

# AL-Raida

m a g a z i n e  
الرائدة Volume XIII, Nos.74 & 75, Summer/Fall,1996 *The Pioneer*



Special  
Double Issue

File:

Women's  
Rights are  
Human  
Rights:  
Perspectives  
from the  
Arab World

Also

- An Encounter of Arab Women Researchers
- Profile of a Political Pioneer



## ABOUT IWSAW

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) was established in 1973 at the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College). The founder and Director of the IWSAW is Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr. Initial funding for the Institute was provided by the Ford Foundation.

**OBJECTIVES:** The Institute strives to serve as a data bank and resource center to advance a better understanding of issues pertaining to Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions throughout the world concerned with Arab women; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University.

**PROJECTS:** IWSAW activities include local, regional and international conferences; seminars, lectures and films; and educational projects which improve the lives of women and children from all sectors of Lebanese society. The Institute houses the

Women's Documentation Center in the Stoltzfus Library at LAU. The Center holds books and periodicals. The Institute also publishes a variety of books and pamphlets on the status, development and conditions of Arab women, in addition to *Al-Raida*. Eight children's books with illustrations, and two guides, one of which specifies how to set up children's libraries, and the other which contains information about producing children's books, have also been published by IWSAW. In addition, the Institute has also created income generating projects which provide employment training and assistance to women from war-stricken families in Lebanon. The Institute has also devised a "Basic Living Skills Project" which provides a non-formal, integrated educational program for semi-literate women involved in development projects. Additional IWSAW projects include: The Rehabilitation Program for Children's Mental Health; Teaching for Peace; and the Portable Library Project. The latter project was awarded the Asahi Reading Promotion Award in 1994. For more information about these or any other projects, write to the Institute at the address provided above.

## ABOUT AL-RAIDA

*Al-Raida* is published quarterly by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) of the Lebanese American University (LAU), formerly Beirut University College, P.O. Box 13-5053/59, Beirut, Lebanon; Telephone: (01) 867-618, ext. 288; Fax: (01) 867-098. The American address of LAU is 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1846, New York, NY 10115, U.S.A.; Telephone: (212) 870-2592; Fax: (212) 870-2762.

**PURPOSE AND CONTENT:** *Al-Raida's* mission is to enhance networking between Arab women and women all over the world; to promote objective research of the conditions of women in the Arab world, especially conditions related to social change and development; and to report on the activities of the IWSAW and the Lebanese American University.

Each issue of *Al-Raida* features a File which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews and art news.

**REPRINT RIGHTS:** No unsigned articles may be reprinted without proper reference to *Al-Raida*. Permission to reprint signed articles must be obtained from the IWSAW.

**SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES:** We seek contributions from those engaged in research, analysis and study of women in the Arab world. Contributions should not exceed ten double-spaced typed pages. Please send a hard copy and a diskette. We reserve the right to edit in accordance with our space limitations and editorial guidelines. Submissions will not be published if they have been previously published elsewhere.

S U B S C R I P T I O N

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# AL-Raida

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## Al-Raida

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## TO CLAIM RIGHTS IS TO RECLAIM HUMAN DIGNITY:

### *Arab Women Stand Up and Speak Out*

The audience, mostly women, leaned forward in their chairs. Some seemed to be holding their breath; others were holding back tears. All were silent, their faces showing intense concentration and a mixture of shock, outrage, surprise, and even, perhaps, a trace of relief. The moving testimonies they were hearing, delivered by a brave group of women at the Arab Women's Tribunal\* in Beirut last year, could shock even the most hardened listener, ranging from the narrative of an Algerian lawyer who told of innocent women being mowed down by gunfire in the streets for the crime of not wearing appropriate attire, to the story of a Palestinian woman from a refugee camp in Lebanon who miraculously survived rape, the slaughter of her family, and injuries that should have left her dead in 1982.

Less electrifying, but no less disturbing, were the testimonies given by average women who had quietly endured years of violence and humiliation at the hands of abusive husbands, brothers, or fathers in the supposed safety of their homes. Domestic violence, although neither as dramatic nor as visible as politically and religiously motivated violence, does just as much harm—perhaps even more—since it is inflicted in secret behind closed doors, with few if any witnesses to intervene or provide emotional or moral support to the victims. Some members of the audience at the Arab Women's Tribunal expressed surprise and alarm at the extent of damage being done to some women in the private, secluded realm of homes throughout the Arab world. But other audience members, who had personally experienced varying degrees of domestic violence, were relieved to hear that they were not alone in their suffering. Other women just like them, Christian, Muslim and Druse, rich and poor, career women and housewives, had also been victimized by those on whom they were the most dependent. They, too, had felt isolated, trapped, and despondent. They, too, knew the gnawing sense of guilt that they were somehow to blame for the beatings, followed by a soul-destroying certainty that they were indeed worthless and deserving of such harsh treatment. At the Tribunal, these damaged women learned that speaking out provided the best antidote to the most poisonous and enduring legacy of abuse: shame.

The Arab Women's Tribunal, the first event of its kind in this region of the world, dramatically broke the silence that traps so many women behind isolating walls of shame, fear, confusion and despair. It provided a rare opportunity for Arab women from different countries and various backgrounds to join together and form networks to confront a topic of concern to them all: violence against women in its many permutations.

More importantly, the Tribunal encouraged everyone who attended to reconsider their unexamined, and thus unquestioned, conceptions of power and powerlessness, and to take a critical look at their assumption that a distinct and impermeable dividing line separates the public and private domains of life. The Tribunal offered insights into the political and economic roots of violence against women, whether committed by state actors, militia members, husbands, brothers or fathers. It examined legal measures to halt violence, and raised unsettling questions about prevailing socialization patterns (largely carried out by Arab women in their capacity as mothers) which impart to children the message that boys have more rights than girls, implying that males are far more valuable than females.

But by far the most important aspect of the Arab Women's Tribunal was that it empowered the women who testified to reclaim their humanity, to stand up, speak the truth, and break through the silence, lies and illusions that permit violations of women's human rights to continue unabated. The Tribunal emphasized that women are neither objects, symbols, scapegoats nor chattel; they are unique, individual human beings possessing inherent value and dignity. Women have feelings and rights, and will not remain forever silent while they are being abused. The public nature of the Tribunal served notice to all those individuals, institutions, societies, and governments who do not yet acknowledge or respect women's human rights that the day is coming when Arab women will say "No!" to victimization in all of its direct and indirect manifestations. In the hope of hastening that day's arrival, we present this special double issue of *Al-Raida* devoted to the topic "Women's Rights are Human Rights: Perspectives from the Arab World." We would like to thank United States Aid for International Development for providing us with a grant to enable wider dissemination of *Al-Raida* throughout the world.

If you are a subscriber to *Al-Raida*, we would like to remind you that this double issue will be the last that you receive in 1996. If you wish to renew your subscription, or take a new one, please complete the form on the back cover of this issue.

**Laurie King-Irani**  
Editor-in-Chief

*\*The Arab Women's Tribunal was organized by El-Taller, an international non-governmental organization, in cooperation with Secours Populaire Libanais, and was conducted under the patronage of Lebanese First Lady Muna Al-Hrawi. (See "The Women's Tribunal" in Al-Raida, Vol. XII, No. 69, page 7.)*

## CONTEST OR CONTENT

### *How Should We Evaluate Young Lebanese Women?*

Everyone was awaiting the night. There were those who were going to watch the long-heralded event on television, and those who would witness it live. It wasn't just a local event limited to a Lebanese audience; it was also a regional event that would have an impact on the surrounding Arab world. Some hoped to see beauty, conventionally defined; others wanted to see displays of intelligence, talent and wit; and some wanted to watch just to satisfy their curiosity. Although intentions were numerous and varied, the final result was the same: everyone who watched the recent Miss Lebanon Contest was stunned.

The program began with a procession of the young, smiling beauties entering Beirut Hall wearing bridal gowns. I could not understand what was the message of this particular costume choice, but figured that it could have been an attempt at stylishness and drama, rather than a reminder of our society's mentality, which gives the utmost value to women when they are young, virginal, unformed and ready to adopt their most sacred role: that of self-sacrificing wife and mother.

Suddenly, the mood shifted from virginal to seductive as the exhibition of the bodies began. Great attention was given to the exact size and dimensions of the breasts, the hips and the waist. The girls' very fates seemed to hinge on the tiniest calibrations of weight and height. After this rigorous competition was completed, the girls displayed their glamour and charm in elegant evening dresses. The only thing missing were some eye-glasses to make them look a little intelligent.

Eventually, having no more outfits or body parts to display, it was time for the girls to demonstrate their intelligence, wit and character before an audience of millions. The judges were ready to ask and the viewers eager to listen. But the questions were quite simple; not one required academic specialization in any field. However, in appraising the girls' performance in answering these questions, we must take into consideration how tired they must have been after those rigorous displays of breasts and hips. Yet despite this consideration, the girls' answers were very disappointing. Most answered the questions in an off-hand, light-hearted manner which sounded nice and flashy, but lacked any substance. One contestant in particular did not give us any hint as to her future career plans, although the question was clearly phrased. Another asserted that Lebanon was so different from all other Arab countries because whereas they are all deserts, Lebanon has greenery. Yet another was terribly perplexed about whether a married woman should work or if she should devote all of her time to her chil-

dren. In the end, we didn't even know if the poor girl had an opinion on this important topic. Oh, but worse was yet to come!

Five finalists had been chosen. Everyone was eagerly waiting to see who would be the eventual winner. Four of the girls were led into a small, sound-proof glass chamber to prevent them from hearing the common question that would reveal the crucial, deciding differences between them. The question was not difficult: "What case concerning Lebanon would you raise if you had the chance to make a presentation before the United Nations?" It was quite a shock for the audience when they heard each girl answer the question in roughly the same manner. All of the finalists stressed that Lebanon is a beautiful country, and now that the war is over, people have every reason to visit us, adding that the Lebanese people love each other so very much and, most important of all, Lebanon is a wonderful place to go shopping! One girl of the five finalists did manage to distinguish herself, however, she did not even know what the United Nations was!

None of the finalists offered a single, serious case to present before the august world body, not the extreme poverty affecting our country, not the harsh military occupation and recent military incursions, not the ecological disasters, nor the psychological impact of the long war. I could not believe my ears! These could not possibly be educated and refined college girls, supposedly sophisticated and polished enough to represent Lebanon abroad! Is this the idea we want to give the world about our country's women? Does this contest really present Lebanese society's ideal of woman?

The Miss Lebanon contest was a beauty contest and nothing more. Selections of the finalists and the ultimate "winner" were made according to the most shallow, ephemeral and superficial conception of beauty: physical beauty. The young woman selected to represent our country should not be chosen on the basis of how much she weighs or how round her hips are, but on the basis of her character and intelligence. It is time that we looked at young Lebanese women in a deeper way. It is time we liberated our minds from the tyranny of the image. We have been imprisoning them for too long.

*Juhaina Razzouk*  
LAU Alumna

*(Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Al-Raida, the Institute for Women's Studies, or the Lebanese American University. We encourage contributions of opinions or rebuttals to published opinions from all of our readers. Submissions of opinions should be typed, double-spaced, and not exceed four pages.)*

# Letters to the Editor

30 September  
Rendsburg, Germany  
(via e-mail)

Dear Editor:

I have just been reading the new *Al-Raida* (No. 73) and was very happy to come across the news that *Al-Raida* and the Institute for Women's Studies now have an e-mail address [jabunasr@flame.beirut.lau.edu.lb]. This will definitely facilitate our communications and enable me to send you reports on my now-completed field research in South Lebanon. Now I am back in Germany and confronted with the most difficult part of the research process: the writing of my thesis, which carries the title "Gender and Migration in the Global Village: Lebanese Women at Home and in West Africa." While reading the most recent issue of *Al-Raida*, the article "One Day in the South" by Nada Awar caught my attention. It really brought all of the events of last April back to me, when I experienced war for the first time in my life. For me, it is really important to know about the Institute for Women's Studies and to receive *Al-Raida*; it is like being in Lebanon, although I am now so far away. I really enjoyed meeting all of the women at the Institute.

Sincerely,  
Anja Peleikis,  
Anthropologist

## Announcement

*Al-Raida* is looking for foreign correspondents to write stories on topics and issues of concern to women throughout the Arab world. If you are a professional or freelance journalist or researcher living in an Arab country, please consider submitting reports on legislation, events, conferences, debates and performances related to women and women's issues. If your article is accepted for publication, you will receive a payment of US\$100.

3 October 1996  
Beirut, Lebanon

Dear Editor:

With genuine eagerness, as usual, I started to read *Al-Raida* (Vol. XIII, No. 73). An Opinion article by Dr. Nadia El-Cheikh, whom I honor and respect, aroused my interest. Upon reading the Opinion, I was shocked to discover that it did not portray the content of the debate on the television program, *Ash-Shater Yehki* ("The Wise One Speaks") about abortion accurately, especially regarding the following points:

1) Dr. El-Cheikh attributed to me the comment, "I am, of course, against abortion." This is very similar to saying that in the Qur'an it is written "do not pray" without referring to the rest of the verse: "while you are drinking." My full statement was "I am, of course, against abortion being used as a method of contraception."

2) Dr. Cheikh says that the panel of discussants on the program had a uniform opinion, *i.e.*, against abortion. But three of us justified abortion in a scientific and realistic manner: Dr. Fouad Bustani, Dr. Zeina Saba, and I. Our mission was difficult considering that the majority of the other participants did not agree with us. Nevertheless, Bustani, Saba and I gave clear opinions that did not incriminate abortion while also calling for humanizing laws to ensure the availability of safe abortions in Lebanon.

What Dr. Cheikh says in the second part of her article is not more persuasive than what we said during the broadcast of the program. Of course, everyone is free to have any opinion; we certainly defend freedom of thought and expression as well as all other kinds of freedom. However, it is not proper to present someone's opinion in a manner which distorts it.

Please take note of this, and kindly accept what I have said.

Sincerely,  
Laure Moughaizel, Attorney

### Notice Notice Notice Notice

The quarterly journal of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, *Al-Raida*, established in 1976, is not associated in any way, shape or form with another publication of the same name currently being published by Dr. Raja' Mukaddam.

## Recent Publications

Women's rights are the focus of three new publications recently issued by the Center for Women's Global Leadership. *Without Reservations: The Beijing Tribunal on Accountability for Women's Human Rights*, edited by Niamh Reilly, surveys more than twenty testimonies given at the Global Tribunal on Accountability for Women's Human Rights at Huairou, China, in September 1995. *The Indivisibility of Human Rights: A Continuing Dialogue*, edited by Susana Fried, presents an overview of the 1994 Women's Global Leadership Institute, focusing on debates and strategies concerning human rights and violence against women, as well as issues concerning women's role in decision-making processes. *Gender Violence: A Human Rights and Development Issue*, by Charlotte Bunch and Roxana Carillo, provides a critical analysis of women's human rights and the development of a human rights agenda incorporating women's perspectives and experiences. For further information, contact the Center for Women's Global Leadership, 27 Clifton Ave., New Brunswick, NJ, 08903, USA. Their e-mail address is [cwgl@igc.apc.org](mailto:cwgl@igc.apc.org).

"Advancing Reproductive Rights Beyond Cairo and Beijing", by Rebecca J. Cook and Mahmoud F. Fathalla, in *International Family Planning Perspectives* (Vol. 22, No. 3), September 1996, pp. 115-121.

"Islam and Human Rights" is the topic of a special issue of *Interights Bulletin*, the publication of the International Centre for the Legal Protection of Human Rights. Articles include "Islamic Law and Human Rights Today," by Dr. Abdullahi A. An-Naim and "The Arab Charter on Human Rights: A Comment" by Mona Rishmawi. For more information, contact Interights, Lancaster House, 33 Islington High Street, London N19LH, United Kingdom.

*Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha Bint Abi Baker*, by D.A. Spellberg. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

*Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance*, by Simona Sharoni. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

*Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, by Pieternella van Doorn-Harder. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

*The Sisters of Men: Lebanese Women in History*, a book

by Dr. Shereen Khairallah, has recently been published by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World. This book is an important contribution to the historical analysis of Arab women's role in decision-making processes. For more information or to order copies, contact IWSAW through the New York office of the Lebanese American University, 475 Riverside Dr., Room 1846, New York, NY 10115.

## Conferences

"Front-line Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance" is the title of a conference to be held at the University of California-Riverside, January 16-18, 1997. Participants will discuss the forging of new forms of feminism in the context of militarized situations throughout the world. The conference hopes to link feminist activists and grass-roots organizers with scholars and policy-makers engaged in theorizing conflict and promoting cooperation. Featured participants will include women from the Balkans, the Middle East, Central America, South Asia, Africa and the United States. All scholars and activists interested in attending are invited to send their mailing and/or e-mail addresses to the organizers for inclusion on the mailing list. For more information, contact: Piya Chatterjee and Marguerite Waller, Department of Women's Studies, University of California-Riverside, Riverside, CA 92521. e-mail: [mwaller@ucr.acucl.ucr.edu](mailto:mwaller@ucr.acucl.ucr.edu).

## Call for Papers

*SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, seeks submissions for a special issue on Feminisms and Youth Culture slated for publication in Spring, 1998. For the purpose of this special issue, "youth" indicates persons aged thirteen to thirty, in contemporary or historical cultures. The editors welcome submissions that are 1) based on independent or collaborative research conducted by, about, or within youth communities, and 2) textual analyses of popular culture produced by youth. This special issue might include articles that address relevant youth topics such as varying meanings and functions of feminisms, strategies employed to transform traditional organizations, issues of health care, sexual autonomy and sexuality. Please submit five copies of prospective articles no later than 31 January 1997, to: *SIGNS*, Feminisms and Youth Cultures, Box 354345, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-4345, USA.

## *Women's Rights Group Lobbies for First Woman Secretary General at the UN*

In its five year history, Equality Now, a small human rights organization, has made much noise over the kinds of violations of women's freedom that other groups sidestep to avoid interfering with 'culture': female genital mutilation; selling children to pimps, factory owners or elderly bridegrooms; the imprisonment of rape victims — some as young as nine — on charges of adultery; the entitlement of men to murder female relatives who 'dishonor' the family. Now the organization has launched a campaign to bring a woman Secretary General to the United Nations, blowing a gust of fresh air into the smoke-filled room of the Security Council. Equality Now has proposed six candidates, two each from Africa, Asia, and Europe. [These] candidates share a characteristic that would give nightmares to legions of career diplomats: Each woman has vigorously taken on the messy, contentious issues that make clear the global implications of local crises....While the UN has incorporated the notion of territorial rotation in the selection of Secretary General, only occasional pious murmurs broach the subject of gender rotation....As for those who complain about the lack of women with inside-track UN experience (only five percent of the 185 permanent representatives assigned to the UN are women), there's the example of Dag Hammarskjöld. Easily the most effective Secretary General in UN history, he was a virtual unknown to the Security Council. There are two reasons to support Equality Now's initiative. The first is simply that women deserve this level of recognition. The second is that electing a woman Secretary General

would profoundly change the notion of how groups of people are represented at the UN. Right now the principal means of defining commonalities of interest is national. But the global economy has radically altered the place of women, figuratively and literally. Women's share in the labor force is booming worldwide, yet women are considerably more destitute than they were twenty years ago. In rural areas, the number living in poverty has nearly doubled, with women constituting at least 60 percent of the world's one billion rural poor. And as more women leave their own countries to find work, there is a skyrocketing trend of physical and sexual violence against them. These expatriates have little or no means of redress. Women's social and economic subordination is clearly reflected in enormous inequities in education and health: two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are women, and this year's UNICEF Progress of the Nations report states that more than 15 million women a year suffer 'the untreated and uncared-for consequences of injuries arising during pregnancy and child-birth.' The toll of injury, disability and death, says the report, 'is arguably the most neglected health problem in the world'....Right now the world's largest constituency needs a voice at the top. Equality Now's challenge should propel the UN to abandon its traditional etiquette and pick a majority candidate. "

*Margaret Spillane, writing in The Nation, October 21, 1996, page 5-6.*

## *Women's Rights: Universal or Relative?*

"The debate over women's human rights raises complex issues of policy and judgment in relation to the prevailing cultural, economic, and political conditions, particularly in societies where historical change has generated contradictory world views competing for the definition and implementation of rights. An important function of the modernization process has been to problematize the normal criteria of judgment, including the criterion of culture, as exemplified by the debate between proponents of universalism and relativism in the contemporary discourse on women's human rights. The Beijing Conference provided a transparent venue where competing coalitions of governmental and non-governmental delegations, each composed of members drawn from across religious and cultural lines, struggled to achieve ascendancy for one or the other concept in the Platform and other comple-

mentary documents. The Platform shows clearly that the international rights movement is ethically and philosophically geared to the moral conviction that men and women possess rights by virtue of their humanity. Human rights, in essence, are not accidents of social status, economic class, culture, nationality, religion, race, or gender. Curtailment of rights, therefore, may not be justified or even viewed as normal, on account of tradition, custom, or historical background. It follows that governments are obligated to rectify breaches of rights whenever and wherever they occur."

*Mahnaz Afkhami, "Universality and Relativism in the Beijing Platform for Action", in The Newsletter of the Association for Women in Development, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 1.*



## ***Observations on the 1995 Women's Book Fair in Cairo***

"November 1995 marked the debut of the first ever Arab Women's Book Fair....What could a Western observer expect of such an historic event? Government censorship of the allowable books? Indifference on the part of the public? The morals police at the door, as in Saudi Arabia, to check that women were properly covered in a modest fashion? Scuffles at the exhibits between Islamists and secularists? No, none of the above....Ferial Ghazoul, one of the judges in the fair's literary prize-giving, pointed out that literacy rates all over the Arab world have been climbing for the last forty years. 'Women are being educated with men, and they are writing and reading, just as men are doing'....Dr. Selma Khadra al-Jayyusi, Palestinian critic and poet, in her keynote opening address asserted firmly that 'the one positive thing that has happened in the Arab world in the late 20th century has been the emergence of women, in all areas of life, but especially in literature.' A few distinguished gentlemen rose pointedly and left the auditorium. But Dr. Jayyusi continued, bemoaning the way men have 'abused the Arabic language by creating incredible numbers of synonyms for flattery and hypocrisy.' A few more men left. Yet most of the 400-plus audience stayed, an audience of men as well as women, old and young."

