

# Hezbollah's Women Aren't Happy

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Articles & Testimony

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**As their sons and 'temporary husbands' are ripped from them to fight a proxy war in Syria, grieving mothers and brides are compensated with empty promises, poverty, and threats, heightening communal frustrations to the point of explosion.**

**W**hen her 27-year-old son died in Syria, Rima felt more furious than sad. Unfortunately, she could not say out loud what she wanted to say. He was sent to fight in Syria, without her approval, and without receiving proper training. She wanted to blame someone -- mainly those who had talked him into joining the fighters in Syria -- but she couldn't. Her community had hailed his death as a sacrifice -- a martyrdom.

When Hezbollah officials visited her after she lost her son, she swallowed her words while listening to them going on and on about the role of Sayyeda Zaynab -- the granddaughter of Prophet Mohammad and daughter of Imam Ali, one of the few survivors of the Karbala battle during which her brother Hussein was killed. For Shiites, Sayyeda Zaynab symbolizes pure grief, justice, and the fight for good against evil. For Lebanese Shiites, mainly those who support Hezbollah, Sayyeda Zaynab has another role: as a key justification for why Hezbollah is in Syria; the fighters are there to protect her shrine in Damascus.

Rima listened silently to Hezbollah's officials, but she only wanted them to leave. She didn't feel the strength and resilience usually associated with Sayyeda Zaynab and the mothers of martyrs. She felt drained and empty. They told her that she had now been elevated to the status of a martyr's mother, and that Sayyeda Zaynab would be looking after her.

Is this title going to secure her future? Not really. She will get her compensation, some benefits, and will then be forgotten, like thousands of other mothers who've lost their sons in battle. Her son will be transformed from the

living boy of her memories into a timeworn poster on one of Dahiyeh's shabby walls, and she will return to her life of struggle to make ends meet.

Rima is originally from the south of Lebanon. She moved to Dahiyeh with her family during Lebanon's civil war, married early, did not finish school, and took care of her five children. Her husband works as a taxi driver and barely makes enough money to feed his family. Her only hope is to see her children have better lives. Now one of them is dead, and her younger son is eager to join the fight in Syria, to avenge his brother's death but also to make money, now that his brother's salary is gone.

Rima's daughter-in-law, Fatima, seemed to like the idea that she was compared to the heroine that shaped her upbringing. Fatima is a 20-year-old widow now, with a son she will have to raise by herself. Hezbollah's officials told her not to worry, because "she will be taken care of." How, exactly, was never specified, but the promises from officials made her feel safe and secure. "But she will soon realize that this is an illusion," Rima said. "They gave us an envelope with \$20,000 and told me that they will be in touch."

Many poor young widows like Fatima become part of Hezbollah's pool of brides -- or temporary wives -- for fighters, a reward given to those who return to Beirut for a respite from battle, or are injured and deserve compensation. Rida -- a 25-year-old fighter who came back injured to Lebanon from Aleppo -- was married to one of those young widows as soon as he got released from the hospital. He got a congratulation letter from Hasan Nasrallah himself, some money to rent and furnish a small apartment in Dahiyeh, and an additional sum as compensation for his wounds. Will this be enough for Rida and his new wife to start a new life? Probably not. The money will provide some real if temporary satisfaction for both himself and his wife. But eventually, he will have to take care of himself.

Rima's son had been with Hezbollah for a while, so his family was compensated when he died. Although some complain that compensation used to be higher -- almost double -- families still expect to be compensated and taken care of. Yet Hezbollah does not have the same budget for services as it used to, as most of the money coming from Iran must go to regional military operations, mainly in Syria, which means that the families of new recruits cannot be compensated at nearly the same levels as those of older fighters. Meanwhile, more fighters are dying, and more families are demanding compensation and services. This is creating discontent in the Hezbollah community and within the larger Shiite community in Lebanon.

After Hezbollah was forced to cut its social services and raise its military budget, divisions with the community of the party's supporters have started to surface and become stronger. For example, fighters (men) are rewarded for their efforts and sacrifices, while other employees (mostly women) are expected to stay on hold and wait until the battle is over and victory is achieved. However, it's been more than four years, and victory still seems like a distant promise.

Hezbollah's institutions constitute an alternative economic structure that hires and attracts Hezbollah's men and women. A girl in Hezbollah's community is brought up in Mahdi's or Al-Mustafa's schools (Hezbollah's schools). She is expected to work in Hezbollah institutions, marry a Hezbollah fighter, and promote Hezbollah's values both outside and inside her family. The Party of God knows that a disciplined and committed woman can raise disciplined and committed fighters. It is a system that physically reproduces itself.

