contradict my findings when I presented them. After all, it was Tony who first encouraged me to "look into rape." Yet his comrades disagreed over the scale of sexual violence in the war.

"Look, it was chaos," Ronny allowed, after I told him how the actions of his former militia, Lebanese Forces, still haunt grandmothers in their sleep up in the Druze Mountains. "Those perpetrators, they were children, they did not fear death, and they were drugged," he

[98] Interview in Beirut-Fayssoul, August 2023.

[99] LAW and UN Women, "They Raped Us."

[100] Curiously, the exact same anecdote appears in a recent UN report on women's experiences in the war, which suggests that it may have been a rumor that circulated between families. See Nur Turkmani, "Women from the War Generation: Between Memories of Survival, Struggle and Adaptation," Kafa and UN Women, October 2024. I contacted the authors of the report but was not able to verify the story with them.

[101] See, for example, *Massaker* (dir. Monika Bergman and Lokman Slim, 2005).

[102] On this point, see also Nina Berman, "Dressed Up, Stripped Down: Media Depictions of Conflict Rape," in Abu-Lughod et al., *Cunning of Gender Violence*, 422–38.

[103] Morris, "The Mute and the Unspeakable," 80.

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pointed out. "The leaders could not control what went on, so it went unpunished. Even the leaders were young." The distinction between victim and perpetrator breaks down in Ronny's discourse, as he questions the agency of a child soldier.

"We Were Children after All"

Age became a leitmotif in my conversations with militiamen and women who all began military training as minors, at the age of 12 to 14, and came of age fighting. Wissam, for example, joined the Lebanese Communist Party after learning in school about the men from his village who resisted the French colonial occupation in 1925. He became a faction leader while still a teenager.

"We would collect our monthly cash [from the militia] and go straight to the Luna Park to spend it," Lamia, Wissam's earlier comrade, told me. She laughed at the irony of it: "We were children after all."[104] Bazzi also recounts in his memoir how he was turned away from donating blood at a local clinic, because he was too young to donate blood, yet somehow old enough to fight. He was still in high school when he joined the war in 1981.[105]

Others were deprived of this relative sense of innocence. "We lost our childhood at the age of seven," Hisham said of his upbringing in South Lebanon, where he was born in 1949 to a family of tobacco farmers. His village became a battleground for Israeli military aggressions that provoked in him a sense of responsibility for protecting his family and community against this imminent threat.

How did this environment of violence, in which militiamen and militiawomen came of age, impact gendered and intimate relations within the militias? Several militiawomen told me that they had their first romantic experiences with men in the barracks. "The food in the barracks tasted bland because they put camphor in it," Lamia recalled. Her remark prompted Nadine and Alia, who were her comrades in the LCP, to bend over laughing, as we sat smoking and chatting on a steamy August afternoon.[106] "Camphor?" I asked, feeling lost in translation. "Yeah, you know, so the men couldn't get it up," the women explained. "Camphor" is an herbal drug believed by some to dampen sexual desire in men. But Wissam, who as a faction leader oversaw the barracks, dismissed this claim, saying they did not put anything in the food.[107]

Nadine told me that society considered her *mufafada*, a "loose woman," unlike their militia "brothers" who were widely depicted as martyrs and sex symbols.[108] The appearance of militiawomen in Lebanon's war is sometimes celebrated in public discourse as an indication of gender equality, but women fighters were still a minority, and they faced different, gendered expectations than their male comrades. Tony indicated the same when he gave me a brief statement that he had written about the challenges facing women who fought in the war. "To live with men in offices or on the battlefield differs, but problem[s] still exist… . The presence of

[104] Group interview in Beirut, August 2023.

[105] Bazzi, *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me*, 11. Parkinson also observes this among the Palestinian factions; Parkinson, *Beyond the Lines.* For depiction of teenage soldiers in the war, see also Fouad Khoury's own website, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/completerrespon.php?theme=23.

[106] Focus group interview, Fighters for Peace office in Verdun-Beirut, August 2023. A young female research assistant who worked there assisted me with interpretation in this interview.

[107] Interview in Beirut, August 2023.

[108] Lebanese militiamen were celebrated not only as martyrs by their constituency, but also as national sex symbols in the public. See Najib Hourani, "The Militiaman Icon: Cinema, Memory, and the Lebanese Civil Wars," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8, no. 2 (2008): 287–307. The sexuality of fighting women becomes a virtue for several female characters in Sobh's novels, who cling to their virginity in the war; "I can't be a virgin and a revolutionary?" asks Ibtisam; Sobh, *Maryam*, 75.