*Elizabeth Warlock Fernea, writing in The Middle East Women's Studies Review, Vol. XI, No. 1.*

## ***Domestic Violence in Palestine***

"Wife-beating has become widespread in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank, according to women's rights activist Nama Haloul and Dr. Iyad Es-Sarraj, a psychiatrist living in Gaza. Interviewed for an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Dr. Sarraj asserts that throughout the Israeli occupation men have been beaten by soldiers, and that they in turn go home and beat their wives or children. Nama Haloul says that women are stronger against beatings from the IDF soldiers than the men, because they are used to it. She says that hundreds of women have complained about being beaten at home to the Union of Women Workers. A veteran in the struggle for Palestinian independence, Haloul also says that the fundamentalists have no concern for women and will send them back home after the struggle if they accede to power."

*Reported in The Women's Watch, a publication of the International Women's Rights Action Watch*

## ***Inside Perspective on Saudi Women***

"The perception common outside Saudi Arabia is that Saudi women live totally restricted lives, largely outside of the public domain. The position of women, however, has changed radically in the last thirty years and Saudi women make an important contribution to the economic and social development of their country....Saudi women are able to work in three main sectors: education, health and banking. But women are also found in other sectors, such as the media and social welfare. Within education, women work in schools and colleges for women and girls, staffed entirely by women....Coming from Britain, it is strange to step inside a women-only institution. In many ways, however, it is thought-provoking because without men, there can be no sex stereotyping of jobs. Women are managing universities and doing everything inside of them from lecturing to maintenance of equipment. Once inside the gates of their own institutions, Saudi women unveil and I met many highly educated and highly committed professional women."

*Ann Keeling, Consultant, writing in The Network Newsletter (No. 9/1996), a publication of The British Council*

## ***Muslim, Female and Refugee: A Rapidly Growing Category***

"What is little known is that 80 percent of today's world-wide refugee population are Muslims. Thus, we felt that there was a need to sensitize Muslim governments, the international community, as well as NGOs, to the particular needs, resources and aspirations of Muslim women....Therefore, in collaboration with the Islamic Relief Organization in Saudi Arabia in 1994, we convened a conference on Uprooted Muslim Women. That conference had a wide outreach to Muslim refugee women themselves and it was amazing to see the faces of the refugee women from the Islamic world....The recommendations that came out of the conference were due to the contribution of refugee women themselves, so they do reflect the actual needs and aspirations of refugee women....The greatest causes of mass displacement are war, ethnic and religious conflict, tribal custom and mass deprivation of human rights. But the undeniable root cause is the non-functioning of the world's political, economic and social structures. When we help refugee women, we are just aiding refugees. We are not attacking the real causes of their suffering. How can we bring about change? We invite all concerned people to join us, not only to support refugee women but to work with us in order to create ways to achieve peace in which social justice and mutual respect has meaning. The culture of peace should replace the day-to-day culture of violence which is causing so much suffering to humanity."

*From an interview with Ms. Homayra Etemad, an Afghan refugee and Muslim woman who chairs the International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women.*

## *EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT RESCINDS MEDICALIZATION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION*

Following the international outcry which erupted over the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt during the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development, the Egyptian Minister of Health publicly stated that the practice of FGM would henceforth be banned, and all those practicing it would be subject to legal prosecution and punishment. But only one month later, the same Minister issued a new directive which medicalized FGM. This sudden change of policy stemmed from pressures from more conservative sectors of society, even though there is no mandate or rationale to be found in the Qur'an or the Hadith supporting FGM. Mainstream Egyptian religious leaders did not join the call for re-instating FGM in a medical setting. In fact, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Tantawi, issued a fatwa declaring that the Qur'an and the Hadith do not contain any teachings concerning FGM.

On 17 October, 1995, the Egyptian Ministry of Health rescinded the directive which medicalized FGM. The latest directive instructs hospitals and doctors not to perform FGM, stressing that the role of medical personnel will be limited to providing counseling and guidance to limit practice. This directive brings the Egyptian Government into line with the policies of the World Health Organization, which has expressed its unequivocal opposition to the medicalization of FGM in any setting.

## *GENDER INEQUALITIES REVEALED BY FIRST LEBANESE CENSUS SURVEY SINCE 1932*

A partial census survey of Lebanon, undertaken by the Lebanese Ministries of Social Affairs and Health in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program, has provided the most accurate demographic profile of Lebanon in more than 60 years. According to the census data, Lebanon's inhabitants number just over 3,111,800 (not counting the 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon). Of these, 64 percent are between the ages of 15 and 64. Nearly 30 percent of the Lebanese population are children under the age of 15. Although the census does not reveal a great difference in the numbers of boys and girls enrolled in schools (and, in fact, girls outnumber boys in school enrollment between the ages of 10 and 19), there is nonetheless a higher rate of illiteracy among females than among males. Lebanon's overall illiteracy rate is 13.6 percent. Just over 9 percent of all men are illiterate, while 17.8 percent of all women are unable to read and write. The census data indicate that most illiterate women are over the age of 40. Concerning women's role in the Lebanese work-force, the census indicates that women are most active as workers between the ages of 20 and 40. Women between the ages of 25 and 29 constitute nearly one-third of Lebanon's work-force. One of the most surprising facts revealed by the census survey is that nearly 15 percent of Lebanese households are headed by single mothers, usually widowed. A final report will be issued in December 1996.

## *IRAQI NATION AS TORTURE VICTIM*

According to a recent UNICEF report on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, up to 40,000 children may be dying every month as a result of malnutrition, lack of potable drinking water, and inadequate medical services. Although the report's accuracy was immediately called into question by the United States, few informed people can deny that the suffering of Iraqi men, women and children has reached horrifying proportions.

The punishment of the Iraqi population by the world community, who, through the United Nations support the punishing sanctions placed upon the country, constitutes blatant, large-scale torture of a civilian population. The long-term effects of this mistreatment will exact more suffering and sacrifices from the weakest members of Iraqi society: women and their dependent children.

## *IWSAW Publishes Unique Historical Study on Lebanese Women*

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World has recently published *The Sisters of Men*, a new historical study of prominent Lebanese women, which was presented for public discussion on 23 October 1996. The book, authored by Dr. Shereen Khairallah, Professor of History at the American University of Beirut, consists of 42 biographies of women who have made an impact on Lebanese society, history, culture and politics. The title is a translation of an Arabic saying, "*ukht ar-rijaal*", which is used to describe a strong, intelligent and independent woman of marked substance and capability. A large audience of academicians, students and representatives of various non-governmental organizations attended the book presentation. Discussing the book were Father John Donahue, S.J., Professor of Arabic at the Université Saint Joseph; Ms. Samira Al-Khoury, Instructor in the Humanities Department at AUB, and Mr. Pierre Sarkis, Instructor in History and Cultural Studies at LAU-Byblos. In his presentation, Fr. Donahue noted that Dr. Khairallah had written a "delightful book which is a mixture of history and biography written in a clear, simple style." Donahue also stated that the book will be a valuable reference work for all scholars interested in women in Lebanon. Those wishing to obtain a copy of *Sisters of Men* should visit the Institute for Women's Studies during working hours, or send a letter and a payment of US\$20 to the New York address of the Lebanese American University.

## *Canadian Psychiatrist Aids Families Searching for Solutions*

For the third time in as many years, Canadian-Lebanese psychiatrist Dr. George Awad came to Lebanon to present a series of training sessions for social workers, educators and parents in Lebanon. Dr. Awad conducted seminars in Sidon and Beirut focusing on the following topics: attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, behavioral disorders, manifestations of violence in children's behaviors, and retardation. The training sessions, which took



*Novelist Hanan Al-Shaykh discusses her recent work while moderator Elias Khoury listens*

place between 11 and 21 November, were organized by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World and benefited a total of 104 social workers and educators from the central and southern regions of Lebanon. On 14 November, Dr. Awad delivered a special lecture on the topic of "Children and Trauma," giving particular attention to the psychological needs of children who experienced the war in Lebanon, and the special skills required by helping professionals working with such children. Participants in the training sessions completed questionnaires evaluating the usefulness of the program. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, and they suggested a number of topics for future training sessions, among them emotional repercussions of physical handicaps, child abuse, deprivation and sex education.

## *World Renowned Lebanese Author Lectures at LAU*

Lebanese novelist Hanan Al-Shaykh, author of such groundbreaking works as *Hikayat Zahra* ("The Story of Zahra"), and *Bareed Beirut* ("Beirut Blues"), gave an informal presentation to a standing-room-only audience at LAU on 9 December. Al-Shaykh's novels have presented a woman's view of war, chaos and social change in Lebanon for an appreciative audience throughout the world. In her speech, sponsored by IWSAW, she discussed the futility of censorship of artistic and scholarly works, noting that poets and authors in the former USSR were able to defy even the strictest methods of censorship. Al-Shaykh also commented on her experience of exile during the war, and how it shaped and influenced her writing, and even became the subject of her most recent novel, *Beirut Blues*. Although she now lives and works in Britain, Al-Shaykh is still very much connected, emotionally and spiritually, to Lebanon. She commented that, whether she is in Beirut or London, "writing is always about exploring the self. I now realize that the more I discover about myself, the more I understand the human condition."

## *IWSAW Documentation Center to go On-Line*

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World is a leader in research, education and documentation on the status and role of women in the Arab world. Through its Documentation Center, IWSAW has developed a one-of-a-kind collection of published as well as unpublished materials on Arab women. Conforming to the history of the Lebanese American University, a leader in women's education in the Arab world, IWSAW is planning to create a database of its entire collection, which will be available through the Internet. The international accessibility of this valuable collection will widen the scope and increase the impact of IWSAW's efforts. On the regional level, it will raise public awareness of the condition of Arab women and inspire research projects. At present, Ms. Fatme Charafeddine is undertaking this project to index and automate the entire documentation collection, which consists of more than 3,500 books and 1,000 documents in Arabic, English and French. For more information, contact Dr. Abu Nasr or Ms. Charafeddine at IWSAW.

# REFLECTIONS ON THE POETRY OF SUAD EL-SUBAH

by *Leila El-Hurr*

**S**uad El-Subah, the well-known Kuwaiti poet, holds a B.A. in Economics from the University of Cairo and a Ph.D. in Development and Planning from the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom. She is the Director of the Administrative Council of The Practical Consultations Office in Kuwait, a researcher and author on developmental and economic issues, and lecturer in a number of respected institutes and universities. Besides her poetry and literary publications, she has authored a variety of scientific writings. She is also a member of several Arab and international non-governmental institutes and coalitions.

Last March 8th, International Woman's Day, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World hosted a poetry recital by Dr. Suad El-Subah. An introductory speech was given by Lebanese writer Leila El-Hurr before Suad El-Subah's presentation, from which we have extracted the following:

"It was within my reach to wear jewelry and behave like a queen. It was within my capacity not to reject, become angry, nor to scream in the face of misery. However, I betrayed the laws of femininity and chose instead the confrontation of words."

This is the only form of betrayal that Suad El-Subah committed. And in so doing, a distinctive poetic voice was born in the Arab World.

The smart child, Suad, the daughter of El-Cheikh Muhammad El-Subah, the President of Kuwait, resorted to words as a way to gain more of the love of her father, who deeply adored her. Initially, she wrote poetry to please her father and then to please her husband. Finally, her moving poems found their way to the public and moved the hearts of thousands of young people. However, the poetry Suad El-Subah most needed to express remained imprisoned within herself.

Eventually, and after much insistence on the part of her intellectual colleagues, Suad El-Subah gave free reign to her emotional turmoil and allowed her powerful poetry to boldly break through, free of all traditional restraints. After producing ten collections of poems, Suad became incapable of controlling



*Leila El Hurr, left, introduces Dr. Suad El-Subah to an audience at L.A.U.*

the unstoppable flow of her poetry. Since the 1980s, with much excitement and curiosity and with a variety of contradictory feelings, audiences throughout the Arab World followed the development of this poet. But along with the compliments Suad El-Subah received came curses and warnings, too. Many saw her as an agitator encouraging others to break social norms and taboos, thus turning women against men.

However, the Kuwaiti poet defended her right to free expression and continued to publish her thoughts and convictions. Whereas Suad the poet had defied the customs that hinder her society's progress, Suad the woman did not transgress the social norms of the community in her Kuwaiti and Arab environment, neither did she rebel against her family, tribe or culture. Because of this, Suad El-Subah's call for women's liberation gained a degree of credibility which would not have been possible if Suad had isolated herself from her environment, as have so many Arab advocates of women's rights, thus becoming incapable of effecting any real change in her society.

*Translated from Arabic by Ghena Ismail*

# Introduction

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

**“A**ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights....Everyone is entitled to all of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

The International Declaration of Human Rights  
Adopted by the UN General Assembly, 10 December 1948

*“Discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and of the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity...”*

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of  
Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)  
Adopted by the UN General Assembly, 3 September 1981

*“The human rights decreed by Divine Law aim at conferring dignity and honor on all humankind and are designed to eliminate oppression and injustice....By virtue of the Divine source and sanction these rights can neither be curtailed, abrogated, or disregarded by authorities...nor can they be surrendered or alienated....All persons are equal before the Law and are entitled to equal opportunities and the protection of the Law. No person shall be denied the opportunity to work or be discriminated against in any manner or exposed to any physical risk by reason of religious belief, color, race, origin, sex or language.”*

The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, 1985

The venerable international documents cited above are often invoked during discussions of women's human rights in the Arab world; unfortunately, they are less frequently applied or enforced. Although the topic of human rights has been high on the world's political agenda since the end of the Second World War, only recently have the human rights of Arab women received the attention and concern they deserve in local, regional and international fora of discussion and debate.

Yet, such probing discussions and lively debates have neither altered traditional mentalities nor broadened narrow visions of Arab women's roles in society. The very concept of women's human rights generates controversy in the Arab world, expressed in questions such as the following: Should women's rights be considered separate from men's rights or children's rights? Should Western models of the individual serve as the criteria for judging the rights and responsibilities of men and women in a cultural milieu shaped more by Islam and Christianity than by the liberalism of John Locke and Adam

Smith? Should universalistic or relativistic conceptions of human rights be employed to assess the morality of particular cultural practices affecting Arab women? Are women's human rights being used cynically by Western powers in order to humiliate Arab countries? Should Arab women adopt Western feminist models, or develop their own indigenous approaches to women's human rights? Clearly, the debate concerning women's human rights in the Arab world is still inconclusive, and the discussions yet to come will provide rich material for contemplation, research, dialogue and policy-making on the regional and international levels.

The topic of women's human rights in the Arab world evokes controversy and debate because it sits uncomfortably atop several cultural “fault-lines.” Discussing Arab women's rights, or the lack thereof, forces us to confront a number of contentious issues: What is the dividing line between private, familial matters, and public policy concerns? What is the difference between legality and morality? What is the role of “culture” in shaping conceptions of women's human rights, and to what extent is culture immutable? Which should prevail: the needs of the individual or the demands of the group? To what extent is the human rights debate in the Arab world constricted and confused by the ongoing and politically charged confrontations between East and West, liberalism and communitarianism, the developing world and the advanced industrial nations? Considering the sensitive and highly-charged context surrounding the topic of Arab women's human rights, it is not surprising that debates about the veil can become life and death matters in some countries, such as Algeria, where Arab women's lives and choices have become the symbolic locus of confrontation between East and West, religion and secularism, tradition and modernity.

Despite this atmosphere of controversy, Arab women are nobly rising to the challenge of defining and claiming their rights. In the course of preparing this special double issue of *Al-Raida*, we have discovered that basic concepts, such as “feminism,” “choice,” “power,” “responsibility,” and “rights” are undergoing subtle redefinitions and refinements in the crucible of contemporary Arab culture. Received wisdom is being questioned, traditional thinking and practices are being critiqued, religious laws are being reinterpreted, and women's voices are being heard. The File section of this issue of *Al-Raida* offers global, regional and local perspectives on the various ways that Arab women are grappling with the multi-faceted roots and repercussions of human rights abuses. In some Arab countries, violations are so severe that speaking out, let alone acting, on women's rights is a life-threatening endeavor. The many women activists, journalists and lawyers murdered in Algeria since 1992 remind us of how much courage and conviction are required to defend women's basic rights and dignity in some volatile contexts. Similarly, the rise of the Taleban movement in Afghanistan, a

Muslim, though not an Arab, country, has stirred debate throughout the Arab world concerning the proper treatment of women under Islamic law. It is encouraging to note that the vast majority of Arab spokesmen, and even the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, have officially condemned the Taleban's treatment of women as uncompassionate, and thus, un-Islamic.

But even in the most moderate Arab countries, women's human rights are far from secured. Kuwait, known for its open, liberal atmosphere in comparison to its Arab Gulf neighbors, still denies women the right to vote. Protests by women's groups and their male supporters before and during the recent Kuwaiti Parliamentary elections, however, indicate that committed, grass-roots effort will not cease until Kuwaiti women achieve suffrage. In Egypt, recent judicial decisions evidence an increasing tendency to apply harsh interpretations of Islamic law to personal status issues, most notably in the case of Professor Nasr Abu Zayd and his wife, Ibtihal Younis, who were ordered to divorce after an Egyptian state court found Professor Abu Zayd guilty of apostasy (based on his academic writings about an eighth century Islamic jurist), and deemed him an unsuitable husband for a Muslim woman, despite Ibtihal Younis's public assertions that she loved her husband and supported his views.

Perhaps the most complex and daunting problem Arab women confront as they struggle for their human rights is the stultifying legacy of personal status codes based on religious laws, which constrict women's options and rights with respect to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. These legal codes are products of societies in which the basic unit is not the individual citizen, but rather, the family, sect or tribe. Critiquing and renovating such deeply-rooted institutions will require more than women's efforts alone; a carefully thought-out and broad-based initiative, involving discussion, dialogue and coordination among both genders and all confessional sects, will be needed to alleviate the most unjust repercussions of personal status laws on women's lives. This is not just a gender issue; rather, it is a question of the meaning of citizenship, *i.e.*, a question of the nature of the rights and duties of every individual citizen in relation to the state.

When discussing legal reforms and voting rights, we are on the familiar terrain of conventional human rights concerns, which focus on the relationship between the individual and the state, specifically, the state's violations of the rights of citizens as defined by national and international law. But the violations of greatest concern to women's rights activists in the Arab world take place in the private domain of the home at the hands of family members. This is a realm which the law scarcely reaches, and into which political debate rarely enters. In the cultural context of the Arab world, the home and the family are inviolable sanctuaries in which outsiders must not meddle. So, how can we confront the domestic violence and sexual abuse which, as so many doctors, counselors and lawyers tell us, is definitely taking place behind the walls of the Arab home? Although many Arab countries have signed the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), few are the Arab countries which have not also entered, along with their official signatures, long lists of reservations concerning CEDAW's claus-

es on women's rights in the context of the family. In fact, one scholar has recently noted that "more reservations with the potential to modify or exclude most, if not all, of the terms of the treaty, have been entered to CEDAW than to any other international convention." (1) State laws are no more effective than international conventions; they provide scant guidance or protection in the event of domestic violence. Furthermore, social, religious and political leaders tend to deny the existence of domestic violence in the Arab world, or, if acknowledging that it may sometimes occur, minimize its seriousness and significance by noting that there is scant statistical proof to indicate that the problem is widespread. Of course, conducting intensive statistical research on such a sensitive topic in a conservative social context is virtually impossible. No statistics will ever exist; thus, no attention will ever be paid to the suffering of abused women.

Despite the culturally imposed dividing line which separates the private and public realms in most Arab countries, global and regional politico-economic forces do indeed have a profound impact on the roles and relationships of men and women in the Arab family. Arab women's pronounced lack of economic power, no less than their glaring absence from decision-making structures in both the private and the public sectors, leaves them extremely vulnerable to violations of their basic human rights in the home. A woman who has no hope of attaining economic self-sufficiency or exercising decision-making powers over her own life or her children's lives will never feel empowered enough to leave an abusive husband whose behavior is excused on cultural and religious grounds. Thus, improving Arab women's conditions within the home will first require a thorough analysis of the interrelated economic and political obstacles confronting women outside of the home. These crucial topics will be addressed in the pages of *Al-Raïda* in 1997.

In the full knowledge of its controversial nature and capacity to provoke criticism and conflict, we present this special double issue of *Al-Raïda* in the hope that it will be discussed actively, not just read passively, by individuals and groups in all sectors of contemporary Arab society. The material contained within this File presents rich topics for debate, poses interrelated problems requiring creative solutions, and offers ideas for effective networking among individuals and organizations inside and outside the Arab world concerned with the momentous topic of women's human rights. If, after reading this issue of *Al-Raïda*, you feel moved to write an article, express an opinion, or propose ideas for research, networking, and activism, please do not hesitate to share your thoughts and ideas with us and all of our readers.

*Laurie King-Irani*  
Editor-in-Chief

#### Endnotes

- (1) Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Rhetorical Strategies and Official Policies on Women's Rights: The Merits and Drawbacks of the New World Hypocrisy," in M. Afkhami (ed.), *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp. 104-131.

## BUILDING ON INDIGENOUS CONCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS



Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami, Executive Director of the Sisterhood is Global Institute.

**T**he Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI) is an independent, international non-profit organization which strives to improve women's human rights on the national, regional and global levels. Founded in 1984, its membership includes women from 70 countries. One of SIGI's most important current projects is the development of a human rights manual designed to teach women in non-Western cultural contexts about general concepts of human rights and how to attain and protect these rights in their societies. Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami, a former professor of English Literature who was born in Iran, is currently Executive Director of SIGI. Al-Raida Editor Laurie King-Irani conducted the following interview with her in SIGI's offices in Maryland in the United States last August.

**Laurie King-Irani:** Last year, you edited a ground-breaking volume, *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* (Syracuse University Press, 1995), which is leading scholars, policy-makers and human rights activists throughout the world to look at the status and

rights of women in Islamic societies in new and innovative ways. I understand that this book was the result of a 1994 conference convened by SIGI in preparation for the Beijing Conference. Can you tell us if the primary focus of SIGI's work is women in the Islamic world?

**Mahnaz Afkhami:** No, not exactly. SIGI is a global network of women. We represent women's groups in seventy countries, and the alert system that we initiated in 1984 has an active membership of more than 1300 people. Alerts are translated into Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese and English and sent out to all corners of the world. Recently, however, we have been emphasizing women in Muslim societies because of the presence of so many active, articulate and energetic women in those societies who are suggesting projects and taking part in the dialogues, conferences and publications we have initiated. So, there has been a tendency in the last couple of years for SIGI to be more active in these societies, but we are still working in other geographic areas, too.

**LKI:** Is SIGI's work primarily educational?

**MA:** SIGI is an educational organization, but it also has a "think-tank" function, since most of our members are extraordinary women from various backgrounds in different countries. These women are politicians, writers, theoreticians and scholars who are making important contributions to scholarly discourse on women's issues throughout the world. The think-tank aspect of SIGI's work is especially important in fulfilling our goal of encouraging a global dialogue on women's rights, in order to encourage a deeper understanding of the cultural and political nuances, the diversities and differences, as well as the similarities, that are found in the situation of women throughout the world.