But the endless war in Syria is producing cracks in the system, and women are no longer as engaged as they used to be -- or being compensated for their sacrifices the way that men are. The divide between old and new fighters is also growing wider. The old fighters and their families were and are still part of Hezbollah's community, which does not represent the Shiite community at large. When they die in the battle, their women are treated with more respect and get more compensation. These women are already part of Hezbollah's system so they do enjoy some kind of power and status. While services to the larger community have been cut, the inner circle is still taken care of.

However, a new problem is emerging: the wives of the new recruits. These are not necessarily Hezbollah members

and are generally not committed to the ideology or the war, but they are part of the community that the party allegedly is protecting. They are mostly from poor families. Without their husbands' income, and with less compensation and fewer services provided, these women tend to suffer financially, despite all the talk about their newly-elevated status and Sayyeda Zaynab's protection.

"There is a serious class problem within Hezbollah's community," ventured Samar, a resident of Dahiyeh. Samar was active within Hezbollah's institutions as a volunteer before their involvement in Syria. By a "class problem," she means the way Hezbollah is dividing its budget: fighters vs. nonfighters; old fighters vs. new recruits.

"While Hezbollah officials' wives drive brand new cars and shop at the most expensive malls, employees in Hezbollah's institutions [around 65 percent of whom are women] are losing benefits, and their salaries are being cut and delayed," Samar explained. "Meanwhile, the mothers and wives of the new recruits are neglected."

After the battle of al-Qusayr in 2013, Hezbollah realized the Syrian war was going to cost the party a lot more than it had expected. It would not be able to cover most of the compensation for the families of martyrs. So it started asking single men to put off marriage and family and started to recruit more unmarried young men. "If these die, they just have to pay their parents a few thousand dollars," Samar explained, "but when a married man dies or gets injured, they'll have to take care of their families forever, through the Martyr Institution and the Institution for the Wounded." With more than 1,500 dead so far and many more injured, Hezbollah's institutions are simply not capable of covering everyone.

Yet as the war drags on, Hezbollah can no longer stop young men from having families, despite the costs. That is why many are being encouraged to marry war widows, or at least engage in temporary (*muta'a*) marriages until the time is right.

Because the new recruits are still considered outsiders, the wives of the new recruits have the lowest status, which means that they are worst-off financially, and most vulnerable to the demands of high-status men within the party. A number of women have spoken openly about Hezbollah officials who have threatened them with a reduction of services and money if they don't accept "private visits." Some women refuse such visits, while others accept. "If this money is all they've got, temporary marriage is not a sin, and some have no choice but to accept," Samar said.

Temporary marriage is not only acceptable, it is promoted as a sacred act that will be rewarded in heaven. By linking the sacred to such practices, Hezbollah has managed to contain its losses and achieve a kind of shaky equilibrium in straitened circumstances.

The Party of God has also managed to alter the rules of temporary marriage through fatwas, in order to make it easier and more accessible. A fatwa was issued a few years ago allowing married men to practice *muta'a* marriage, and another more recent one allows women to practice *muta'a* without having to wait 40 days (*Al-Edda*) between one man and another -- the time period usually required to make sure the woman is not pregnant. However, this new regulation that eliminated *Al-Edda* also forbids penetration. So a woman and a man can do whatever they need to get sexual pleasure as long as he does not penetrate her. Then she can "marry" another man immediately afterward. But, at the end of the day, these women are aware that the sexual services they provide are more important. If it were not for the money they receive, few if any of them would participate in this sacred act.

Amal was one of those who refused the advances of a senior party member. When her husband died, a delegation of Hezbollah officials came to visit her and gave her an envelope filled with money. One of them visited her a couple of weeks later to "check on her," but then his visits became frequent and he started hitting on her. She is extremely poor but she found his demands to be demeaning. When she rejected him, he threatened to halt her benefits. While he did not follow through on his threat, her vulnerability within the system was clear.

Amal comes from a very conservative family from the Bekaa region. She went back to live with her parents after her

husband died, but her parents are already very poor and cannot provide for her. Eventually, with her parents' encouragement, she accepted the marriage proposal of another fighter, whom she has never met. Being the wife of a fighter confers prestige. Despite the current lack of proper services, many in the community still believe that fighters and their families will be taken care of. As soon as she married a fighter, the harassment stopped.

Women are Hezbollah's main internal problem. The war in Syria means they are losing sons, brothers, and husbands. It is marginalizing their role in the party, and pushing the poorest among them to the edge of survival. The pressure that is building within the community cannot be contained for very long by stop-gap measures like delaying marriage for young men and temporary marriage for widows. The communal frustration and inequities that the war continues to exacerbate and deepen may soon lead to an explosion that not even Sayyeda Zaynab will be able to prevent.

*Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the inaugural Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute.*



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