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men who have not seen women for long time and he wants to have sex ... (bmc) bitch for men company," he wrote, teaching me yet another category of female sexuality.

The adolescent experience of the war as a violent playground also manifested for civilians. Racha, who grew up in the war amid the threat of militiamen, also fell in love with her future husband during the conflict and remembers the excitement of crossing checkpoints to see him. For her, the war had bred a sense of radical uncertainty and possibility, which in her postwar life was supplanted by a sense of immobility and foreclosure. "You want to do something, be productive, you are used to moving around. Should we take office jobs and live normal boring lives now? Impossible. In the war we used to dream, but after the war we had no excuse, this was it. It was our great disappointment."

Racha's statement evokes a nostalgic mode of remembering the war that is common to fighters as well, who described waking up from a dream, or a nightmare.[109] For the first six months after the war had been declared over, in 1990, Wissam sat in his living room cleaning his weapons, not going out. "I joined the war as a teenager, and when it ended I was 32 years old... . I had no idea how to act or be in the world outside war." Reversing the erotic appeal of coming of age as a fighter, his account suggests that the transformation back to civilian life can have an infantilizing effect. "After the war, people didn't want to associate with the war, and fighters were seen as part of it," Tony from the LF told me. The lack of education and transferable skills, along with stigma and fear, made it hard for fighters to find decent work; many became security guards and truck drivers, for lack of better-paid jobs.[110] Others were saved by political connections, like those who found work as clerks in Lebanon's Ministry of the Displaced, which was set up after the war.

The sense of aborted dreams also concludes Alawiya Sobh's novel, in which the female narrator likens the forced disappearance of women and children to the city's disappearance as a whole.[111] "All of us aborted foetuses and dreams and memories," she writes. "The city aborted the city, the street aborted the street and the buildings aborted their walls. The villages aborted the villages, and humans aborted their lives."[112]

Conclusion: Relational Binds of War

"A man has died in Beirut. A woman too," Etel Adnan wrote in 1989.[113] Like these deaths, recounted in the passive voice, violence became an expected occurrence during the war. But unlike deaths, there has been little scholarly attempt to count or otherwise document the number of rapes and incidents of sexual violence that occurred.[114] Asking what role sex played in the violence of Lebanon's long civil war necessitates grappling with why we are only asking this question now, fifty years after the war first broke out?

Sexual violence appears, in contrast, across Lebanese cultural production of the war, to such a degree that it almost naturalizes sex-as-violence. This cultural framing allowed for a binary narrative that either blamed women for sexual promiscuity, or blamed men for

[109] Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Sami Hermes, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[110] Haugbolle, "The (Little) Militia Man"; Ghassan Hage, *The Diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese in the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[111] The forced disappearance and killing of women is a central theme in several female-authored novels, including Sobh's *Maryam* and Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*, and became an advocation point for Lebanese feminist–led civil society after the war.

[112] Sobh, *Maryam*, 248.

[113] Adnan, *Arab Apocalypse*, 53.

[114] The official death count from the war is 150,000, with over a million people displaced. However, the fact that at least 17,000 people were forcibly disappeared in the war has led many to suspect that unreported deaths may result in a much higher total body count.

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lacking moral guidance, suggesting either way that rape happens due to a lack of social control. My findings challenge both the silencing and the scandalization of sex in the war by foregrounding instead how sexual violence became integral to the political and economic governance of civilians; a form of patriarchal governance which was not unique to militia rule, but rather imitated state rule. When militiamen violated their "own" constituency, it served to inflict fear and so to uphold civilians' loyalty to them, through a logic that reinforced sectarian divisions and perpetuated the patriarchal social order.

I have argued that militias governed sex through two parallel systems, the traffic in sex and the traffic in women; the former by integrating the sex economy with the war economy, and the latter by controlling civilians through a patriarchal, sectarian logic of protection. The two traffics intersected and contrasted: the valorization of sex and of femme sexuality could be instrumentalized to cross the city's sectarian boundaries, whereas the governance of civilian women through militia marriages reinforced those boundaries socially.

When examining how sex was governed in the war, we are faced with a series of appearances. First, in the cultural archive, Beirut appears as a city where sex (and women) roamed uncontrollably, when in fact sexual relations were highly governed by patriarchal political interest. Second, in militiamen's discourse, Beirut's women appear demarcated according to categories of publicly available and private sex, when in fact transactional sex occurred across these spaces and there was no place kept "private," because militiamen governed and invaded civilian homes. These appearances and disappearances of sex in the war remind us of what Hisham first taught me: that "nothing was one thing only" in the war, and that everything was connected.

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