A key part of SIGI's work right now is our Human Rights Education Project, which we began after noting that the declarations, concepts and conventions that have come out of the international human rights movement are usually quite Western-oriented, both in concept and in language.

*"The women's movement in general, and the women's human rights movement in particular, are modern phenomena. But, so is political Islam!"*

So much of the world has had very little to do with the drafting of these declarations or the formulation of these concepts. Indeed, the terminology of some international conventions and declarations can alienate people in non-Western cultures, even to the extent that these declarations are seen as a continuation of the cultural hegemony of the West in the formerly colonized countries of the world. This view, while extreme, is often justified by some of the historical experiences of individuals in developing societies. At the same time, this emphasis on international human rights conventions masks some of the deeply-rooted human rights concepts that are indigenous to non-

Western cultures. Let's take, for example, a woman's right to work. In Muslim societies, we all know that the first person who became a Muslim was Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who was a successful business woman. She was, in fact, Muhammad's employer. This is evidence of a long-standing, indigenous tradition of working women in the Muslim world. Long before women in the West had the right to work, there was already a well-established acceptance of a Muslim woman's right to work. In disseminating human rights information in the Islamic world, international organizations are all too often educating in ways that are not attractive to or rooted in native, indigenous traditions. Hence, their efforts are often resisted in these non-Western communities. Our Human Rights Education Program, on the other hand, is based on seeking out indigenous, local, and culturally appropriate examples, expressions and images in support of human rights. We are currently overseeing this project in six different Muslim societies: Malaysia, Jordan, Lebanon, Uzbekistan, Iran and Bangladesh. We are working with women in all of these countries to discern what the key rights concepts, symbols and images are in their societies, and then to help them prioritize which rights are the ones they most want to stress. We are striving to prepare the Human Rights Education manuals on the basis of the local experts' in-put, and according to the culturally relevant concepts and priorities as they view them.

*"We must not forget that there is a rich vein to be mined in Islam; we can go back to the Qur'an and the Hadith to address contemporary questions of social justice and equality."*

*"Two man women learn that power is something unattractive — it's unfeminine!"*

**LKI:** Who will use the manual when it is completed? Teachers in the formal educational sector, or activists in the informal sector?

**MA:** The manuals will certainly be introduced into the educational curricula,

but first we are going to test the manuals. In September of this year we will have the first test manuals ready, then, in early 1997, we are going to work with women educators using the manuals in the six aforementioned countries. After we receive their feed-back and advice, as well as more original materials from each of these cultural contexts, we will begin to adapt the manual and its concepts to different groups of people. For example, we will certainly target teachers. Perhaps we will also do manuals for government employees and media personnel. We have to think in terms of adapting the manuals not only for different societies, but for different sectors in each society, e.g.,

both women and men government workers, teachers, judges and social workers. Adjustments will probably have to be made for each of the targeted audiences in each society. We are also going to get advice from individuals in each of the six countries concerning which groups ought to be targeted first. In some countries it will be possible to go directly to the school system; in other countries it may be harder. In some countries, it may be that higher-level decision-makers are accessible and interested, and in other countries not. What is important to emphasize about this human rights education project, though, is that the manual will not be produced here and shipped out; instead, it will be created in the context of particular cultures and societies by individuals and groups who know their own society's values, needs and priorities.

**LKI:** Concerning women's human rights in the Arab world, how would you appraise the Beijing conference and follow-up activities? Where do you see the human rights debate heading?

**MA:** There were two things about Beijing that I feel very positive about. First, looking back on the Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1993, I and many others felt that very few women from the global south participated actively and effectively in Vienna. Of course, a number of women from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America were present, but considering their representation in the world's current population, and especially considering that Muslim women, whether Arab or not, comprise 500 million people, the number of women from the global south who occupied decision-making positions were very few. It seemed that any kind of decision-making power was concentrated in a small number of Western women's hands, specifically, women from North America and Western Europe, who chose the women who came from the global south in order to give the desired "rainbow" impression. They had the funding and the capability, and one



*"We all are guilty of simplifying and labeling each other."*

cannot find fault with or raise complaints against people who know how to do things and how to successfully access money and power. But one also wants to encourage others to participate. Women from the global south must also have an equal and effective voice in international fora. It is

not a matter of wanting to keep certain groups of women out, but to bring more women into the decision-making process. Thus, SIGI started trying to involve more women from the global south in the preparation process for the Beijing conference. To a great extent, our efforts succeeded, although we have yet to achieve all of our goals and ideals. However, a lot more women from the global south, particularly Muslim women, were significantly involved in the preparatory process. We had a number of sessions at the Commission on the Status of Women meetings prior to the Beijing Conference. In addition, we convened the conference on religion, culture and human rights in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1994, which led to the publication of the edited volume, *Faith and Freedom*. SIGI also organized two other conferences, one in Africa which focused on women and commerce and industry, and the other in Athens, which addressed the growing problem of women refugees.

At the Beijing conference itself, there was quite a large contingent of Muslim women present. We saw the full spectrum of women from the Muslim world at Beijing: the Islamist (or "fundamentalist"), the conservative, and then the more secular and progressive. I think this range of representation was very healthy because it enabled us to initiate a fruitful debate on the current and future status of women in Islamic societies. One of the interesting points revealed by this debate was that, although the very resurgence of an Islamist movement in so many Muslim societies has had negative consequences for women (especially in Algeria and Afghanistan), it has nonetheless also had an important positive consequence: it has brought to the fore issues of women's rights and participation. Women's issues have now become a focal point for public debate and discussion throughout the Muslim world. Women's silence and subservience is no longer simply taken for granted.

Another positive aspect we saw at Beijing was that although so many governments

persisted in using religion and culture as excuses for reinstating a subordinate status for women, their efforts ultimately failed. Some governments spared no effort to argue that women's human rights just did not and could not mesh with their scriptural or cultural values. We even saw some very interesting coalitions forming between people and states who usually have nothing at all in common. But despite all of their efforts to form alliances and sway opinion, the Beijing Platform for Action was approved by consensus, and came out rather strongly in favor of the inviolability of women's human rights and the necessity of governments throughout the world to change laws, policies and practices in order to be more in line with key international conventions protecting women's human rights. So, I can say without hesitation that I am optimistic about what happened at Beijing.

**LKI:** But how do you foresee the follow-up to Beijing in the Arab world?

**MA:** I see that there are two simultaneous movements happening now in the Arab-Islamic world: One is the development of an extraordinary awareness of rights on behalf of women, and parallel to it is an Islamist resurgence which focuses on women and their proper role in family, society, and the community as the measure of the Islamic integrity of any given Muslim society. Paradoxically, this focus on woman as symbol has given some Muslim women an opportunity to be active and visible in ways that would not previously have been possible. I am speaking here of conservative, fundamentalist Muslim women, who would never have had such opportunities for self-expression and activism without the backing of a fundamentalist political movement. It is not a form of activism, however, which is conducive to the long-term achievement of human rights for women, but it is an activism which brings women into fields which they otherwise might never have entered. There's no doubt, though,

*"There was, and still is, a certain arrogance in the Western women's attitude. There's a sense that they have all the answers."*

that what they are urging is a "separate but equal" platform for women, which is a negative (and in my view, a potentially dangerous), factor as we have seen in recent events in Algeria. But by bringing into an activist role these women who would not otherwise have had one, we can say that the fundamentalists are doing leadership training of women and teaching them the principles of persuasive and articulate public speaking. Still, there is no doubt that these two movements, the feminist and the fundamentalist, are mutually contradictory. In the end, the human rights groups are talking about equal opportunities, equal rights, equal access to employment, wealth and key

public spaces, and the others are saying the equality does not apply, but complementarity does. And to many of us at SIGI, complementarity implies inherently unequal treatment of men and women, as well as an inherent limitation of roles, not only for women, but for men, too.

We have to confront and discuss this issue of inequality, but it cannot be confronted by ideologies and methodologies imported into Muslim societies from elsewhere. It has to be an indigenous commentary and confrontation; it has to come from within, and it must combine the views of the people themselves and be spearheaded by the people themselves.

**LKI:** Do you see that happening in your travels and studies? Is an indigenous Muslim feminism taking shape?

**MA:** Yes, I definitely think so. Even some of the adherence of women activists to the fundamentalist groups has resulted from a basic heightening of social and political consciousness. Many women have chosen this route — and sometimes even for reasons other than religious ones — because they are against poverty, corruption, foreign military interventions, and an invasion of a highly materialistic Western consumer culture. So, a lot of women allied with these Islamist groups have not explicitly opted for a subservient or unequal position (as encoded in the fundamentalists' discourse), but have joined the Islamist movement on social and political grounds. All of this indicates to me that Muslim women are entering the political realm in increasing numbers.

Another interesting phenomenon is that modernity brings with it certain complexities and contradictions because we are passing from one set of values and priorities to another. This is a period of great uncertainty and potential confusion, and the upshot is that many people throughout the world are really quite anxious. So, the women's movement in general, and the women's human rights movement in particular, are modern phenomena. But, so is political Islam! The Islamist resurgence is also a quintessentially modern development. If traditions were already in place and unquestioned, there would be no need to have a fundamentalist movement, whose *raison d'être* is to

*"This focus on woman as symbol has given some Muslim women an opportunity to be active and visible in ways that would not previously have been possible."*

*"This identification of feminism with the West and imperialism has harmed us a great deal."*

restore a traditional order that has been lost. These two movements are both results of momentous changes in a shared and common world. I think we will continue seeing these two movements, which arise out of the same socio-cultural and temporal context, clashing for the foreseeable future. They may help bring attention to the negative and destructive aspects of both Eastern and Western societies, such as materialism, corruption, poverty, and the lack of popular participation in the political process. Seen from this angle, both feminism and Islamism give powerless people more of a voice in political decision-making. Also, we must not forget that there is a rich vein

to be mined in Islam; we can go back to the Qur'an and the Hadith to address contemporary questions of social justice and equality. But women's rights should not be confined within the limited framework of any particular religion, whether Islam, Buddhism, Christianity or Judaism.

**LKI:** Have you, or anyone else affiliated with SIGI, given thought to publishing a book in Arabic outlining an indigenous feminism drawing on indigenous Arab sources, whether Islamic or Christian?

**MA:** Dr. Fatima Mernissi of Morocco is working on a project entitled "Humanist Islam" with a large number of colleagues. It is a huge project: a series of books in Arabic which will look at women and women's rights through an Islamic lens. They are now collecting and studying all the verses of the Qur'an and all the Traditions of the Prophet that are positive concerning women's rights.

Lately, we are seeing a lot of new writing on women's role in religion. In our next collection of papers, to be entitled "Prose, Politics and Power: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World," there is an essay on religious higher learning as a human right. This is extremely important in Muslim societies, because women are generally not allowed into religious schools of higher learning, and unless you have the background and the learning, you will never have the validity or the credibility to discuss Islam seriously. So, for the first time at Beijing, women's right to higher studies in theology was claimed as a basic human right. I think it is essential to strive for this right.

**LKI:** What, in your opinion, are the major challenges confronting women in the Arab world?

**MA:** Without hesitation, I would say that the most important challenge is getting women into decision-making positions. We have a lot of work ahead of us in our strug-

*"Why don't we take the lead? Why not borrow from the West if they have a valuable idea that works?"*

gle to ensure women's participation in social, political and economic decision-making. Once you have that, you can influence decisions which affect women in all fields: education, health care, the economy, the environment, etc. We have to remember that decision-making in any society does not simply happen. It requires a lot of preparation and training. So, the concept of educating women for empower-

ment, educating women how not to be afraid of power, is of utmost importance. Too many women learn that power is something unattractive — it's unfeminine! — so it is crucial to teach women to see power in new ways — not just as force, might and coercion, but as the power to create, to help, to heal, the power to do things for people, the power to make decisions that are positive and constructive. This type of education is essential for getting women into key positions within the power structures of their societies. And, of course, education always involves an awareness of one's relationship to one's culture and religion. How do we reconcile this? This is not an issue specific to the Arab world; we also see similar phenomena in the United States with the rise of the Christian fundamentalist groups. But certainly, the answer is not to go back to some golden era that probably never really existed!

Another important challenge is achieving financial and economic independence for women. This was the concern I heard most frequently voiced by grass-roots women's organizations in Iran 25 years ago. And in the US, when we hear about battered wives, we are reminded that these women could escape abuse and degradation if only they could stand on their own two feet financially. Again, education is so important; to achieve economic self-sufficiency, you first must have the necessary skills and training.

**LKI:** What has been your experience in dialoguing with Western feminists with little awareness of women's realities and concerns beyond North America and Western Europe? Do you feel that they have opened their eyes to the needs and views of women in the global south, particularly Arab and Muslim women?

**MA:** I think there is more sensitivity now than before. There was, and still is, a certain arrogance in the Western women's attitude. There's a sense that they have all the answers. But perhaps this stems from their lack of expo-

sure to other realities, their lack of opportunities to learn about other cultures. It seems that Western women who have lived in non-Western contexts can be more sensitive than those who have never had any experience, except what they see and hear in the media. Sometimes I get the sense that, if you don't have the same concern for the same priorities as Western feminists, you are made to feel less developed, or less progressive. I have seen a lot more sensitivity from Western feminists in the last few years, but I must add here that sometimes their attempts at cultural awareness and sensitivity can go too far, as we see among those Western women who say that female circumcision (female genital mutilation, *i.e.*, FGM) is just another cultural practice. But this cultural relativism is just another example of the arrogance I have just described. It is as if Western feminists are saying "okay, a whole set of norms apply to us and our culture, and a whole other set of norms applies to these other cultures."

What we must not forget is that all cultures, whether Eastern or Western, have gone through various stages of cultural expressions and behaviors, some of which have been harmful and negative, and many of which have changed. And they ought to change. All cultures change, and if they didn't, then every human society would be characterized by a harsh hierarchy of a few dominating men on top of the social and political pyramid, and all women and most other men in subordinate positions.

**LKI:** It is also important to realize that women don't play a very significant role at the top of the social or economic hierarchy in North America, either!

**MA:** No, they really don't! In the United States, you have only one percent participation by women in economic and corporate decision-making, and just seven percent in political decision-making. It is a dismal record, considering America's advanced economic development and its high, overall level of education. So Western feminists should consider this bleak reality before they criticize the non-Western world. But in general, there is much more understanding and sensitivity on the part of Western feminists now than we saw even two or three years ago.

**LKI:** What would you cite as the deciding factors in this deepening of sensitivity and awareness?

**MA:** A lot of it has

*"We are working with women to help them prioritize which rights are the ones they most want to stress."*

stemmed from contact and communication. We have expanded the circle of dialogue considerably. The UN and international conferences have made a great difference in that they have allowed people to share perspectives and information. Also, the Internet has helped tremendously. But here, I would like to point out that it is not only Western feminists who have displayed arrogant attitudes. Some of us non-Western feminists have also misjudged, misrepresented and simplified "Western women." Just who is a Western woman? There is as much variety and difference in the West as in the East or South! We demand that Western feminists make the effort to understand our diversity and differences, then we turn around and speak of "the American woman" as if she was an easily identified, categorizable entity. Do we mean an African-American woman? A Catholic woman? A Jewish woman? A single, professional woman living in Manhattan? Or a farm wife raising a family in Iowa? We all are guilty of simplifying and labeling each other, but the more we dialogue and cooperate, the more that tolerance, understanding and sensitivity will grow.

**LKI:** What would you say is the single most daunting obstacle to Arab women's participation in political and economic decision-making?

**MA:** Lack of education, not just formal education, but all forms of education and socialization that lead to women's empowerment. There is a great need to develop forms of education which will make it harder for women to be manipulated, exploited and abused, that will make it harder to perpetuate the traditional subservient role of women. Such education need not be alien to the society; rather, it should be based on the concepts, priorities and values which are dear to women, such as their religious heritage and their important roles as nurturers and educators of the young. Lack of education for empowerment leads women to "buy into" the myth that being a woman of equal status to a man somehow threatens her family, or somehow contradicts her role as mother, wife, friend, citizen or religious believer. And when women buy into that constricting mentality, it harms them a great deal.

**LKI:** But I have noticed that when Arab women express a desire to do new things, to take a critical look at their society and traditions in order to expand their horizons or increase their options, native critics immediately say, 'Ah! This is a Western approach!'. Since anything labeled as Western or American is automatically suspect, even dangerous, this label puts an immediate halt to any discussion or action.

**MA:** Exactly! That is what I meant when I said that people will emphasize a woman's proper role or deportment as

part of her religious, cultural or national heritage, because this is their reaction to the painful colonial past. They have been using the past as a reason to perpetuate women's inequality and subordination. In traditional and non-Western societies, feminist discourse is always pushed into the category of 'the other', so this identification of feminism with the West and imperialism has harmed us a great deal. But now, people in the global South are actively trying to transcend this way of thinking; I believe this perspective has run its course.

**LKI:** It seems to me that SIGI's approach of urging non-Western, particularly Muslim, women to develop their own indigenous forms of culturally relevant feminism and concepts of rights is a stroke of genius. It could do much to remove the false dichotomy many scholars have erected between Islam and the West, and thereby counter the pernicious idea that a "clash of civilizations" is inevitable.

**MA:** For women in the Arab and Islamic world, one of the most negative things is the extent to which we have been reactive, rather than proactive. We are always hearing Muslim women say 'I don't want to be like American women, British women, or French women! I am against the hegemony of Western culture!' Let's leave this discourse behind! We ought to do our own thing; we ought to say what it is that we do want; we ought to state clearly what we see as a good way of life for a Muslim woman. What do we, as Muslim women, stand for? Why don't we comment seriously on some of the feminist ideas and practices that evolved in the West? I don't mean criticism for the sake of name-calling, but serious study and constructive criticism. Why do we constantly comment upon, and react to, Western views about us? Why don't we take the lead? Why not borrow from the West if they have a valuable idea that works? If we find a particular concept or methodology that proves effective in furthering women's rights in the Arab world, why not utilize it?

Recently, the Jordanian human rights lawyer Asma Khodr was participating in a Human Rights Education Workshop organized by SIGI. She told us about an interesting campaign they initiated in Jordan to encourage children's interest in human rights. A Western woman from Amnesty International immediately picked up on this idea and said, 'that is great! Let's see if we can do that, too!'. Western women don't have this reactive-ness; they aren't threatened, and this is something valuable that we non-Western women can learn from them. Our overall goal at SIGI is to encourage dialogue and respect between all the women of the world. If we don't have respect for each other's opinions, ideas and experiences, how can we expect such respect from men?

# A LEGAL LITERACY CAMPAIGN FOR PALESTINIAN WOMEN

by Randa Siniora, Coordinator, Women's Rights Projects, Al-Haq, Ramallah, Palestine

## Introduction

Perceiving women's rights as an integral part of human rights is a relatively new phenomenon in Palestinian society. The Palestinian women's movement, which has been evolving since the beginning of this century, has focused primarily on the Palestinian national struggle; thus, it has developed in parallel with the Palestinian liberation movement. In essence, Palestinian women's groups worked in support of the Palestinian national agenda without formulating a clearly defined orientation to women's issues as such. The many grass-roots women's organizations which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s perceived, in theory, the strong relationship between the political emancipation of Palestinian women and their corresponding socio-economic and legal emancipation. Unlike earlier Palestinian women's organizations, recently formed grass-roots organizations have developed a decentralized structure which allows more women to contribute to decision-making processes. In practice, however, the Palestinian women's movement has traditionally attended more to the requirements of the national struggle than to needs and problems unique to women in this historical and cultural context. It was not until the late 1980s that Palestinian women began to raise new questions and chart a different course.

In the early 1990s, Palestinian women, although maintaining their significant role in the Palestinian national struggle, also began to realize the urgent need to address social, economic and legal factors which contribute to the oppression of Palestinian women. Discussions within the movement focused upon the need for a well-defined Palestinian women's agenda. Gradually, various groups initiated new projects and activities in order to address the leading social, legal and human rights issues confronting Palestinian women. Activists also began developing empowerment programs for Palestinian women.

This report provides a brief but comprehensive survey of

Palestinian women's initiatives in developing programs to enhance Palestinian women's awareness and understanding of the concept of women's rights and human rights, thus ensuring women's increasing empowerment within Palestinian society. The report focuses primarily upon women's initiatives in developing legislation based on equality and non-discrimination which draws upon international principles and standards for the protection of human rights generally and women's rights specifically.

*Struggling for Equality:  
Using the Law as a Tool  
for the Empowerment  
of Palestinian Women*

Beginning from the firm conviction that the law can be an effective tool for empowerment, Palestinian women's groups began to focus their lobbying efforts on the adoption of legislation based on equality and non-discrimination of women. These efforts commenced with a campaign to raise social awareness about women's legal and human rights and to encourage open discussions within Palestinian society concerning the legal and social status of Palestinian women. After the election of the Palestinian Elected Council (The Legislative Council) for the West Bank and Gaza in January 1996, Palestinian women activists began lobbying the new legislators in earnest. The women held many meetings with key members of the Legislative Council, as well as with members of political decision-making bodies within the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The activists' aim was the adoption of legislation based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and respect for human rights. Women's groups undertook parallel consciousness-raising efforts concerning human rights at the popular, grass-roots level.

The main obstacle to the development of effective legal discourse and practice in Palestinian society in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip over the past three decades can be attributed to the long years of harsh Israeli military

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occupying forces to further control and circumscribe Palestinian society. As a result of this historical experience, few Palestinians perceive the law as an instrument for positive social and political change.

But this difficult political situation itself served as a catalyst for women's mobilization and participation in the national struggle. Economic hardships obliged Palestinian women to enter the work-force for the first time as wage-laborers. As a result of so many changes on the political, social and economic levels, Palestinian women began to view themselves and their roles in new ways. Palestinian women's grass-roots organizations were the sites of critical discourse and new action plans. These organizations initiated a number of income-generating projects for women, mainly in the form of cooperatives, day-care centers, and various other projects geared towards increasing women's decision-making abilities. These activities and experiences led many women activists and lawyers to realize the need for legal reform as an important mechanism for change within Palestinian society.

Concerted attempts to raise awareness of the importance of legal reform began in the early 1990s, sparked by ongoing debates concerning women's fate in the event of national liberation. Would Palestinian women, like Algerian women, be pushed back into the private, domestic sphere of life following liberation? Or would they have a better chance at maintaining their new-found political and economic status after the national struggle was realized? Palestinian women faced up to the challenges posed by these questions. Realizing that no clear plan of action would be adopted without their efforts and in-put, women activists began to organize their work and developed a comprehensive women's agenda, in which the role of law was highlighted as a tool for empowerment. Law, in this context, referred not to the isolated legal text itself, but to two other key components of any

occupation of Palestinian territory. Since 1948, Palestinian men and women alike were prevented from participating in democratic processes concerning the governance of their own country. Under Israeli occupation, the legal framework remained static. The only amendments and changes came in the form of new military orders devised by the

occupying forces to further control and circumscribe Palestinian society. As a result of this historical experience, few Palestinians perceive the law as an instrument for positive social and political change.

legal system: the structure of legal principles and the culture of the law. Focusing on the legal text alone cannot in and of itself lead to positive changes. What is also required is a serious attempt to enforce laws thoughtfully and effectively. The women activists also focused on the need to change the attitudes of both men and women concerning the role of law in their lives, and their own gender roles in Palestinian society.

To achieve awareness and transform attitudes, Palestinian women's groups convened a number of workshops and training sessions devoted to examining legal and social rights. In a local conference sponsored by the Women's Unit of Bisan in Jerusalem in 1990, women's social problems were voiced openly for the first time. Women spoke publicly about such sensitive issues as domestic violence, veiling, early marriages, personal status laws, and divorce. This ground-breaking conference was the first of many such events.

An event which no Palestinian woman activist will ever forget was the 1991 seminar on battered women organized by the Women's Studies Center in Ramallah. Long and contentious debates preceded the event, the key points of debate being whether or not it was too early to address such a difficult topic, and whether or not the activity should be open to men as well as to women. Since it was the first major activity to address the topic of gender violence in Palestine, the organizers decided that only women would be allowed to attend. Despite the absence of men from the discussion, the prevailing mood was one of tension and unrest; most of the participants felt it was an extremely sensitive issue. Some women felt that the phenomenon of domestic violence simply did not exist in Palestinian society and hesitated to reflect on their own experiences. The seminar on battered women was complemented by numerous other discussions and workshops on the topic. Having so often been the victims or the witnesses of violence in their everyday lives during occupation, Palestinian women have participated actively in international campaigns to combat violence against women. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, a number of organizations are focusing their work on providing legal, social and psychological counseling to women victims of gender violence. The current support system, although still

*"As a result of this historical experience, few Palestinians perceive the law as an instrument for positive social and political change."*

not up to the desired standards, provides a wide range of services to victims of gender violence regardless of social background.

The issues of the greatest significance to Palestinian women activists are also the most sensitive issues in contemporary Palestinian society: marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and polygamy. These issues are classified under the general heading "personal status issues." The sensitive nature of personal and family status matters stems from the fact that laws pertaining to these issues are influenced primarily by Islamic law, *al-shari'a*, which is based on verses of the Qur'an and precedent-setting decisions and judgments of the Prophet Muhammad known as *al-Hadith*.

In addressing the complex topic of personal status laws, Palestinian women's organizations have based their discussions on the principle of the law's flexibility and hence, its openness to a variety of interpretations. *Shari'a* law embraces different schools of thought and tolerates various opinions concerning almost every topic. The legislative power of one Islamic country could, therefore, theoretically develop legislation differing from the legislation prevalent in other Islamic countries. Thus, Palestinian women could also press for changes in personal status legislation based upon progressive interpretations of *al-shari'a*. Palestinian women activists see this strategy as the most realistic approach available for treating this sensitive issue. In the long run, however, Palestinian women know that their efforts must lead to the adoption of a civil family status law as an alternative legal framework for those who wish to resort to it. To reach this desired end, Palestinian women activists should organize an intensive legal literacy program to elicit broad-based social support for such a wide-reaching change in legislation.

Over the last four years, Palestinian women have been addressing the topic of legal reform in a serious manner. In the area of personal status laws, for example, Al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights organization which sponsors a special program on women's human rights, saw a need for an in-depth course for women pioneers in the field of law. The course offered a critical examination of the text and implications of the Jordanian Family Status Law of 1976, legislation which is applicable in the West Bank. Women activists strongly believe that this law does not meet the needs and aspirations of Palestinian women; thus, they think it should be changed. Al-Haq, while agreeing with this point of view, realized that a thorough understanding and analysis of the law should precede any call for change. Therefore, Al-Haq organized a three-month course which enabled participants

to fully understand the law and its components, discuss and debate its merits and deficiencies, and finally, to make recommendations on how to address the deficiencies. It was hoped that through this training, Palestinian women activists could use their new-found expertise among their wide-ranging social networks at the grass-roots level.

*"What is also required is a serious attempt to enforce laws thoughtfully and effectively."*

One of the major accomplishments of Palestinian women in the area of legal reform was the comprehensive survey of laws affecting Palestinian women, which was carried out by the Women's Center for Social and Legal Counseling in 1993-94. The Women's Center commissioned Palestinian experts to conduct a survey on all laws applicable in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip as they affect women's roles and rights. The survey examined every law, whether based on Ottoman, Jordanian, British Mandatory or Israeli Military rule on the West Bank, or Egyptian Rule in the Gaza Strip. The survey then pinpointed all existing gaps in the law by highlighting those provisions and policies which clearly discriminate against women in six major areas, *i.e.*, personal and family status laws, criminal laws, labor laws and social welfare, women's health, women and education, and laws dealing with women's civil and political rights.

The follow-up to the legal survey consisted of six workshops which were attended by women activists, lawyers, professionals in a variety of fields, and academics. Each workshop focused on one of the major areas mentioned above, and examined both the positive and the negative aspects of the laws before discussing practical suggestions for future action. Organizers saw the workshop participants as a nucleus of activists who could be called upon for future training and actions on legal issues.

In 1993, Al-Haq, in cooperation with a steering committee of women professionals, initiated a one-year campaign entitled: "Women, Justice and Law: Towards the Empowerment of Palestinian Women." This local campaign aimed at encouraging discussions at the grass-roots level on issues of concern to women in the fields of the law and women's human rights. The campaign's ultimate goal was to increase awareness of women's legal rights and to foster an appreciation of the use of the law as an effective tool for the empowerment of

women. The campaign succeeded not only as a means of public outreach, but also as an learning experience in coordination and cooperation for the women who were involved in the event. The campaign was organized by a consortium of grass-roots women's organizations, non-governmental organizations, and all democratic elements in Palestinian society. Although the project was planned by a steering committee, it was designed to allow for the greatest amount of participation and decision-making. The work was completely decentralized, and regional committees were democratically elected in various parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to organize workshops, discussions, seminars, and media campaigns.

The Women, Justice and Law project was also designed to complement rather than replicate the efforts of the Women's Center for Legal and Social Counseling. Its activities disseminated information about the results of the legal survey undertaken by the Women's Center. Participants throughout Palestine were asked to suggest recommendations for the resolution of existing legal and social problems. The Women, Justice and Law campaign culminated in a three-day conference held in Jerusalem in September, 1994. The conference began with a consideration of the recommendations made by women in the aforementioned workshops, and sought for ways to translate these recommendations into concrete plans of action which could be adopted by women's organizations, individuals, and NGOs.

Following up on the work already accomplished, the Women's Center for Legal and Social Counseling organized a number of workshops throughout the West Bank to discuss specific legal amendments to existing laws. The result of these workshops was a text containing the amendments of existing laws written by the workshop participants. Women discussed these amendments and gave their feedback on the various issues presented. In 1995 and 1996, Al-Haq has focused its efforts on addressing issues of great controversy in Palestinian society, *i.e.*, gender violence, family status laws, and labor laws.

As a result of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations which began in Madrid in 1991, women's technical committees were formed to contribute ideas and suggestions to discussions of legal and social reforms. Although the starting point of these committees' efforts was closely linked with the peace process, the women's technical committees have now evolved into an umbrella organization representing all women's committees and organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Of great significance is the work of the technical committees addressing the issue of women's role in decision-making processes in

political and public life in Palestine. The technical committees mounted a large campaign just before the Palestinian national elections to highlight women candidates for the Legislative Council and to raise public awareness about their platforms. Another campaign emphasized a proposal to guarantee Palestinian women 30 percent of all seats in the legislature, but this campaign was unsuccessful. Another important project of the technical committees is the campaign for higher representation of women in the upcoming municipal elections. In an attempt to lobby for laws and legislation which do not discriminate against women, the technical committees are training women to be members of pressure groups in the different regions of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

One of the most important activities now taking place in Palestine is a project spear-headed by the Women's Center for Legal and Social Counseling in coordination with several other human rights and legal organizations entitled "Palestinian Mock Parliament". This project aims at raising awareness of lobbying techniques and tools for formulating legislation which does not discriminate against women. The mock parliaments, which are held in different regions of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, focus primarily on legislation affecting women in an effort to encourage women to devise alternative amendments. Through the mock parliament experience, participants learn how to present their case, how to attain access to parliamentary members, and how to mount successful campaigns to fight for their causes. The mock parliaments are comprised of concerned members of Palestinian society representing both genders, all regions, Christians and Muslims, and representatives from a wide variety of political and ideological currents.

A key area of concern for the Palestinian women's movement is the issue of legal reform and the adoption of laws which are non-discriminatory towards women. The significance of this issue is underlined by the latest political events taking place in Palestinian society. During this transitional period, the newly elected Palestinian Legislative Council is required to create laws for every aspect of Palestinian life, especially in areas where powers have been transformed by the PNA. Women's legal and human rights should be given top priority. Palestinian women's contributions to the life of Palestinian society, and their active participation in all domains of Palestinian public life, should be realized through laws and legislation which are just and fair to women. Pursuing such a strategy ought to ensure the full representation of women in the political and public life of Palestine through their equal and active participation in decision-making processes.



# LAURE MOUGHAIZEL EVALUATES LEBANESE LAWS



Attorney and Human Rights Activist  
Maitre Laure Moughaizel

Conducted by Ghena Ismail

**Ghena Ismail:** How do you evaluate Lebanese laws from the perspective of human rights in general and women's rights in particular?

**Laure Moughaizel:** First, I would like to stress that women's rights are inevitably part of human rights. There cannot be

human rights without women's rights, nor can there be women's rights outside the framework of human rights. All of the issues raised by women's movements are essentially humanitarian issues. Consequently, both men and women should work on them. This is what I have been advocating for fifty years now, since I first became active in the humanitarian field. I simply cannot imagine humanity divided into two sections: one for women and another for men. Concerning my own evaluation of the Lebanese law, I have to point out that there is a gap between the legislation and its application. As for the legislation, it is relatively modern; it emerges from a democratic system and emphasizes the respect of human rights, especially the new Introduction added to the Constitution in 1990, which clearly affirms Lebanon's commitment to all international conventions and declarations concerning human rights.

**GI:** What does this commitment imply?

**LM:** It merely implies respecting the international declarations, which have no legal force, as you may know. A country only becomes legally obliged to follow a certain code when it ratifies the agreements issued by the UN. Although Lebanon has always committed itself to the international declarations, it was only last July (1996) that the Lebanese Government became a signatory to CEDAW (The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Even though the Lebanese legislation emphasizes respect for human rights, this does not mean that it has no flaws or deficiencies. A flaw is a present law that violates human rights, e.g., a farmer is excluded from the legal protection offered to

Lebanese workers; a deficiency is a missing law, e.g., Lebanon lacks sanctions against "sexism". Some laws need to be amended, some need to be canceled, and others need to be added. However, the laws which violate human rights are much fewer than the violations of human's rights that take place in everyday life. This reminds us of the Arabic proverb, "Iqra' tafrah, jarrib tahzan", i.e., "If you read, you become happy, but if you try, you become sad!" In other words, theory and practice are not the same thing! The real problem is in the application more so than in the legislation.

**GI:** What is being done to monitor the application of the laws, especially those recently amended or added?

**LM:** Follow-up efforts are made, but not, of course, by the Government. We in the Non-Governmental Organization for Human Rights monitor the Government regularly; never has the Government taken the initiative to respect human rights. For instance, when the law concerning women's testimony was amended, due to our constant efforts, enabling women to give their testimony in all matters and be considered equal with men, many mayors still refused to accept the testimony of women. Here, our work began. We conducted studies, carried out investigations, and wrote reports which we submitted to the relevant ministries. At our request, the Director of Public Security issued a public announcement stating that mayors must accept women's testimonies. For the purpose of monitoring the application of the law, we have established two offices: one for complaints and petitions and another for free legal consultations. Now, I am attempting, along with the National Committee for Women's Rights headed by Lebanese First Lady Mona El-Hrawi, to institutionalize these two offices so that services will be expanded to benefit the greatest number of people. Today, in light of the present economic difficulties, voluntary work has become virtually impossible. People might be enthusiastic for a little while, but faced with the demands of everyday life, they eventually quit. Therefore, institutionalizing these two offices is imperative.

Monitoring the application of laws alone is inadequate. If a right exists and people do not know about it, it is simply useless. In an attempt to promote legal literacy among Lebanese citizens, I issued two guidebooks, one for the working woman and another one for the Lebanese citizen. Now I am preparing a third guide entitled "The Right to Health." Moreover, we in the Lebanese Association for Human Rights have carried out a comprehensive campaign to introduce and explain the law to Lebanese citizens, to inform them about their rights, and more

importantly, to teach them how these rights should be used. If a woman knows that she, as a worker, has the right to 50 percent salary for every one extra working hour, but does not know how to practice this right, she may not know that she can simply go to the labor disputes tribunal council and submit a complaint without appointing a lawyer. Thus, she is not likely to pursue her right. Three goals need to be achieved: First, the citizen must become aware of his or her rights; second, the citizen should learn how he or she can practice these rights; and finally, citizens must learn how to amend the deficient existing laws. In a survey that preceded the campaign, we discovered that legal illiteracy affects not only college students, men and women alike, but even those in the Parliament!

**GI:** Does anyone in any position of authority promote women's issues today?

**LM:** No, not at all. In the past, there was Joseph Moughaizel, my late husband, who was the first one to call for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and there was also Auguste Bakhos, a parliamentarian who used to support all of our goals and plans.

**GI:** What is your strategy to change the laws which still need to be amended?

**LM:** The strategy was drawn up in 1947, half a century ago. After we had made a survey of all the laws which needed to be amended, canceled, or added, we used to choose, for each stage, a specific law to adopt or change. Last year, for instance, we focused on the Government's ratification of CEDAW, which we eventually succeeded in having the Lebanese Government sign, but not without major reservations. (See explanation on facing page.)

**GI:** What are your priorities for the coming year?

**LM:** Our priorities for 1997 are the amendment of laws related to crimes of honor and laws concerning economic and work regulations. According to Lebanese law, a man who kills his wife or sister upon witnessing her in an act of adultery benefits from an exempting excuse, whereas if he kills her because he witnesses her in a state that arouses suspicion of adultery, he benefits from an extenuating excuse which reverts his punishment from a death sentence to a one-year imprisonment. Regarding economical legislation, there is no equality between the woman employee and the male employee with regard to financial grants, privileges and insurance.

**GI:** What are your criteria for deciding on legislative priorities, and what method do you employ to effect the desired changes?

**LM:** There are two criteria: first, the extent of need for the

change of a particular law; and second, the likelihood of realizing the aim. This second criterion is important, since we try to avoid public provocation or discontent about a subject which we know is too far-fetched. As for our method, the first step is to prepare a legal study and a proposal for an amendment in the law. Then, we convene the non-governmental organizations for a meeting. If the organizations are convinced and supportive, we sign the proposal, forward it to the authorities, and form a follow-up committee.

**GI:** Wasn't the law for transferring Lebanese nationality through the mother among the priorities last year?

**LM:** Of course it was. In fact, it was the top priority for the year 1995-96. Seventy non-governmental organizations had signed the proposal, and then we held three meetings with the parliamentary committees, in the presence of the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Interior Affairs, and the Committee for Management and Justice, headed by Auguste Bakhos. Unfortunately, though, certain political circumstances related to the issue of the settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon hindered the progress of our work. So we changed the title of our proposal from transferring the nationality of the Lebanese mother to her children to transferring the nationality of the Lebanese mother to her fatherless children. Now, we are just waiting for the right opportunity to activate this subject.

**GI:** Through your long and rich legal experience, do you agree with those who say that a change in mentality should necessarily precede any change of laws?

**LM:** I think this is a lousy excuse! Undoubtedly, it is important to change people's mentality. However, we cannot freeze the legal progress, waiting interminably for the mentality to change; in many cases this may mean waiting forever. In 1956, for instance, we called for the amendment of the law of inheritance so that women could inherit equally with men, and in 1959 the law was amended. Definitely, this amendment did not conform to the mentality prevalent then, and not even to that prevalent today. Many families would still prefer to give their son more than they give to their daughter. However, the compulsory nature of the law deters the citizen and eventually contributes to changing the mentality. Whoever tries to discriminate in inheritance matters will know that if his daughter goes to court, she will win the case. Let's take Tunisia as an example. Although it is a Muslim country, many important changes were made in its personal status code. Divorce is no longer allowed except in front of a judge, and polygamy is prohibited, unless for extreme reasons, and then only with a judge's approval. Once a law is promulgated, people have to adapt to it. What really hinders the development of our laws in Lebanon is the fact that our system is sectarian. The only solution would be to establish an elective (non-compulsory), unified civil law. Unfortunately, though, this law had more poten-

tial of being implemented before the war. We in the Democratic Party (which was secular), and in co-operation with Abdullah Lahhoud, had prepared a proposal for such a law, and MP Auguste Bakhos presented the proposal in the Parliament. The proposal was discussed several times in the administrative committee. However, as a result of the war, this law is now perceived as being very far-fetched.

**GI:** What about the reinterpretation of religion as a possible solution for updating some of our rigid laws?

**LM:** The reinterpretation of religion is extremely important. It was the reinterpretation of religion that facilitated many legal changes in several Arab countries. A pioneering country in this respect is Tunisia, which amended many of its laws without sacrificing its religious identity. Tunisia declared that its official religion is Islam, and then made all the amendments in light of this declaration, unlike Turkey, a non-Arab country which abandoned Islam, and then made civil amendments. It is necessary to change some of the rules which are not directly related to one's faith in accordance with the times in which we are living. Otherwise, the religious rules become meaningless and empty, and will repel young people. It is very sad that religious laws are not keeping pace with the international development of human rights; I fear that this may be harmful to the religions themselves, all of which were founded on the basis of respecting human rights. It is illogical to conclude that any of the newly established laws aiming at protecting human rights could possibly violate any of the existing religious rules.

**GI:** We have learned that you have attained a new position as a Member of the United Nations Committee for Human Rights. What is the importance of your membership in this committee?

**LM:** This committee constitutes a body of experts from different countries throughout the world. It is elected by the member countries of the UN for a period of four years. The election is conducted confidentially, and in the presence of two-thirds of the UN's members. Any candidate, in order to win, needs a majority of the votes. The mission of this committee is monitoring all countries' reports about human rights, giving the comments of these countries, receiving complaints from one country about another, and complaints from individuals and NGOs about their own countries. I consider my new position in this committee an important responsibility, especially since no one was elected this year from any of the Arab or Asian countries. Furthermore, I am the first Arab woman ever to be elected to serve on this committee.

Thus, I believe that I will have a double mission: On one hand, I will try to unite the efforts of all those concerned with human rights, in order to get Lebanon to implement the laws of the

international conventions for civil and political rights. Despite my international role on the committee, I am a Lebanese first and thus, it is of great importance to me that Lebanon implements these laws.

On the other hand, I will do my best to perform my international mission. I consider this a good opportunity for Lebanon to contribute to the defense of human rights and their development on the global level. This is both an honor and a responsibility at the same time.

*The Lebanese Government attached reservations to its ratification of CEDAW concerning the following issues:*

1. The provision that gives women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children (para. 2 of article 9). This means that Lebanese women married to foreigners cannot bequeath the Lebanese nationality to their children. This reflects the patriarchal and patrilineal characteristics of Lebanese society, whereby children's social identity must follow that of their fathers.

2. The provisions that give men and women the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution (para. 1c of article 16). This reservation is due to the fact that there is no civil code for personal statute laws in Lebanon; all these laws are governed by religion; thus, the woman is not allowed to enact or dissolve a marriage on her own.

3. The provision that gives men and women the same rights and responsibilities as parents, irrespective of their marital status, on matters relating to their children (para. 1d of article 16). This is also related to the fact that the father is the main authority in the family, and it is he who is always rewarded custody in the event of divorce.

4. The provision that ensures equal rights to men and women with regard to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship and adoption of children (para. 1f of article 16).

5. The provision that gives equal personal rights to husband and wife, including the right to choose a family name (para. 1g of article 16). This is obviously due to the patrilineal character of Lebanese society.

6. The article that calls for arbitration of disputes by the International Court of Justice (para. 1 of article 19).

It is worth noting that the above reservations made by the Lebanese authorities may not be the only reservations on CEDAW. There is still a need to compare the compliance of the Lebanese laws and codes with each of the articles of CEDAW in order to assess Lebanon's situation concerning discrimination against women.

# INTERVIEW

## EQUALITY NOW

*The following conversation with lawyers Jessica Neuwirth and Surita Sandosham, women's rights activists and founders of the international women's rights monitoring organization, Equality Now, took place in Manhattan in September.*

**Laurie King-Irani:** Can you tell us what event or idea led to the establishment of Equality Now? Who decided to form this international organization devoted to monitoring and protecting the human rights of women world-wide?

**Jessica Neuwirth:** Although particular events sparked the creation of Equality Now, a few of us activists had been thinking about such an organization for a long time. I founded the organization with two other women, a lawyer from South Africa and a lawyer from Iran, whom I knew through working with the international human rights movement. All of us had come to the realization that an immense gap existed concerning women's human rights' violations and the way that international human rights organizations were dealing with these violations. Women's rights were not, in fact, being adequately addressed, but we saw that the techniques and strategies of these international organizations could be effective if applied exclusively to women's rights issues.

One of the first stories that affected us and galvanized our efforts was that of Amina, a young girl from Hyderabad in India who had been sold into marriage at the age of nine. Unlike so many other girls, she was rescued from this forced marriage only by a fortunate accident. Her "husband", an older, wealthy Saudi businessman, had taken her on the airplane from India to Saudi Arabia. Amina was visibly distraught during the flight, and an Indian flight attendant asked her why she was so upset. Upon learning of her plight, the flight attendant informed the authorities of her sale into marriage when the flight landed. The man was arrested, and Amina was sent back to her family in India. This case received a great deal of international media attention, but we were very concerned about Amina's fate upon returning to India. Media attention is terrific, but it comes and goes in a flash, and we were fearful that Amina could easily be sold again to another wealthy businessman, because there is no legal framework or monitoring to protect young girls and women like Amina on a long-term basis. In so many areas of the world, women and girls are being sold everyday like chattel. Most people in the human rights movement were simply unaware of this fact and all of

the related social, economic and psychological issues surrounding it. Thus, we saw a real need for an effective grass-roots activism that had worked so well in freeing prisoners of conscience and halting torture. The same approach could and should be used to raise awareness about women's human rights and their violation.

That was how and why we founded Equality Now in 1992. Although we are a fairly new organization, we have grown quite rapidly. Increasing numbers of people are realizing that there is a gap in human rights work focused on women, and we are constantly reaching out to new groups and individuals who are not necessarily human rights activists, but just ordinary citizens and coalitions who are so outraged when they read media reports about the sale of children, the burning of Indian widows, or the circumcision of young girls in Africa that they want to do something, so we tap into that energy and use it to actually make a difference.

**LKI:** How do you reach out to all of these disparate groups and individuals? Do you have branch offices in various regions of the world?

**Surita Sandosham:** We are based in New York City, but our Board is international. We have representatives from Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, and I am from Singapore. Our strategy is to work with groups and individuals in the countries where the human rights violations are occurring. Based on their information and their documentation, along with our research to verify the facts, we put together action alerts, which we then send out to our 2,000 members in 75 different countries. We mobilize people and organizations throughout the world to take action of various kinds depending on the situation. In the recent case of the young Togolese woman, Fauziya Kasinga, who sought political asylum in the USA on the grounds that female circumcision, *i.e.*, female genital mutilation, is a form of torture, we sent out an action alert which was very effective. Another case was that of a young woman, Maricris Sioson, who had left her home in the Philippines to work as an entertainer in Japan. Less than a year later, her body was returned to her family by the Japanese government, who stated that she had died of natural causes. Upon opening the casket, however, her family discovered that her body was badly bruised and showed signs of deep stab wounds in and around the genital area. So clearly, she did not die of natural causes! Here, our strategy was to work with various non-governmental organizations in the

Philippines to encourage the Japanese Government to investigate the case and prosecute those responsible for her death. Whenever there is an opportunity to raise awareness about violations of women's human rights, we do all we can to raise it. We even tried to tie this case into the issue of Korean "comfort" women, *i.e.*, women who had been forced into prostitution by the Japanese Army during World War II.

**JN:** We always try to choose a case that is very specific, so that people can relate to it in an immediate and personal way, but at the same time, a case that addresses larger issues and general practices that we want to highlight. So, depending on the case, or the nature of the issue, we might be calling for new legislation, or the implementation of existing legislation. Or, we might call for something altogether different, but in every instance, we try to be creative and find new ways to tackle these problems effectively.

**LKI:** A major human rights violation affecting millions of women throughout the world is that of domestic violence. Since this form of abuse usually occurs in the privacy of the home, it is very hard to monitor or legislate practices concerning domestic violence, which, according to a recent UN report, is tantamount to torture in its effects and repercussions on women and society. How would you go about dealing with this issue?

**JN:** We did do at least one important action on a domestic violence case here in the United States. It concerned a judge who was sentencing a man who had murdered his wife upon discovering her in bed with another man. The judge gave him a light sentence and said, "I shudder to think what I would have done in your position." We found this outrageous. This concept of honor killing — which is

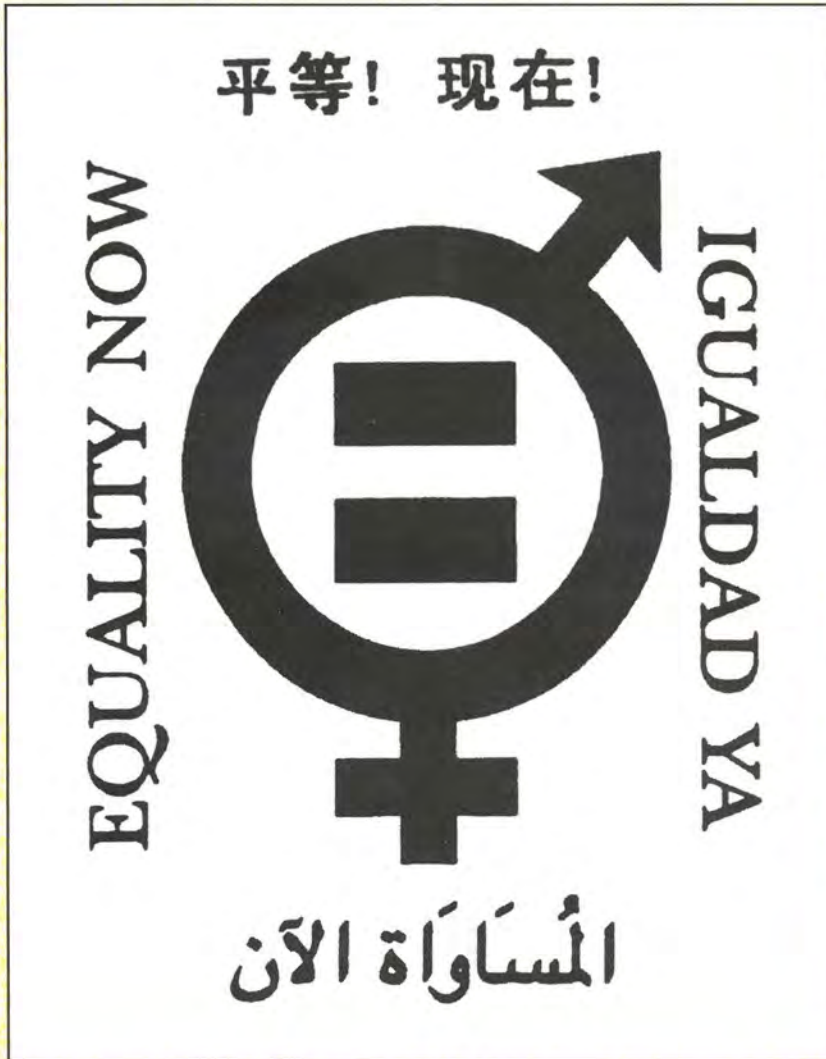
universal — implies that a woman is a man's property, so murdering her for an infraction of his ownership rights somehow mitigates, or even cancels, his punishment. Honor killings raise the crucial question of equal protection under the law, it represents clear discrimination against women, and that is our starting point: The law is there to protect

everyone equally. If you are being battered by a husband or a brother and you call the police, they have to respond to your request for help as they would anyone else's request. So, we always start from a legal perspective: the law should be enforced, but if there is no law concerning domestic violence (such as cases of marital rape), then that should be changed and a law should be created and enforced. What we usually do not address is the psychological issues of battered women who are not yet ready to ask for help. This is a very hard decision, but I think that the psychological dimension really ought to be addressed by local, rather than international, organizations. We try to build awareness and concern and to facilitate exchanges of

information between various groups concerning strategies and solutions for domestic violence.

**SS:** Where domestic violence is concerned, there usually are local groups engaged in efforts to halt it, and we do not want to duplicate efforts, thereby wasting time and money. We would rather be able to think strategically about how best to raise the issue, how to do something positive and effective to make a change.

**JN:** Also, a lot of people think that domestic violence is something that only happens in the privacy of the home, and indeed, that is where the actual beating usually takes place, but there is a complex, interlocking official hierarchy that



supports and condones domestic violence. When a judge tells a wife-batterer or a wife-killer, "well, I ought to punish you, but I probably would have done the same thing you did..." , then that sends out the wrong message. At the very least, it encourages violence; it is an official statement on behalf of the state that killing is an acceptable way of dealing with marital infidelity.

**LKI:** Attitudes are key here. You would have to change not only the laws, but the ways people think, judge, value and decide. That means you would have to affect socialization processes, *i.e.*, the ways men and women learn what is and is not appropriate behavior.

**JN:** But our approach, though not explicitly educational, may be a very good way to influence gender socialization. If you get into that courtroom and hear the judge say, "well, this isn't really a crime," that is a message that will prevent other abused women from ever going to court. People are always complaining that women don't report domestic violence. Well, maybe they don't report it because they know that they are going to be told "it was your fault; you asked for it". Hearing this is like a second human rights abuse, in addition to the battering! If we can inspire women to have confidence in the legal system's ability to work for them and their protection, this may change attitudes, and, we hope, behaviors.

**LKI:** Have you done any actions on violations of women's human rights in the Arab world?

**JN:** We've done an action alert about the medicalization of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt; I think that's the only case in the Arab world to date that we have addressed (see News Briefs, p. 8). In Egypt, we worked with some of the local groups to see what steps we could take that would be useful and effective. Sometimes it is very hard for us to know what would work best, so we really rely on local groups to set the pace and plan the strategy together. We would like to develop more links with other women's human rights groups throughout the Arab world.

**LKI:** When a human rights abuse affects a woman or women in a particular country, do you go to them to offer your services, or do they come to you?

**JN:** Increasingly, we are happy to say, people are coming to us. In the beginning, we were going to them. We would attend conferences and hear about cases and follow it up. For instance, the case of Maricris from the Philippines came out of the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993. And at last year's Beijing conference, we learned of the case of Fauziya Kasinga, who was going to be forced to undergo FGM against her will.

**LKI:** What was your overall appraisal of the Beijing Conference?

**JN:** The distance between the official meeting site and the NGO site in Huairou presented problems. Ideally, the point of such a conference is to facilitate dialogue and sharing between governmental and non-governmental actors, but when you have a clear attempt to separate them, as we saw at Beijing, the message, at some level, is "we don't really want to hear what you NGO people have to say."

**SS:** And the Chinese Government definitely did not want to hear anything from the NGO community!

**JN:** I think that a lot of women representing NGOs at Huairou had no idea what was in the *Platform for Action*, and they weren't really focusing on it. They were having their own networking sessions, which they could have done anywhere, or even through the Internet.

**SS:** Still, I have to say that Beijing was a necessary experience; we had to be there. For Equality Now, the purpose of going was to network and discuss some of the human rights issues that were taking place around the world to decide how we could best contribute to monitoring, consciousness-raising, and protection. So, getting the Kasinga case was ironic: it was being played out in the US, but we had to go to China to learn all the details!

**JN:** Yet in terms of the official purpose of Beijing, we at Equality Now are rather skeptical about the kinds of documents coming out of the conference. We are now going back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and even earlier documents in international law that have much more force, and treaties that have been signed which have, in a legal sense, greater weight than the *Platform for Action*. Perhaps the *Platform* develops some ideas and issues a little further, but the most basic promises to the world's women remain unfulfilled. So, what is our focus? To expand the documents when existing promises are not yet implemented? That is one of the key reasons we have taken up the UN Secretary General action (see "Quote/Unquote," p.6), because the *Platform for Action* states, in very specific terms, that all decision-making levels of the UN Secretariat should be gender-integrated. Then six months later, there is a discussion concerning the post of Secretary General, and hardly any attention at all was paid to the glaring gender gap at the top!

**SS:** There are a lot of disparities between signed documents and actual behavior. For instance, when we returned from Beijing, the whole Sara Balabagan case erupted in the United Arab Emirates. We were simply flabbergasted, because the UAE delegation had been at Beijing, and had

just signed a document containing very specific, concrete language concerning the protection of migrant workers; it's not some vague promise — it's clearly spelled out in detailed guidelines in the *Platform for Action*. It would be much better if the *Platform* were a shorter document and everybody read it and followed it.

**LKI:** I am glad that you brought up the Balabagan case, because it is clear that mass population movements, whether due to refugees fleeing war or labor migration, will be an increasingly important focus for human rights work in the next century. Migrants and refugees are often women, and they don't have any citizenship status or support networks in the host countries where they reside. These are people who "fall through the cracks" of the international legal and human rights system.

**JN:** Definitely!

**LKI:** What is Equality Now's work plan for the coming few years? Do you have a particular project you want to focus on, or are you remaining responsive to whatever violations of women's human rights come up?

**SS:** One of our upcoming campaigns will focus on trafficking in women and girls. We are currently strategizing on how best to deal with this issue, which is just so immense and complex. It is a truly international problem, but is especially severe in southeast Asia, parts of Europe and Latin America.

**JN:** We also have an action on abortion, which we are doing in Nepal, a country where abortion is forbidden under any circumstances, whether a woman is impregnated as a result of incest or rape, or whether her life is threatened by carrying the pregnancy to term. We are working with a rights group in Nepal to reform abortion laws and to allow certain exceptions for women. Nepal has an incredibly high maternal mortality rate, mostly due to women going to back-street illegal abortionists, which is terribly unsafe.

**SS:** In addition to issuing our alerts, we are working with the UN Human Rights Committee. When countries come up to report to the UNHR Committee for review, we contact NGOs in each country to let them know their government is to be assessed, and we ask them for their reports on the internal human rights situation in their country. We ask them, too, if there are any issues they would like to have raised concerning human rights practices or violations, and then we offer to assist them in any way we can. Last year, Afghanistan was coming up for review, and through NGO contacts working with Afghan refugee women in Pakistan, we learned that women in Afghanistan were being forbidden by the Taliban Islamic group to go to school or to work.

Even more shocking, we discovered that female UN officials in Afghanistan were being dismissed from their positions under pressure from the Taliban. As soon as we discovered this, we immediately got the documentation to the UN Human Rights Committee, and also sent it out to the media. Soon afterwards, we were able to meet a group of Afghan women activists here in New York, where they met with UN officials. Doors were opening to these women; people had to talk to them, and as a result, these Afghan women realized they have a power and a voice, and that the UN, as a world body, has a duty to abide by internationally recognized human rights principles.

**LKI:** The process of empowerment could be enhanced if this group of Afghan women began networking with Pakistani women, Arab women and Asian women.

**JN:** Yes, and related to this is the idea of involving more women in peace processes throughout the world. This is really needed. There are so many conflicts nowadays, *i.e.*, Bosnia, Chechenia, Somalia, Rwanda. But look at the peace efforts in Somalia, in Bosnia. Where are the women in these peace processes?! Wherever you look, it is clear that women are outside the power-structures that are deciding what constitutes peace and reconciliation in these war-torn societies.

**LKI:** The same could, unfortunately, be said about women in post-war Lebanon. What are some of the biggest challenges Equality Now faces in trying to carry out its mission?

**JN:** The big challenge is not that people don't care about women's human rights and their violation; it's that they just do not know. And once they do know, they really care a lot. But getting the word out is so hard, because of lack of communication technology in reaching women in some of these remote countries. We just do not have the money yet to do all that we know we must do to inform the world of violations of women's human rights.

**SS:** I'd say that the biggest challenge is raising money. We have been incredibly successful in garnering and generating media coverage over the last four years, but we cannot seem to translate these successes into funding. At present, we are seeking subsistence funding from foundations known for supporting mainstream human rights organizations, but when we tell them that we are focusing on women's rights, the response we frequently receive is, "well, it's a little bit specialized....I don't think that this request fits within our mandate".

**LKI:** Violations of the human rights of more than half of the world's population is too specialized?!

**SS:** Exactly! We started this organization precisely because women's human rights were not being adequately monitored and protected. Now we are discovering that, because it wasn't being done, it wasn't being funded, and so on. It's a vicious circle!

**JN:** I used to work with Amnesty International, and I tried to get them to focus on women's rights issues. In 1990, I was asked to chair a task force, and this was one of the first opportunities I had to focus on women's issues. As a result of this task force's recommendations, we did get Amnesty International to undertake a research project which resulted in the publication of a report on human rights violations against women within Amnesty International's mandate. Part of the work of the task force was to highlight those areas in which Amnesty could be more effective in safeguarding women's rights, *e.g.*, preventing rape by governmental officials and soldiers, *etc.*; and the other part was to look at the issue of rights violations from the women's movement's point of view. As a result of taking this perspective, we quickly discovered that governmental abuses are a rather small part of a wider set of problems. Most violence against women doesn't take place in prison, or at the hands of the military or the police. Rather, women's human rights are most frequently violated in the home, on the street, in the workplace, and these types of abuse were viewed as being far outside the scope of Amnesty's mandate. We felt that it would take a very long time for the organization to get around to addressing these violations effectively. But one can argue that Amnesty is now getting around to doing this. They are now focusing more on women, but I think they are constricted by their official mandate as it currently exists; they cannot get to the heart of the issues that affect the most women in the most serious ways. An issue like trafficking in women, for example, is just not part of their work. Unless a woman ends up in a prison somehow, or is tortured by the military or the police as a result of trafficking, Amnesty is not set up to help her. The issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) generated a huge debate as to whether groups like Amnesty International would get involved. They have taken steps to do educational projects against FGM, but they have stopped short of activism. You have to ask yourself: Why would they treat FGM differently from other types of human rights violations? And they would probably respond, "well, it's a cultural thing, it's not a purely political or legal matter". But in our experience of networking at the grass-roots level, it is clear that you can address such issues in a coherent, constructive way, rather than differentiate them as a class and say, "we're only going to do educational programs on this issue, but not activism." When you are the world's premiere human rights organization, this sends the message that there is a hierarchy of human rights violations. What are we saying to those voiceless little girls going under the

knife in Ghana, Togo, Egypt and Ethiopia, and sometimes dying under the knife? That they are not a priority!? That we will educate about their problem, but not advocate?

**SS:** The irony of it all is that we got a call today from Amnesty saying they are going to be doing more work on FGM, and they want to consult with us.

**JN:** Amnesty could do so much! They have the resources, both personnel and financial, to put their energy into focusing systematically on discovering which countries have actually banned the practice, and if so, are the laws in place? Are the laws being implemented? Clearly, they are not. So, if there is no legislation, they should mount a campaign to effect legislation, or to implement it in countries which have laws but choose to ignore them. Amnesty could highlight particular cases to attract public interest. So many girls have died in Egypt. Is the Egyptian Government properly investigating and prosecuting those responsible for these deaths? I don't think you would have to prosecute too many people to bring a halt to this practice, which currently goes on with complete impunity. If there is a consensus — and I believe there is — among the international human rights community that FGM is a human rights violation, then we should spare no effort to stop it before any more little girls are killed or permanently disabled. It's an outrage.

**LKI:** Of course, the counter-argument to your view would be one based on a claim of "cultural relativism". How would you respond to it?

**JN:** We forget to ask a very important question: Who owns culture? Cultures are not unchanging, monolithic entities. If you ask me, Surita, or Anita Bryant what's going on in contemporary American culture, I am sure that you would get quite a diverse set of responses! And that is true everywhere. In every cultural context, you can find women who want equality and autonomy; it's an inner, human aspiration. We have to tap into that, whether we are talking about women in New Jersey or New Guinea. Equality Now searches out those women in every country, and we work with them.

**SS:** I think that this cultural relativism argument is, ironically, rather imperialistic; it implies that other cultures just don't have as much variety or subtleties as western culture does. I don't think that this view is accurate.

**JN:** I also feel that the human rights movement has focused on a skewed portion of human rights: the civil and the political, without giving due regard to the economic side of human rights. And this deficiency plays right into the hands of the cultural relativists' argument. It is really unfortunate, because those basic economic rights are just as important,



and they really ought to be addressed. Equality Now is trying to do this, but it will take a lot of creativity to figure out how to use our strategies and techniques to address these more subtle violations, like debt burdens. They are not as immediately obvious as torture or extra-judicial killings, but they also take their toll. If we look at trafficking, we are forced to ask why women end up leaving their home country for another. Do they really want to leave, or are they compelled to do so by economic pressures? Are there any viable economic options for them and their families back in Sri Lanka, Romania, the Philippines, or Guatemala? If we focus on these economic exigencies, and view them in a more holistic way — not just as economic indicators — maybe it will decrease the tendency to see all human rights violations as strictly political or cultural phenomena.

**LKI:** What is the biggest obstacle you face?

**JN:** I don't like the word "obstacle"! I prefer "challenge" instead. One of our greatest challenges is to bring the type of exacting research and documentation done by conventional human rights organizations into the area of women's rights. There has been a lot written, much of it anecdotal information, but not enough hard documentation. We find it a challenge — as well as an educational experience — to work with some of these groups on attaining the level of precision of documentation that we need to move forward. We have to maintain a certain standard of credibility. It's a transformation we are working to realize at the grass-roots level. What Amnesty International has done that has been very helpful has been to promote the idea that violations are phenomena that happen; you can document them. Violations are facts having an objective existence in the physical world. Thus, we at Equality Now tend to steer away from the more ideological discussions about women's rights. It's not as if we don't find these discussions important — they are — it's just that they are not immediately relevant to our work. Ideology too often takes precedence in discussions of women's human rights; sometimes, there is not enough careful attention to detail, not enough actual, on-the-ground reporting of facts. So, we are hoping to increase the amount of facts available for analysis and advocacy; we need to be more precise if we are to successfully pursue cases. We also need a network of detail-oriented people throughout the world to gather such facts. Hence, we usually gravitate to journalists and lawyers, who instinctively make detailed reports of the actual facts of a case; they have been trained to do this.

**LKI:** What have been your greatest rewards?

**SS:** The Afghan women's network was really rewarding for us. Also, there was a case a few years ago of a young Saudi Arabian woman, Nada, who sought political asylum in

Canada because of politically and socially sanctioned mistreatment by her family in Saudi Arabia. Equality Now was still a very small organization at that time, in fact, this action was only our second one.

**JN:** We were astounded at how sexist the Canadian judge had been in denying Nada political asylum; he actually said that her problems were not serious, and suggested that she simply needed to show more respect for her father. Nada was in hiding when we got involved in the case. We began by adding a layer of international attention and support to the work that was being done on her behalf by various Canadian human rights organizations, all of which were much larger and stronger than Equality Now. Our very first action had been on a case concerning women in Poland, and as an afterthought, we sent the action alert about Nada's case to our colleagues in Poland, who immediately alerted their networks to write letters of protest to the Canadian Government concerning the refusal of asylum for Nada. The Canadian Government was really disturbed to receive so many letters from all corners of the world, even from countries Canada was helping with social development projects, asking the Canadians to show more respect for women's rights! Later, when the Canadian Prime Minister made a speech announcing that the Government was reversing its decision and granting asylum to Nada, he said that he had made the decision, in part, because of his concern for the international reputation of Canada. Afterwards, Canada adopted guidelines for women refugees seeking asylum, and these guidelines were later adopted by the United States Government. This case is quite memorable; it was so rewarding because such a small effort really paid off in such a big way. It's experiences like this that keep us going, despite financial constraints. But there is still so much to do!

*If you would like to learn more about Equality Now, or assist them in their work, you can contact them at the following address: Equality Now, P.O. Box 20646, Columbus Circle Station, New York, New York 10023, USA. E-mail address: sandosham@igc.apc.org.*

*Lebanese readers should note that the UN Commission on Human Rights will soon be reviewing Lebanon's human rights situation. If you wish to emphasize a particular point concerning women's human rights in Lebanon, please contact Equality Now and they will include your concern in their report to the Committee.*

# INTERVIEW

## THE JORDANIAN WOMAN'S STRUGGLE

Conducted by Ghena Ismail

**A**sma Khodr is a lawyer and the President of the Jordanian Woman's Union and a Member in the International Human Rights Committee. She had the honor of presiding over the Arab Women's Tribunal which was held in Beirut in June 1995.

For eleven years, Asma's parents were known as "Abou and Umm Asma," "father and mother of Asma". With the birth of her brother, however, her parents' names automatically changed to Abou and Umm Samir according to tradition. This change came as a real shock to young Asma, who suddenly found herself wondering about her value and meaning in her parents' lives. She felt happy whenever she encountered her parents' old friends, who would give her back her lost sense of identity by once again referring to her parents as "Abou and Umm Asma".

Asma was not initially conscious of her anger. Later, though, her anger manifested itself in certain acts, such as playing with boys, identifying with them, and viewing her brother as a competitor. She used to criticize her brother's behavior, and would make comments such as "He cries too much," "he is dirty," or "he makes too much noise".

Asma's interest in women's issues began during her school days. Early on, her leadership traits became apparent. In intermediate school, Asma was actively involved in various students' movements, and in secondary school was elected to the Executive Committee of the Students' Union.

*"The country was in dire need of a woman lawyer capable of utilizing her legal and public experience for the benefit of women and children."*

Asma's decision to study law met with considerable social opposition, since there were only four women lawyers in Jordan at that time. However, her husband and parents were very supportive, and eventually, her choice proved to be wise, because as Asma relates, "the country was in dire need of a woman lawyer capable of utilizing her legal and public experience for the benefit of women and children."

However, Asma was disappointed to discover that women did not trust other women. "This probably goes back to their negative experiences in which they perceived themselves and other women as victims or the weaker partners." So, instead of specializing in women's issues, Asma found herself working on commercial and criminal cases at the beginning of her career. However, since she was a firm believer in human rights, she joined some non-governmental organizations that dealt with humanitarian issues. Since 1976, she has been a member of the Jordanian Women's Union, various organizations for human's rights, the Lawyers' Syndicate, and has helped in the formation of the Committee for Women's Conditions within the framework of the Arab Lawyers in Jordan. It is worth mentioning that, today, in Jordan, there are 500 women practicing law out of a total of 3000 lawyers.

*"Last year, 23 women in Jordan were killed in so called crimes of honor."*

Asma Khodr notes a big improvement in the Jordanian woman's legal status in the past fifteen years. Among the most important achievements are:

- In 1990, Jordan finally ratified the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which it had signed in 1978. "The agreement, however, was legalized with three key reservations concerning women's right of movement, equality within the family, and nationality," notes Khodr

- In the work place, women's legal status has improved, since women are now entitled to maternity leave. Moreover, women receive employment compensation.

- In 1974, the Jordanian

*"Until now, the Jordanian woman needs written permission from her husband or legal guardian in order to travel."*

*"The Jordanian Women's Union has designed a program devoted to abolishing all forms of discrimination against women."*

woman achieved her political right to elect and nominate herself for public office. However, she did not practice this right until very recently.

Amendment of the electoral and municipal laws means that the Jordanian woman can vote as well as nominate herself. Thus, the legal obstacles to women's participation in political life have been abolished. There are two women in the

Jordanian Senate, Leila Sharaf and Naila Rajdan; a woman in the Parliament, Tujan Feisal; Minister of Planning, Rima Khalaf (who was formerly the Minister of Commerce and Industry); and the Minister of Social Development, Salwa El-Masri. Last month the first woman judge, Taghreed Hikmat, was appointed, thus overcoming the last legal barrier that the Jordanian woman had to transcend in her struggle to play a role in political life.

Outside the framework of political laws, other laws still need to be amended. Key laws among them are those related to nationality, equality within the family and the right of movement. "Until now, the Jordanian woman needs written permission from her husband or legal guardian in order to travel!" In the work place, despite the amendment of some legislations, there are still laws that institutionalize discrimination against women. "The Jordanian woman does not receive retirement income for her husband and children, and in the public sphere, she does not receive a family allowance. The worst forms of legal discrimination are in the Personal Status Code, especially those clauses concerning the punishment laws which permit extreme violence against women. Last year, 23 women in Jordan were killed in so-called crimes of honor. Moreover, in the southern Jordanian city of Al-Akaba, two children, each eight years old, were recently betrothed in a lavish ceremony." The Jordanian Women's Union condemned this act and called upon all the concerned authorities to interfere and confront this disturbing phenomenon of betrothal in early childhood in order to prevent the violation of children's rights. Such an incident underlines the need for the amendment of the personal status code which does not define an age for engagement, although it forbids children to marry before a certain age, *i.e.*, 15 for girls and 16 for boys.

What are Jordanian women doing to amend these laws? Asma enthusiastically states that The Jordanian Women's Union has designed a program devoted to abolishing all

forms of discrimination against women. So far, two campaigns have been launched. The first campaign concerned the right of movement and the adult woman's right to an independent passport which permits her to travel without being subject to a spouse's or legal guardian's control. The second concerned the law of nationality. Each of these two campaigns, which lasted for a few

months and featured the endorsements of a number of influential people, aimed at promoting awareness and garnering public support for the suggested amendments. A third campaign for social and health insurance was scheduled to be launched last October.

Khodr stresses that legal discrimination is not the only or the worst type of injustice. "In social life, the Jordanian woman is subject to worse forms of discrimination which must be addressed." Asma Khodr reminded us that at the Arab Women's Tribunal (which was held in June 1995 in Beirut), 33 women from 14 Arab countries testified bravely about the different forms of violence to which they had been subjected. Violence came in various horrible forms: circumcision, force-feeding, early compulsory marriage, and ruthless beatings. Unfortunately, Arab society rarely gives any support to an oppressed and abused woman. On the contrary, women are urged to maintain their silence in order to prevent a scandal. Asma recalls a recent incident which illustrates this social expectation: "When a well-known Jordanian woman doctor finally went to the police only after her abusive husband had tried to suffocate her, the reply of the judge was intimidating: he told her that it was shameful for a well-known doctor such as herself to drag her husband all the way to the court. Violence, however, only gives rise to more violence if it is not dealt with and stopped in its tracks." Khodr strongly affirms that "over the last few years, the world has learned of cases of women who murdered their husbands." Of course, these are rare occurrences. However, those

*"Legal discrimination is not the only or the worst type of injustice. In social life, the Jordanian woman is subject to worse forms of discrimination"*

*"When a well-known Jordanian woman doctor finally went to the police only after her abusive husband had tried to suffocate her, the reply of the judge was intimidating."*

*"Those wives who cannot respond to the violence inflicted by their husbands often end up inflicting violence on their children."*

wives who cannot respond to the violence inflicted by their husbands often end up inflicting violence on their children." According to Khodr, this takes place for two reasons:

1. the woman has inherited the patriarchal mentality and thus believes that force is the best means of reforming the child; and
2. she cannot control her feelings of rebelliousness resulting from unfairness and incompatibility.

Does the law provide women with adequate solutions for the violence to which they may be subjected?

Khodr sighs as she tells us that under Jordanian law, rape is defined as having sexual intercourse with a woman against her will, except if the assailant is her husband. Moreover, the Jordanian Personal Status Code excuses a man for killing his wife, sister or daughter if he suspects that she has committed adultery. "However, once again I say that the real issue springs from the society's mentality; and unless it changes, no real improvement can be induced."

What measures did the Jordanian Woman's Union take in response to the problem of violence?

"Recently, we established a hot-line, the line of hope, which until now has proved to be very successful. Seven new cases of violence against women are received daily, although information about the center was not disseminated widely."

Asma Khodr explains that the amendment of laws and the establishment of the "line of hope" are only part of the solution to this global problem of violence against women. "The real solution must begin by promoting woman's

*"Recently, we established the line of hope, which until now has proved to be very successful."*

awareness, enhancing her sense of dignity, and providing her with an alternative so that she will be capable of saying: 'No'. This alternative would obviously require economic and social protection. Women should become productive, because when the man understands that slapping his wife might

lead to her departure from the marital home, he will consider this act a hundred times before committing it."

Finally, I asked Asma how it was possible for her to balance her career along with her many voluntary activities and her responsibilities towards her family, which consists of her husband and their four children.

Asma replied that she was able to manage because of special circumstances. "I am lucky; I have a mother who lives near me and I have an understanding husband." She then added, laughingly, "a busy one, too." This does not mean that there are not times when Asma feels guilty. However, she usually resists the feeling and does not give in to it. "Most working women feel guilty and are inclined to blame themselves for any mistake. This is because we were brought up to believe that any professional or public activity will affect our child's and our husband's rights." She adds that in her experience, this is not true. "I have learned to believe that the woman who has a successful professional life is of great value to her family and children, and today I can say that I am very proud of my children because they have independent characters and a high sense of responsibility. Moreover, my children are proud of my work despite our emotional need to spend more time together." Asma recalls proudly that her eldest daughter, who is now nineteen years old, came up with the idea of "Teen Amnesty" seven years ago. Being in a demanding position like Asma's of course deprives the mother and children from spending enough time together. However, Asma asserts that in life you cannot have it all, and that there is always a price that one has to pay, especially women. Only a few women are willing to be engaged in voluntary work because of the immense responsibilities they have. However, some of us have to take the initiative and try to change things. "After all, it is our children who are going to benefit from our accomplishments, and thus I consider my work part of my personal duty towards my children."

*"Under Jordanian law, rape is defined as having sexual intercourse with a woman against her will, except if the assailant is her husband."*

*"It is our children who are going to benefit from our accomplishments, and thus I consider my work part of my personal duty towards my children."*

# REPORT

## FACING THE LAW, BRUISED

by *Tina Achcar-Naccache*,  
Independent Researcher and Activist

For the first time, the Lebanese police began processing reported crimes on a computer data-base system in 1994. The first comprehensive statistics were released in 1995. The information in the data-base can be accessed by date, age, gender, location, and every type of crime recognized by Lebanese criminal law, including the latest to have entered the books, *e.g.*, the buying and selling of children, a criminal activity that has flourished during and after the war. We now know how many rapes of virgins were reported, but we still do not know how many women have been battered by their husbands.

Besides the codified information, each report entered in to the data base holds two written lines describing the family relationship, if any, that exists between the alleged perpetrator of a crime and the victim. But as of this time, the data base is not equipped with a program that would allow for a specific word-search to ascertain crimes committed by husbands against their wives. A woman reported as having been beaten by her husband will appear in the same category as all women who suffered assault and injury; a woman killed by her husband, brother or father will be filed along with all the other female victims of homicide. And a woman raped by her husband will not appear in the statistics at all, because rape within marriage is not recognized as a crime, although so-called "unnatural" sexual acts are.

Given the dearth of statistical information on battered wives, I turned to some of the officers working at the Police Computer Department as well as to police chiefs in some of Beirut's precincts. I randomly chose half of the *fasilaat* (precincts) of each of the three *saraya* (police administrative divisions) of the city. I was able to conduct long and very informative conversations with police representatives, thanks to a research permit officially granted to the

*"Precinct stations have become, in some instances, the only places where mothers can go to see their children."*

Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World. Unfortunately, I cannot quote any of the policemen on their attitudes *vis-à-vis* domestic violence, since they were not allowed to give opinions, just information concerning violence against women. All of the police officers and chiefs I interviewed affirmed that very few women, if any, walk into a police station to file a complaint against their husbands. When asked how common wife-beating was in our society, most of them answered that it was widespread, and happened in every strata of society. A few others said that it was a rare occurrence, except in some distant rural areas, and that if it did happen in the urban areas, it was usually because the man was under the influence of alcohol.

While they did not consider rape a common occurrence, one police chief mentioned that the custom of eloping sometimes masked threats of violence against a women's boyfriend; another one spoke of the increase in the number of husbands forcing their wives into prostitution. I also learned that there are no specific guidelines issued, either by the police headquarters or by the individual chiefs, concerning domestic violence. When I asked about the possible case of a woman calling the police for help because her husband was beating her (and I imagined her phoning while her husband was in the bathroom), the chief's response was clear: the police cannot interfere between the husband and the wife. The interviewees mentioned that there are women who file complaints against ex-husbands, mainly because of visitation rights. Precinct stations have become, in some instances, the only places where mothers can go to see their children.

There are several components of Lebanon's legal system that make it virtually impossible to file a suit against one's husband. It is true that it is against the law for anyone to beat another person, thus it is against the law for a man to beat his wife. But for a man to be

*"One police chief explained that he could not answer a call for help unless the call emanated from the husband, or unless it was a call for an emergency."*

prosecuted for domestic violence requires the victim to bring charges, and a wife can drop the charges anytime she likes before the matter goes before a judge. If she does, the husband will not be prosecuted by the State unless her injuries incapacitated her for more than ten days. Let us imagine two women incapacitated for seven days because of beatings: one having been beaten by her husband or another male relative, the other by a complete stranger. Both bring charges, then drop them. The husband or relative will be cleared, while the stranger will still have to face trial since, in his case, public prosecution does not stop. This legal discrimination between violence inside and outside the home is explained by the concern of the legislator and of the whole judicial complex for the protection of the family!

According to several family medical practitioners, a "ten days' incapacitation" is given for acute pain, *i.e.*, a severe case of battery. Bruises will not rate more than a three days' incapacitation. Usually, criminal procedures will not be invoked for less than a seven days' incapacitation, although one District Attorney told me that prosecution could be started for a five days' incapacitation.

The Lebanese system of separation of property between spouses creates an imbalance in the power relationship between a married couple. Under this system, the family home is technically the property of the husband because few wives are homeowners or home renters. One police chief explained to me that he could not enter a home without the permission of the owner, *i.e.*, the husband. Thus, he could not answer a call for help unless the call emanated from the husband, or unless it was a call for an emergency, such as a fire, a burglary in progress, or a case of imminent murder. The intervention, or non-intervention, of the police in cases in which a husband is heard mistreating his wife depends upon the personal attitudes of the officers and the views of the District Attorney, who has to deliver a war-

*"A woman has no right to leave, and if she does leave, her husband can file a suit against her and obtain an injunction from a religious court to compel her to return to the marital home."*

rant for the police to enter a home.

Thus, separation of property turns a woman into a special kind of guest in her husband's home; special, because in the event of her husband's death, she will automatically inherit the lease if the home is a rental, and part of the property if it is owned. But she is not an autonomous guest; she has no right to leave, and

if she does leave, her husband can file a suit against her and obtain an injunction from a religious court to compel her to return to the marital home. If she does not comply, she will, in the case of divorce, automatically lose whatever rights she might have had. According to the chiefs of police I met, the police only deliver the injunction without forcibly bringing the woman back to her husband's home. Although the subject of divorce is outside the scope of this article, it is important to know that since issues of personal status in Lebanon are governed by religious, rather than civil laws, the woman's right to file for divorce for reasons of violence will depend on the religious community to which the husband is affiliated. It is also important to note that regardless of the religious court in which a divorce or separation motion is filed, and regardless of the reason, Lebanese custody laws are always disadvantageous to the mother.

Having visited a number of police stations, I can say that I found them rather intimidating places for a woman. The men were polite and courteous (perhaps because I am a middle-aged woman who was carrying an official authorization to conduct interviews). No woman was to be found in any station, because there are no policewomen working in precinct stations in Lebanon. The only women I saw during my research were not in the police stations, but in the Police Computer Center, where they were invariably employed as typists, not as part of the police force. Not only were there no policewomen at the stations I visited, but there aren't even social workers in the precincts. When I asked several police chiefs if they could use the help of social workers, they clearly expressed the wish to have a close working relationship with a non-governmental organization that could help them in some of the cases they had to handle, particularly cases of children and adolescents who get into trouble.

Of course, some precinct stations are staffed by men who are more sensitive to the plight of battered wives than others, and I may feel comfortable going there with a woman who wants to file a complaint. But if you live in Beirut, and meet a woman who has been abused, whether physically or emotionally, by her husband, and if she tells you about it, you will soon discover that there is not much you can do to help extract her from her painful situation. There are no hot-lines or shelters for

*"In sum, it is evident to laypersons and to police officers why battered women in Lebanon do not file complaints."*

her to turn to. If she is ready to lose all of her rights, or if she can file for divorce on the grounds of violent abuse, and if she is ready to lose the custody of her children, she can leave her marital home. To walk out, she needs a place to go to, and this place could only be her parents' home — if they are willing to take her in, and if they have room for her young children. The war left Lebanon with a shortage of affordable housing. Most building activity in post-war Lebanon has concentrated on luxurious and very expensive apartments and villas; it has become practically impossible for most Lebanese to rent an apartment.

In March of 1994, a small group of women filed for permission from the Ministry of the Interior to establish an association concerned with halting violence against women. The aims of the association were to publicize the problem and to strive to bring Lebanese laws in line with key United Nations conventions on the subject. As of today, however, this group has not been granted a license or formal recognition by the Lebanese Government.

Lebanese academia, whose libraries lack virtually any international references on the problem of domestic violence, has not published much research or reflections on this subject. This apparent lack of interest is detrimental to the advancement of the cause of women in Lebanon. We need comprehensive studies of our legal system to develop penal and civil sanctions in domestic legislation. We need studies on attitudes *vis-à-vis* domestic violence in order to develop a strategy for raising social awareness about this problem. Academia should mount studies of the attitudes of the general public, the media, and every one of the professional groups directly involved in responding to this problem, such as the police, the courts, the medical profession, religious men, social workers, teachers, *etc.* The current lack of statistics on actual incidences of violence in the home should be no obstacle to the initiation of any of these research projects.

In sum, it is evident to lay-persons and to police officers why battered women in Lebanon do not file complaints. We cannot wait until non-existent statistics appear to address the problem of domestic violence. When one starts asking questions which show interest in and concern for the victims, it quickly becomes obvious that there are indeed many battered women in Lebanon from all social classes, regions, and confessional sects. I have rarely met a woman who, upon hearing a discussion of this problem, does not immediately mention a relative, friend, neighbor or colleague who has been the victim of battery at the hands of a husband or another close male relative. I have even been surprised to discover that friends of mine have been victims themselves.

UPCOMING IN  
AL-RAIDA

WOMEN'S  
CHANGING ROLES  
IN THE ARAB  
FAMILY

CREDIT PROGRAMS  
FOR ARAB WOMEN

ARAB WOMEN AND  
AGRICULTURE

# STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFYING AND COUNTERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

by *May Majdalani, Psychologist*  
*Hagaizian University-Beirut*

*A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree,  
the more they're beaten, the better they be!*

— *old English proverb*

*A wife isn't a jug:  
She won't crack if you hit her ten times.*

— *Russian proverb*

*"When did you stop beating your wife?" "Who said I stopped?"*

— *American vaudeville joke*

*A wife is like a Persian carpet: the more you beat it the better it becomes.*

— *Arab proverb*

These disturbing proverbs, taken from different areas of the world, indicate that wife-beating (domestic violence) is not a new or a culturally delimited phenomenon. Rather, the practice seems to have been considered an acceptable, even a desirable, method of solving marital problems for thousands of years. Although the term "domestic violence" is new, the practice is ancient.

Why did domestic violence come to the forefront of social attention and discussion in various countries over the last two decades? Is it due to the demands of feminists calling for women's human rights? If so, did these demands encourage women to realize that their basic human rights have never been legally and officially safe-guarded and respected? Could the new attitudes expressed by women have elicited from men feelings of threat, *i.e.*, simply by demanding her rights, does the woman communicate to the man that this will entail his losing certain rights? Do threatened men then retaliate to protect what they perceive as a threat to their "territory"?

Or could it be that domestic violence has been highlighted because social organizations have realized the damage that domestic violence is wreaking in women's lives, thus reducing their potential productivity while also threatening their children's mental health and social adjustment? Whatever the reason, or combination of reasons, the fight against domestic violence has begun in earnest. More and more studies are being undertaken to document its frequency, the nature of abuse, the

profiles of the people involved, and the possible causes of violence in the home in an effort to find adequate solutions for a problem that has caused immeasurable pain and suffering throughout the world.

In Lebanon, no statistics have yet been compiled on the frequency of domestic violence. A number of concerned women were interested in carrying out such a project. Their efforts, however, were stymied by the lack of cooperation by some officials who felt that such a study would constitute an unwarranted intrusion into people's private lives. Two factors make gathering objective information on domestic violence in Lebanon rather difficult and inexact: the sanctity of the family — the idea that nobody should know what goes on inside the home — and a lack of knowledge about which behaviors constitute domestic violence.

Domestic violence has been defined in different ways by various organizations. It is most often understood as any act committed by one person with the intent to hurt or cause damage to another. This hurt could be directed against the body of the other person, such as killing or seriously wounding, or slapping, shoving, kicking, pulling hair or indirectly attacking property valued by that other person, *etc.* This is physical violence, the most commonly acknowledged type of violence, which most people mistakenly assume is the only kind of violence. Few people realize that what is now called psychological violence can cause just as much, if not more, damage. Psychological violence can be verbal or non-verbal: it consists of attitudes, behaviors, or words directed against the identity, soul, and self-esteem of the other person in order to attack, hurt or control her. Forms of psychological violence are name-calling, constant criticisms, derogatory comparisons, silence, and the use of isolation as a form of punishment. Psychological violence also encompasses control of a person's activities, and often involves control of her money. (A more extensive discussion of the many forms that psychological violence can take was presented in an article by this author which appeared in *Al-Raida*, Vol. XI, No. 65/66: 21.)

Some people might ask, "if arguing, fighting, disagreeing, being assertive, and defending one's rights are considered violent, can anybody safely vent his or her feelings and frustrations without violating the rights of another?" None of the preceding actions, if done in good faith, *i.e.*, with a spirit of respect and with the



intent to help find a solution to a problem concerning both partners, can be considered violent. Domestic violence is the use of intentional physical or psychological abuse to control, maintain control, or otherwise obtain through the use of force what the other partner does not want to give willingly. It is exhibited by the person who behaves or talks to the other as if she had no value, no feelings, no rights, self-esteem or self-respect.

As a professional interested in domestic violence, I was invited to participate with a group of women from several other Arab countries in a two-week seminar in the U.S. sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. The aim of the workshop was to discuss and research issues concerning domestic violence in various cultural contexts. One of the first issues we discussed was whether abusers and victims could be easily recognized. Did they fit particular psychological profiles? A common myth, which still remains in the minds of many, is that the victim of abuse usually asks for it in some way or another. This question has been answered by a recent study entitled *The Myth of Women's Masochism*: "Masochism was often attributed to battered women...although several studies have refuted this thesis...The notion that the victim is somehow to blame for her plight nevertheless persists in many of society's attitudes." In another book, *Domestic Assault on Women*, the author reports that whenever a phenomenon cannot be understood, it is then directly attributed to "some trait indigenous to the person" and since nothing that has been done to date has successfully halted domestic violence, then the cause must be in the victim." One key trait common to most battered women is that they are usually economically dependent on their husbands and they often have young children they seek to protect.

Like the victim, the abuser also does not neatly fit a particular psychological profile: "abusers come in all forms, in all professions and all socio-economic classes," as J. B. Fleming, in her book, *Stopping Wife Abuse*, reported. However, abusers do tend to share the following common characteristics:

- 1) extreme jealousy, displayed by their need to keep the mate completely controlled and isolated;
- 2) a marked inability to tolerate frustration;
- 3) a poor self image;
- 4) a pervasive pattern of blaming others for problems;
- 5) a history of having been abused as a child or of having witnessed abuse of one's mother by one's father; and
- 6) the acceptance of violence as an appropriate problem-solving method.

If neither the abuser nor the victim begin by wanting a violent and abusive relationship, then what happens to create such a state of affairs in the home? And once the relationship becomes violent, why do so many women stay? In an article entitled "Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence," which appeared in *The Psychological Review* (1996), the major stimulus for vio-

lence in men is explained as a volatile combination of high esteem and ego threat "... when favorable views about one's self are questioned, contradicted, challenged...or otherwise put in jeopardy, people may aggress. In particular, they will aggress against the source of the threat. It is mainly the people who refuse to lower their self appraisals who become violent." In a recently published book, *Masculinity in Crisis*, the author (a male psychotherapist), states that "it seems a straightforward assumption to make that the new wave of feminism has produced a crisis in masculinity." Could it be, then, that men, upon finding their mates suddenly challenging them on certain issues which, until now, they felt were indisputable, feel insulted and react violently?

Another attempt at explaining violence between spouses appeared in an article in *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 22 (3): 222, and observed that "violence in intimate couple relationships is, in part, a distance-regulating mechanism which maintains a balance between separateness and connectedness in the relationship." This theory, which the author developed from case studies in the psychoanalytic literature, contends that through socialization, men learn to fear too much connectedness, though they are drawn by it, while women want connectedness and fear autonomy, which they have learned to perceive as rejection. So, when men feel that they have been drawn into a connectedness relationship a bit too close for their comfort, they may lash out violently to protect their sense of "I", which they feel has been compromised by the "one-ness" of the relationship. According to this theory, men use violence to protect and balance distance in their relationships, violence being a "powerful strategy of intimidation to regain control over the woman."

If valid, this theory might also explain why couples involved in domestic violence rarely leave each other: the good periods may be experienced so intensely that they take away from the anguish of the abusive periods. However, in domestic violence, the "ups" become rarer and rarer while the "downs" always increase in frequency. So, why don't women leave?

One reason could be that the abused person, through the phenomenon of self-blame, keeps hoping that by constantly changing her behavior and adapting it to the expectations of her mate, she might finally be able to fix things. Too late does she discover that no matter what she does or says, her partner's demands just change and increase. He is never satisfied. By then, desperation, if not depression and/or several forms of anxiety or even psychosomatic illnesses, could have rendered an already weak woman even weaker.

Another consideration for many women, should they finally decide to leave, is that their parents, families and society in general will not approve of a woman leaving her husband. Instead of receiving sympathy and support, women are often blamed for

not having been patient enough, or not appreciating their luck, or not knowing how to conduct a successful relationship. Moreover, women might justifiably fear the sudden change in their social and economic status, not to mention the loneliness, and perhaps even the scorn, they might face following a divorce. Other women may fear for their own safety or for the safety of their children, and in some cases, even the safety of the ex-husband. Many abusers have been known to threaten to commit suicide or do some other harm if the victim leaves.

Most women, however, never leave; they have been so traumatized that they become convinced of their own inadequacies and unworthiness. They feel they have no chance of succeeding, hence they do not even try. Finally, some women might have already been so abused as children that they do not realize that there are alternatives to this way of life. Such doubly abused women usually stay and accept their dismal fate. They cannot believe that they are worthy of a healthy and happy relationship, having never experienced one in their entire lives.

Searches for the causes of domestic violence are on-going. Most research has suggested that there is not one, simple cause; every situation has its own characteristics. Regardless of the causes, one thing is certain: the effects of domestic violence are painful and long-lasting, not only for the two people immediately involved in the violence, but also for their children and their children's future. In women, the effects of violence are many and diverse. They may range from death (as in crimes of honor in Lebanon, where the "guilty" woman has to pay with her blood to remove the shame her family experiences because of her immodest behavior, or the large percentage — according to a recent United Nations Report, an American woman is physically abused every eight seconds — of women in the U.S and Canada who are murdered by husbands, ex-husbands, and boy-friends), to serious bodily injuries such as broken limbs, hemorrhaging, sprains, torn ligaments, burns, *etc.* Women who have been systematically abused are more vulnerable to disease, psychosomatic illnesses, anxiety attacks and depression. Some women become so desperate that they turn to alcohol or drugs for relief, thus becoming addicts, which merely compounds their problems. Some women may even attempt suicide. No matter what their response, most women subjected to abuse find themselves unable to complete their jobs satisfactorily, whether outside or inside the home. They might neglect taking care of themselves, their homes, or their children, towards whom they may vent some of their intense feelings of anger and frustration, an act which only serves to increase their guilt and further devastate their fragile self-esteem.

As for children, the consequences of abuse can be long-term and drastic. Children may suffer two kinds of abuse: direct abuse, *i.e.*, beatings (many studies have shown that men who abuse their mates often abuse their children as well, particularly the oldest child), or indirect abuse, *i.e.*, the mother may take out her

anger on the children, or the parents will let children witness terrifying scenes of marital violence which disrupt their delicate emotional equilibrium. The children quickly learn that they cannot talk frankly about the situation; instead, they have to cover up for their parents in front of relatives and neighbors, thus learning early in life how to live a lie. They might exhibit an escape-avoidance reaction, *e.g.*, they will either live in fantasy worlds in which all is calm and loving, or they may begin to steal, lie, fight, and become unruly as a reaction to their insecurity. Some children may experience acute and paralyzing feelings of guilt, self-hate, depression or anxiety; they may become apathetic and uncaring towards other people and even towards their own needs. Many children, unfortunately, model the violent behavior they witness daily in the home and adopt it as the only or best way to solve problems, and then carry that belief into adulthood, thus replicating the entire cycle in their own families.

What can be done to confront and change this difficult situation? As was noted earlier, efforts in the domains of legislation and counseling have not been effective in halting violence in the home. It often seems that women cannot acknowledge that violence is actually being done to them until abuse becomes physical, and of the severest kind. Very often, I observe that women unquestioningly accept the fact that neither their husbands nor their children pay any attention to their needs or demands. In our society, ignoring a wife and mother is viewed as something very normal, something which women should simply accept. In the words of one woman I saw in my counseling practice today: "My job is to clean up after them, all day long. If only I could have a maid! But they wouldn't even think of helping me by being more tidy. I have to scream to get their cooperation, and I don't want to scream all the time; I'll feel like a witch or a nag. So what is the result? I never get what I want. If at least they would acknowledge me, or they would talk to me or ask me what I need... But it's always 'no', whatever I ask for. I have to give everything to them and to myself. I'm so tired — it's hard to be a woman!"

In my opinion, a first but very important step in stopping the effects of domestic violence, if not the violence itself, is to start by acknowledging that it is happening. Another step is to accept the fact that you have feelings and needs of your own, and you have a right to them. Nobody has the right to put you down and hurt you without explaining why and allowing you to present your own point of view. Once the situation is acknowledged, once the victim gets in touch with her feelings and realizes that she has rights that have been slighted, then something must be done to correct the situation. Domestic violence rarely disappears on its own, as many women might wish would happen. Help should be sought from external sources, whether a therapist, a priest, a social worker, or a doctor. The important thing is to realize that if nothing is done, the situation will deteriorate. It rarely, if ever, improves.

# “WE HAVE NOTHING BUT SYMPATHY TO OFFER WOMEN WHO ARE BEING ABUSED”

*Al-Raida Editor Laurie King-Irani conducted this interview with Mrs. Tina Naccache, demographer and women's rights activist, who has been at the forefront of addressing domestic violence in Lebanon.*

**Laurie King-Irani:** You have been involved in and concerned with the problem of domestic violence in Lebanon for the past four years as a volunteer activist. Can you tell us how public attitudes and reactions to this human rights violation have changed during that time period?

**Tina Naccache:** Things have definitely changed! This subject has now come out of the closet and attitudes are gradually changing. People are much more willing to talk about domestic violence and to acknowledge that it does, indeed, exist in our society. But there is still a long way to go. I think that domestic violence has become a bigger issue in Lebanon since the Beijing Conference because violence against women, along with the feminization of poverty, were the two key issues of discussion, focus and debate at Beijing. In the last two years, in the course of my activist work, meetings, and discussions, I have been noticing a very interesting phenomenon: young, intelligent, professional women are very sensitive to the issue of domestic violence. I think that this phenomenon is worthy of serious sociological investigation. Why is it that young women of 25 or 26 years of age, usually unmarried and not yet mothers, are so responsive to this issue? What do they know? What have they seen that could have sensitized them to domestic violence and its pernicious repercussions on individuals and on society? Did they watch their mothers being beaten? Are their newly married girlfriends experiencing abuse?

**LKI:** What is your hypothesis?

**TN:** My hypothesis, which is based on studies done in the United States, is that when there is a discrepancy between the status of a woman in relation to her husband and her status in society, the tendency towards violence in the home increases. I think that our young Lebanese women today feel much more equal to men than did women in my age cohort 25 years ago.

**LKI:** Do you think this is due to the increasing numbers of young women who earn college degrees and go on to join the

work force?

**TN:** Perhaps. But I think it has to do with the different experiences of young boys and girls during the long years of the war. While the conflict was raging, young men were often out on the streets, sometimes in militia organizations, while young girls were confined to the home, where they did not have much to do but read, study, and watch television. The television programs that were so popular here during the war were American comedy and drama series which featured women characters who were very strong, capable, creative and independent. Shows like “L.A. Law” revealed that women were equal (or even superior!) to their male colleagues in many domains. Also, we saw a lot of Western movies and documentaries about social problems, such as child abuse, drugs, and women's issues, including domestic violence. These programs, too, had an impact on young Lebanese female viewers. Television has given our young women another image of what they could do or be, and since men were outside the home so much of the time, they were not affected by this new cultural influence. I have a hypothesis that the idea of gender equality was introduced to young women through this informal educational sector, but it does not seem to have reached too many young men.

So, it is not surprising to find in contemporary Lebanon a marked discrepancy between young men and women. Today, 50 percent of college students in Lebanon are women; in my day, it was only 15 percent. Young women who have gone to university are doing their best to get their own jobs and mold their own lives. When they look at young Lebanese men their age, they often find them lacking. I have heard so many educated young professional women say “we just cannot marry these men; we have nothing in common with them!”.

I think that current media interest in the topic of domestic violence is related to young women's fascination with the subject, because most of the young media professionals who want to do programs on domestic violence are women. As recently noted by the statistical study on the status of the Lebanese woman prepared by the Lebanese National Committee for the Beijing Conference, 82 percent of students pursuing university degrees in media and communication are women. Last March, I appeared on a call-in program on Tele-Liban, the State-owned television station, to discuss the issue of domestic violence. The program was organized, in large part, by a remarkable young woman of 25 who is very interested in the topic of domestic violence.

**LKI:** When you make public presentations about domestic violence in Lebanon, what is your overall aim?

**TN:** I try to sensitize people to the issue. For me, the discussion of domestic violence has nothing to do with feminist theory or ideology, although I am a feminist. It is an issue of basic human decency and justice. When a person is being treated unjustly, we just are not going to stand by silently and let it happen. I start from basic principles: humans just should not hurt and degrade other humans in this way. It is an abuse of trust and power; thus, it is wrong. I believe that if we make domestic violence into a shameful thing, it will diminish and eventually disappear. But if we don't talk about it, we cannot possibly make it shameful. If something is universally known to be shameful, no one will do it or tolerate it. For instance, it is considered shameful to walk around in public naked; it is simply unacceptable. And as you can see, everyone around us in this cafe is wearing clothes. People should have the same attitude about abusing women.

**LKI:** But domestic violence doesn't take place out in public; it almost always occurs behind closed doors, where no one can see it or stop it. Usually, few if any people outside the immediate family know it is going on. The children know, of course, but they are powerless and would never report on their parents. Maybe the neighbors know, and although they may gossip about it regularly, I doubt they would interfere between a husband and wife unless they were related to them. So, how do you propose we bring public attention to this problem and make it unacceptable?

**TN:** If it were unacceptable, then the woman would feel justified in talking about it publicly to her friends and relatives; she would go to her in-laws, her parents, her doctor, her lawyer, and say "he is doing something unacceptable, and neither I nor anyone else should put up with it!"

**LKI:** When you talk with battered women, what reasons do they give for not speaking out and taking action?

**TN:** They don't speak out because they know that it is useless to do so in this society. No one would help; therefore, what is the point of talking about it? And, unfortunately, they are right. As of today, we have nothing to offer to a woman who is being physically or psychologically mistreated, nothing but sympathy.

**LKI:** Are you saying that, even though there are legal principles and guidelines, they aren't being enforced because they do not carry the same weight as tradition, family and culture?

**TN:** The principles exist. That is true. But they are not enforced.

**LKI:** What happened to the plan some activists were formulating last year concerning the establishment of a women's hot-line and a domestic violence shelter?

**TN:** Both of these have yet to be realized, but I would like to add that I, personally, do not believe that a shelter would work here in Lebanon. This is a small and close-knit society. Everyone knows everyone else, and the location of such a shelter would soon be discovered, which would obviate its privacy and security. You would have to move the shelter constantly, and this would not be feasible. Also, if a woman went to a shelter, which is by nature a temporary arrangement, where would she go from there? To her parents? Back to a husband who would probably punish her for going to a shelter? We must remember that Lebanese women, unlike American and European women, don't have the option to live on their own. Also, Lebanese women hesitate to make such a dramatic gesture, since Lebanese Personal Status Laws always award custody of the children to the husband, no matter how abusive he may be.

**LKI:** How did you first become interested in the problem of domestic violence?

**TN:** A little over four years ago, I was attending the birthday party of a young girl, and I overheard one of the women there talking to her friend about her daughter's problems. The daughter was witnessing her mother being beaten regularly by her ex-husband, who would come over and barge into the young woman's home at will, even though they were divorced. Upon hearing this, I became outraged and concerned. I started asking my friends and colleagues — lawyers, political activists, doctors, professors — if there were any organizations in Lebanon offering assistance of any kind to battered women. And of course, I discovered that no services existed. So, I began to wonder if perhaps there simply was not enough domestic violence to warrant the creation of such services. After talking to some doctors and lawyers, however, I soon discovered that this was not so; there is indeed domestic violence in Lebanon.

**LKI:** So, after making these discoveries, you decided to become an activist?

**TN:** Yes, but I never thought that my involvement alone would halt domestic violence or that I would found an association. I only set myself to talk about it, to raise the issue and make people think. And now, it is being talked about openly — in seminars, in salons, in the press, on radio and television — so some progress has been made. The television call-in program I participated in last March proved an important point: It was a live program on a state-owned station, and so many people were calling in that the producers decided to do a second show the following week on the same topic.

I appeared on both programs. On the first program, my co-discussant was a Muslim woman university professor; the second time, it was a Muslim man, a forensic medical specialist. And on neither occasion was there even one phone call from any religious leaders, Muslim or Christian, denouncing our views, or telling us that it is forbidden to discuss such things. Hence, all the claims we were hearing previously, *i.e.*, that the domestic violence issue cannot be raised or pursued because it will anger the Muslims, were just a lot of bunk. If it was so wrong to discuss it publicly and critically, then a state-owned television station would never have permitted one, let alone two, programs on the topic! Not only that, but I also received a lot of verbal and written support from Muslim political and social leaders. We should really conduct a scientific study on this, because here we are, Christians and Muslims, living and working side by side for centuries, and so much of what we “know” about each other is based not on facts, but on stereotypes and prejudices! We assume that our respective religions forbid us from raising so many pressing issues. This is something we really must talk about; if we don’t, we will never move forward as a society.

**LKI:** Where do you see the domestic violence debate heading in Lebanon?

**TN:** Unfortunately, I am not very optimistic. Not much is being done at the grass-roots level. It seems that we are still at the stage of verbal formulations. We have no comprehensive studies on the subject, and all of the proposals that have been put forth by different organizations all emphasize the question of statistics. This shows a total misunderstanding — even an ignorance — of what statistics are and how they should be used. It shows, too, a lack of careful thought about this problem. If we are to change people’s behavior, we must first change their attitudes, not measure how many times “x” number of men hit “y” number of women in a given period of time.

**LKI:** But changing people’s cognitive, affective and behavioral processes is a very tall order. How do you suggest that we go about changing people’s attitudes?

**TN:** First (and here, I will show you what I mean by a correct use of statistics), we need to begin by studying people’s actual attitudes and experiences, rather than going on mere hearsay evidence about how Lebanese people view the phenomenon of domestic violence. Academics should be studying the attitudes of people methodologically and quantitatively. It is as simple as the principles underlying modern marketing techniques. Let’s say a company wants to introduce a new chocolate bar into the Lebanese market. The first thing they do is to commission researchers to find out which brands of chocolate are popular in Lebanon and why. Once they begin to understand people’s motivations, they know how to

go about altering them. This enables them to change people’s thinking, tastes, and ultimately, their purchasing behaviors. We are looking for the wrong kinds of statistics if we are trying to get an exact number of Lebanese women who have been beaten. Because of social pressures and cultural traditions, not many women are ready to come out and say they have been abused. But statistical information on attitudes, beliefs, and orientations — men’s as well as women’s — is not difficult to collect. Why do we need to know the exact, precise number of battered women anyway? To build a shelter? Instead, let’s start by getting the views and attitudes of students at all of the universities and colleges in Lebanon. This wouldn’t be very difficult, nor would it be expensive. Why should we wait until we have a huge sum of money to do a national survey ascertaining the extent of domestic violence? We don’t even have a regular census survey in Lebanon! Some have suggested that we simply collect statistics on domestic violence from social workers, but this implies that domestic violence exists only among those classes of people served by social workers, *i.e.*, the poor and disadvantaged, and from my experience, domestic violence can be found in all socio-economic classes!

One of the key reasons we are not moving forward in halting domestic violence is that the women who have been beaten are not coming forward and organizing to stop the abuse. If anyone wants to come forward, take up the issue, and make it theirs, they must be aware that such a commitment requires humility and dedication. These are both very difficult to maintain over time. Our culture encourages dedication, but it does not encourage humility. This, I think, is at the heart of the different ways of handling domestic violence in Lebanon and in the West. The people talking about domestic violence in Lebanon today, myself included, are not speaking from their guts; we haven’t personally experienced beating. In the United States and Europe, on the other hand, the first domestic violence support groups and shelters were founded by battered women themselves. It was not an issue brought out of the shadows by activists and academics, but rather, by the women who had actually suffered. In Lebanon, we know there are many women suffering, but they cannot come out and talk about it or share their stories with other battered women because there is simply no public forum that is open to them. The women who speak for other women in Lebanon are usually educated, elite women with titles, degrees and credentials. You always see rich, educated women talking about poor, unschooled women. Why? We don’t have a place where a regular working woman can go to speak with other women about her life in her own daily language. I wanted to try to be their voice, but I cannot. We, the educated women, can become their voice only if we are very humble, only if we are always conscious that we are talking about a serious issue that is a matter of life and death for many women and their children. We must never lecture to them. We have a duty to

do our research and listen carefully to these women.

**LKI:** But if these women are unable to save themselves from their situation, who has the duty to rescue them?

**TN:** Let me tell you about a woman who, three years ago, was slapped and shoved hard in the bathroom while she was pregnant. Then, last Spring, she was so badly beaten that the muscles of her back were torn, and on top of this, her husband had threatened her with a gun that he keeps in the house. When I was appearing on the television call-in program last March, she was watching the program, and so was he. The man apparently felt threatened that I would say his name on television, since I mentioned a little about the case, without giving any names, of course. The woman later reported to me that the husband was extremely angry and had threatened to kill not only her, but me, too, if she dared to open her mouth again about the abuse to which he was subjecting her. As soon as I heard this, I was very afraid for her safety. I contacted the head of the Lebanese Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights, Ras Beirut MP Beshara Merhej, and told him about the problem and the gun. I asked him if I could go to the police station and make a complaint or give them some warning. Merhej, though sympathetic, said, "be careful, Tina! The way the laws are written, *he* could sue *you* for slander!"

Ultimately, the crisis was defused, not through the intervention of the police, the courts, or social workers, but rather, through the wisdom of an older woman related to the family who exerted social and moral pressures to get this man to turn over the gun to her. So, in this case, we were fortunate: kinship and community networks proved more effective than the law in getting the gun out of his hands. However, the battered woman is still living under the same roof with this man and their children. I am worried, because he has not changed his attitudes and behaviors, and although he no longer has that gun, there are always knives. I am also afraid for the woman's reaction, of what she might do the next time in her own self-defense. After he tore her back muscles, she told me that, for the first time, she realized that he could actually incapacitate or kill her, and thus limit or destroy her abilities to care for the children properly. I believe that the next time he attacks her she will defend herself, and she may end up really hurting him, or even murdering him. If that were to happen, she would go directly to jail and possibly face the death penalty. There is no precedent in Lebanon for a court excusing a wife for murdering an abusive husband.

**LKI:** Don't you think that one of the obstacles to changing mentalities and practices here in Lebanon is that the group is more important than the individual? The needs of the family take precedence over the needs of the individual, whether man or woman, so how can we convince people to give more weight to the anguish of one individual and ignore the con-

cerns of the family group? The community is strong here, and that is very good in some respects, as we saw in the example you just gave of the older woman who took the gun away from the abusive husband, but the negative aspect is that the family will hide or dismiss the suffering of one individual member in order to protect the honor or the integrity of the group. How can we work within this cultural and social reality to address the issue of domestic violence?

**TN:** We cannot start by making the individual supreme in this society. This will not happen, neither today nor tomorrow. So let's start by working with what we have: the family network. Let's use what exists and what works; let's change the attitudes among family members and get them to realize that domestic violence is very dangerous because it hurts not only the individual woman, but also the group: it hurts the children. If the group is not interested in the wife, then what is the group interested in? The offspring! So, let them interfere in the interests of the children. Let us see how we can best do this in our socio-cultural context. If we were to sit down and consider this carefully, we would have to involve the family, religious leaders, lawyers, judges, the police, doctors, *etc.* I am not optimistic for the woman who is already married ten or twelve years and who has a few children; she cannot change her economic situation. We cannot offer her much, except a listening ear and an affirmation of her feelings, and the reassurance that what she is experiencing is wrong and unjust, and not her fault. But what we can do, what we must do, is reach those people who are not yet married — men and women. Let's teach these people about domestic violence. We worked on a small flier about the myth of domestic violence, showing that it affects all social classes and confessional faiths, and we distributed this in the context of informal workshops we held in various people's homes. It was very useful; it made people review their attitudes and beliefs critically in group discussions. But we still don't have the solution for domestic violence in Lebanon. I think we need to sit and think and discuss some more before we start acting. We need to have an indigenous approach that works for us; we can't simply import Western methods of treating domestic violence. I feel that Lebanese academics have an important role to play here, but as of today, I do not see them taking action. Anyone and everyone, regardless of their background and specialization, should come together and actively search for solutions to this dangerous and insidious abuse of women's human rights.

I am pessimistic, though, because the long years of the war have diminished the capability of the Lebanese to solve their problems in a methodological and rational manner. Logical argumentation is overshadowed by a clash of egos, as each person tries harder not to lose face than to actually address and solve the problem. So, we must honestly confront our own faults before we address the faults of our society.

# ISLAM AND WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS:

## ESSAY

### *A Reappraisal in Light of the Qur'an and the Hadith*



*Photo Credit: Delphine Garde*

by *Rania Ahmed Nahle, LAU Student*

Islam is a full and complete religion which addresses every aspect of life: social, economical, familial, spiritual and political. There is no doubt that there are physiological and psychological differences between men and women, but this does not obviate the fact that they are both human beings endowed with intrinsic rights and worth. Thus, they should be treated equally, taking into consideration the implications of their inherent differences.

Contemporary Muslim societies interpret women's rights in a drastically different way from the actual teachings of the Qur'an. Because of the existence and influence of a deeply-rooted patriarchal social system and culture, many Muslim men tend to interpret the Qur'an and the Hadith (teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) in a limited and literal manner which suits

their own temporal interests. Muslim women, on the other hand, have historically been unaware of their rights, mostly due to their lack of religious and formal education. Today, however, women's ignorance stems from the fact that they have unthinkingly given into traditions which are based on misinterpretations of religious teachings.

Women's rights in Islam have existed since the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. All women's rights are to be applied as they have been assigned. Some members of Islamic communities, however, misuse or ignore women's rights due to a lack of faith or knowledge. This inevitably leads to a wide-spread misconception of Islam and its teachings concerning women, thus fueling so much of the stereotypes and prejudices non-Muslims hold about the Islamic world.

During *al-jahiliyya* (the pre-Islamic period), it was the tradition

of the Arabs to bury alive newborn infant girls. These young females were not valued as highly as male offspring, and parents feared that girls might put the family's honor at risk by bringing shame through improper behavior. The inhumane practice of female infanticide continued until the Qur'an was revealed, stating clearly that girls and boys are equal in worth, and specifying that the only meaningful differences between people are those related to faith and belief in God, not gender, linguistic or racial differences:

*"O, humankind, we have created you male and female and have appointed you races and tribes that you may know one another; surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you"*  
(Sura 49; verse 13)

With the revelation of the Qur'an, female infanticide was henceforth forbidden, yet the disappointment which marks the birth of a girl child still lingers in many Muslim societies, and in quite a few non-Muslim communities as well.

Before considering the question of gender equality from an Islamic perspective, we must first examine the physical, biological and psychological attributes of men and women in order to judge the kinds and degree of their differences. If such differences do exist, should they automatically require a limitation of rights, or the assignment of special rights or duties according to gender? Concerning physical structure and function, it is clear that most men, in comparison to most women, have clearly discernible natural characteristics, e.g., greater muscle mass and bone density, as well as greater weight and height. Just because men are physically stronger, however, does not mean that they are entitled to more rights than women. Men's physical attributes merely indicate that "he is made for hard and difficult jobs" (Bahonar, 1985: 32). Islam teaches that, in the eyes of God, men and women are equal in rights and responsibilities. Although differing in physical structure, biological functions, and the social roles each plays in the community, neither is accorded more value or worth than the other in the Islamic world-view. Islam does not deny, however, that God has given men the capacity to lead during crises due to their physical power, which enables men to protect their spouses and offspring in times of danger, strife and hardship. Because of their physical strength, men are obliged to perform certain duties from which women are exempted. A woman's strength, on the other hand, is found in the emotional and affective realm, according to Islam. A woman's physically distinguishing characteristic is her ability to carry children, bear offspring, and care for the young. Islam states that women are thus equipped by nature with the necessary emotional and mental skills to nurture children. Bearing children is one, but certainly not the only, responsibility that a Muslim woman fulfills in her community.

Another contribution Muslim women can make to society is through work. Although men are responsible for supporting women and children, and thus removing the economical necessity for a woman to work outside the home, Islam does not, as so many people assume, forbid the woman to work. Compared to the West, where family ties have been dangerously weakened, and where women must carry a double burden of holding down a demanding full-time job while also maintaining a good home for their families, Islam's perspective appears eminently humane and practical. Women in Muslim societies are encouraged to give primary attention to the care and education of their children, yet work is not forbidden if the situation calls for it. "Between the two, male and female, there are social solidarity and mutual responsibility" (Abodalati, 1993: 124).

It is not the Islamic faith, but rather, patriarchal society which forbids Muslim women to work. Social and cultural traditions, not religious precepts, maintain that women should not work outside of the home. Also, few men's egos can endure the fact that they are not able to support their families alone. An additional reason that men do not permit women to work is to prevent her from coming into contact with men who are not relatives. This consideration explains why Muslim women veil, to prevent problems from arising:

*"Say to the women believers that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts, and not reveal their adornments save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils over their bodies"*  
(Sura 24; verses 30-31)

As one recent magazine article explained the Islamic practice of veiling to a Western audience, "wearing a veil does not mean that a woman is weak; she wears a veil because she knows the high status that Allah has given her, to protect society and to prevent immorality: The *hijab* helps women to achieve justice in society. This does not mean that men should not also dress modestly" (Mahjouba, 1984).

Another example of social traditions obscuring true Islamic teachings is that of women's role in the choice of her marriage partner. According to the Qur'an, women are to choose whom they wish to marry and when they want to marry. But, "unfortunately, the traditional tenet was that the male guardian of the family should choose [a woman's] husband and force her to marry if necessary. Girls were usually married at a young age to relieve her parents of economic burdens" (Al-Samawi, 1995: 300). As far as women's marital rights are concerned, the man is obliged to provide all the necessities of life. "Men should spend on women even if they work or have their own money because the woman has no obligation to participate in the marital expenses, and the man has no authority to manage her possessions or to use them, unless she permits him to do so" (Al-Gamari, 1993: 117). Bearing children and house-keeping are



the only contributions that a woman is required to make to the sacred institution of marriage. Nevertheless, some men in our Islamic societies still believe that a married woman is required to stay at home, do the housework and be available to serve the man's every need whenever he wishes. Thus, many Muslim women are denied their social life. Whereas a man has both a public and a private life, most women's lives are only private: the life she shares with her husband and children in the home.

Perhaps the most widely misunderstood and denigrated practice in Islam is that of polygamy. This practice, which most people consider unfair, is, of course, unjust because of men's lack of knowledge of the Islamic religion. There are several theoretical reasons which may be invoked to justify polygamy: "First...men remain potentially fertile all of their adult lives, while women become barren at menopause....Another reason is that men are exposed to more danger, *i.e.*, fighting in wars and suffering accidents during work. Thus, many women were often widowed, and others remained unmarried due to the loss of men" (Hojjatulislam, 1995: 28). The verse in the Qur'an which permits polygamy is as follows:

*"Marry such women as seem good to you, two, three, or four.  
But if you fear that you treat  
them unequally,  
then only one..."  
(Sura 4; verse 3)*

Since women give birth, marrying more than one man could lead to a confusion of paternity, and hence to a loss of social identity for the child, in a patriarchal social system. "Those who are ignorant of the actual Islamic teachings take advantage of this verse, being able to marry up to four wives, while ignoring the fact that they have to treat each one equally" (Al-Gamari, 1993: 126). This is another illustration of how men use the Qur'an however they wish, emphasizing their rights yet ignoring their duties to treat all of their wives equally and with impartiality. Some men who are not even true believers claim this right for reasons that are far from religious.

Islam is the only one of the three great monotheistic religions which permits divorce, especially in cases of marriages that stand no chance of lasting. "Although Islam allows divorce, it provides various ways of resolving the conflict between the couple before it leads to a divorce. Therefore, divorce is the final decision that takes place "after much effort has been expended to heal the rift" (Al-Gamari, 1993: 136). At the same time, Allah considers divorce "the worst of all the permitted things (*halla*l)." Divorce is not to be undertaken lightly; "it is a bitter medicine which should not be administered except in extreme cases" (Al-Farouqi, 1988: 27). If the only other alternative is for the couple to live a miserable life, divorce is the sole solution. "Only the man has the right to divorce, due to the reason that a woman tends to be more emotional by nature and

thus her feelings get hurt easily" (*ibid.*), but it should be noted that there is an exception which most Muslim women today take advantage of: they can request, before marriage, that the right to ask for a divorce rests with them, and this right is now written into the marriage contract if the woman wishes. As we saw in the cases of work, marriage and polygamy, divorce illustrates another way in which Islamic teachings can be misinterpreted and misapplied. Some men invoke the right of divorce whenever they wish, even when their reasons are insignificant. Another case of misusing this right is seen when a man marries another woman and fails to support the first wife or even to acknowledge her. Such men, of course, are not true believers. There is a verse in the Qur'an which clearly forbids such selfish behavior:

*"And when you divorce women and they reach their prescribed time [i.e., three months, to determine pregnancy], then either retain them in a good fellowship or set them free with liberty, and do not retain them for injury so that you exceed the limits. Whosoever does this is indeed unjust to his own soul; and do not take Allah's communications for mockery. And remember the favor of Allah upon you, and that which he has revealed to you, the Book and the wisdom admonishing you thereby, and be careful of your duty to Allah, and know that Allah is the knower of all things."  
(Sura 2; verse 231)*

Another area of controversy for non-Muslims concerns the Islamic teachings about inheritance. The Qur'an says "God charges to the male the like of the portion of two females" (Sura 4: verse 11). Given the aforementioned economic structure of the Muslim household, it only seems fair and logical that a man should receive double the share of inheritance received by his sister, since a man has unlimited financial responsibilities towards his mother, unmarried female siblings, his wife and children, whereas a woman usually has only limited personal expenses. Muslim men who do not fulfill their economic responsibilities to their families are not true believers.

Legal stipulations which indicate that the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man in cases of arbitration and judgment are explained by the following verse from the Qur'an:

*'Call two witnesses; of if there are not two men, then call one man and two women from those on whom you agree among the people who are present. So, if one of the women goes astray [in her testimony], the other woman may remind her.'  
Sura 2; verse 282*

Commenting on this verse, Kotb notes that "In the verse itself, the explanation is made clear: by the very nature of her family duties, the tendency of the woman's spirit is toward emotions and passions, just as in man it tends towards contemplation and thought" (1953: 51). The implied reasoning behind this is that

women may be more influenced by their feelings and thus sympathize with one side or another depending on the conflict situation. But this represents yet another example of how men claim to be superior to justify their dominance in a patriarchal society. The following verse is often taken out of context and used to defend and affirm male dominance: "Men are in charge of women because Allah made the one of them to excel the other and because they spend of their property" (*Sura 4*; verse 34). Men misinterpret this verse, emphasizing the notion of "being in charge" of a woman, and de-emphasizing the deeper meaning, *i.e.*, that men must not dominate so much as support women. The relationship between the sexes is meant to be complementary, not asymmetrical, with one partner having all of the rights and the other being burdened with all of the duties.

### *Western and European Views of Islam*

In general, most Westerners view Islam from their own socio-cultural perspective and using their own modes of interpretation, which are often biased by ignorance of Islam, if not marred by negative stereotypes. The fact that most Islamic societies do not correctly interpret or confirm to many Islamic tenets, and sometimes even distort Islamic teachings, adds to the West's misunderstanding of the meaning of Islam. If individuals and groups in Western countries are really interested in understanding Islam, rather than simply criticizing it, they should refer directly to the Qur'an and the Hadith and learn from knowledgeable religious scholars. If they were to undertake a serious study of the religion, Westerners would learn that men and women are indeed equal according to the logical reasoning presented above. Critics of Islam view issues from a distance and believe that women are deprived of their due rights by Islam, but to the contrary, Muslim women are granted their full and complete rights. Women's rights in Islam have been clear and unambiguous since the revelation of the Qur'an. Sadly, these rights have so often been ignored by Muslim societies. On the other hand, we must not forget that many Western women are still struggling to attain some of their basic rights, too, such as equal pay for equal work in the United States.

Regarding the contrast between the Islamic and the Western interpretations of women's right to work, most Westerners believe that a woman should seek employment because men are not obligated to support anyone but themselves. Thus, it is crucial for a woman to attain financial independence simply to survive. Unlike Islam, which burdens the man with such responsibilities, "the West imposes upon women the payment of lower wages. France does not grant married women the right of administering their own property, a right that Islam has always granted to women. Islam has always given women privileges that Western and European countries did not grant them until today" (Kotb, 1953: 53).

Turning to the practice of polygamy, which, it must be noted, is

very rare in contemporary Muslim societies, we can see that it may be justified for the reasons mentioned above, and this is indirectly proven by realities in the West, where adultery, open marriages and illegitimate children are becoming normal aspects of so many people's lives. Many Westerners engage in extra-marital affairs at least once in their married lives. "It is true that the Christians do not marry more than one woman, but we know that many engage in extra-marital relations in secret" (Hojjatulislam, 1985: 31).

The issues of inheritance and legal witnesses are generally perceived as unfair. No doubt, they have been most often defended and promoted by the least religiously-educated members of our society.

### *Conclusion*

We have learned that Muslim women indeed have rights, but they have often been denied these God-given rights due to their lack of education, which leaves them vulnerable to unjust domination. One should not judge the religion of Islam by the way it is promoted and practiced by societies. We must take into consideration the fact that most Muslim societies are in need of more education about the tenets of the faith. Lacking such education, they are likely to misinterpret and mis-apply the teachings of the Qur'an.

The physical differences which distinguish men from women cannot be denied; these are biological facts of life. The strongest aspect of Islam is the equality given to all believers. Because of Islam's emphasis of equality and social justice, women's rights are guaranteed. Debate on this issue will probably never come to a conclusive end; there will always be misconceptions and problems in dealing with sensitive subjects, but comprehensive teaching of the true bases of the Islamic faith can prevent the worst injustices suffered by Muslim women, while simultaneously correcting many of the stereotypes Westerners have about Islam.

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# REPORT

## WOMEN AND AIDS IN LEBANON:

### *A Question of Rights and Responsibilities*

by Laurie King-Irani

The young mother was anxious. Her baby son, 14 months old, did not seem to be gaining much weight and he was continuously beset by health problems. Her two older children were already walking at his age, but the boy was too weak to stand up by himself. She herself had also been feeling ill; for nearly three months she had been battling a persistent flu and a low-grade fever. The young woman attributed her poor health to simple exhaustion. She had so many tasks to attend to in the absence of her husband, who spent half of the year away overseeing his business interests in West Africa.

One day, the little boy developed a high fever and severe diarrhea. In a panic, she took him to the emergency room. Her son was hospitalized, and after a two-week barrage of medical tests and questions, a solemn-faced doctor ushered the young woman into his office, where he calmly gave her the most devastating news anyone can receive: tests had revealed that her baby son was HIV-positive, and she was the only possible source of his fatal infection. In the immediate, chilling aftermath of this shock, she suddenly realized that her husband, on whom she was completely dependent and in whom she had placed all of her trust, had infected her and their only son.

At least one hundred variations on this harrowing tale have unfolded in clinics and doctors' offices throughout Lebanon during the last six years. Unfortunately, hundreds more Lebanese wives and mothers will receive the crushing news that they and their children have contracted the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) from their husbands, who invariably become infected through heterosexual extra-marital affairs, often while living abroad. The emerging AIDS crisis in Lebanon is not only an index of a looming public health disaster, it is also an illustration of how easily and how often women's human rights are violated in Lebanon, largely because women do not know, value, or defend their own rights. Regardless of social class, educational level or confessional background, most Lebanese women are brought up to serve men's needs unquestioningly, to ignore their spouses' sexual peccadilloes, and to adopt passive and fatalistic attitudes concerning the repercussions of their husbands' behaviors. Furthermore, Lebanese women are neither expected nor encouraged to lead independent lives of economic self-sufficiency. If they do not marry, they usually must live with a father, brother, or other male relative and his family. With the

advent of the AIDS virus in Lebanon, these socialization patterns and role expectations place Lebanese women at increased risk of contracting a virus which will lead to a painful death for them and any infected children they may bear. (1)

As of mid-1996, 400 medically-documented cases of HIV/AIDS infection have been registered with the National AIDS Program of the Lebanese Ministry of Health. (2) Of these 400 people, 100 are women, 99 of whom contracted HIV from the only sexual partners they have ever known: their husbands. To date, 15 Lebanese children have been born with the virus. Dr. Alissar Radi, MD, a dynamic young physician who



*A flier designed by the Lebanese Ministry of Health to warn women of their vulnerability to AIDS*

heads Lebanon's National AIDS Program, notes that the official number of registered HIV/AIDS cases represents only the thin edge of a much wider wedge. Using tested epidemiological models, medical researchers estimate that the true number of HIV-positive Lebanese citizens is at least 2,500, the vast majority of whom do not even suspect that they are infected. Dr. Radi has been vocal in calling attention to the rapid increase in AIDS infection rates among Lebanese women. "Just four years ago, there was one infected Lebanese woman for every six infected Lebanese men; now, the ratio is one to three! In other words, the infection rate among women has doubled in only three years. This is incredible; it indicates that Lebanon will soon be facing a social, medical and psychological catastrophe of great proportions, and very few individuals or institutions in Lebanese society are ready for what is coming. In the not-so-distant future, we will have to cope with the needs of a lot of widows and orphans."

The demographic profile of HIV/AIDS patients and the prevailing patterns of HIV/AIDS transmission in Lebanon closely parallel the West African AIDS experience. In both settings, HIV is transmitted primarily through heterosexual contact, thus threatening the entire family unit — men, women and children — to a greater extent than is the case when homosexual contact is the main route of infection. "Since so many Lebanese individuals and families have emigrated to various West African countries during the second half of this century, it is no surprise that AIDS in Lebanon mirrors the African model," notes Dr. Radi. "A significant number of Lebanon's documented HIV/AIDS cases originated in West African countries. Many Lebanese men have active business interests in these countries, and although their families reside in Lebanon, they spend a lot of time on their own in Africa, where they meet their sexual needs by visiting prostitutes or even founding a second household and family there with an African woman. These men are thus at risk for contracting AIDS and bringing it home to their unsuspecting wives."

In order to respond effectively to Lebanon's nascent AIDS crisis, the National AIDS Program, in conjunction with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Lebanese Ministry of Health, has conducted field research on attitudes, activities and beliefs among Lebanese in order to ascertain which behaviors can and must change if the spread of the virus is to be slowed and ultimately halted. As a result of initial studies, certain obstacles to confronting AIDS in Lebanon have become clear. First and foremost is the difficulty of discussing AIDS and the nature of its transmission in a conservative society hedged around with religiously-sanctioned family laws and uncomfortable with frank talk about sex and sexuality. Radi noted that Christian and Muslim religious leaders were initially very receptive to the message of the National AIDS Program, *i.e.*, that married couples should behave responsibly and commit themselves to monogamous sexual relations within the marital

context. They were somewhat less supportive, however, of the National AIDS Program's dual strategy of disseminating information about the use of condoms and encouraging women's empowerment. The AIDS awareness campaigns that have had some success in Europe and North America would never work here, asserts Dr. Radi, since the basic message of these Western campaigns seems to be "use condoms, and have as much sex as you want, with whomever you want!". Such a message would alienate, rather than educate, the vast majority of the Lebanese public. "Our approach has been to encourage people to go back to the traditional values, to respect the sanctity of the family and engage in sexual relations only with their spouse, and primarily for the purpose of procreation," Radi explains. "We see behavioral changes as the man's responsibility, so we emphasize traditional cultural expectations which stress men's important roles as providers and protectors of the family unit; we try to convince them to practice responsible behavior not only for their own sake or even for their wives' sakes, but for the sake of their children. Thus, we communicate to the man that he should be monogamous in order to preserve his family's health and integrity, and if he can't be monogamous, we tell him to use condoms; he has no choice *but* to use condoms!"

The educational emphasis on men's roles and behaviors points to the most disturbing obstacle to AIDS prevention in Lebanon: the powerlessness and passivity of the Lebanese wife. Dr. Radi relates that the National AIDS Program's staff has conducted workshops and seminars for women from a variety of non-governmental organizations in order to create networks of Lebanese women through which to disseminate information and provide social and psychological support to those stricken with AIDS. However, they quickly discovered that Lebanese wives are structurally isolated and disempowered in the marital relationship; they exercise little, if any, decision-making power in the home, and place crucial decisions concerning health, sexual relations, and contraception in the hands of their husbands, on whom they are utterly dependent economically. "What we originally wanted to do was empowerment training for Lebanese women, and we are still pursuing this strategy, especially among younger women who are not yet married, or those who are just newly-wed. But we face a number of interrelated obstacles to the empowerment of women here, particularly, a fatalistic mentality expressed by the phrase "*qadaa' wal-qadar*", which implies that it is a woman's fate or destiny to contract this entirely preventable disease. Confronted with the evidence that men who engage in extra-marital affairs without the use of condoms are likely to contract AIDS and pass it along to their spouses and children, Lebanese women too often adopt a passive attitude rather than being proactive in preventing their own infection or asking critical questions about the double standards that allow men to be philanderers. It shows a basic imbalance in the marital relationship here: the wife has the obligations, and the husband has the rights.

"Another obstacle is the pronounced discomfort Lebanese

women feel about discussing sex with their husbands. Lebanese women are not brought up to negotiate sexual matters with their husbands; they let the husband decide when and how they will have sex and whether or not they will use any form of protection. Women say 'I have no power! What can I say or do? It is his right to have sex with me whenever and however he wants to; if I don't comply, he might divorce me or have affairs with other women!', which indicates their almost total dependence on their husbands. We now realize that, in order to protect the woman from AIDS, we cannot go to her directly and say, 'do this; don't do that.' Rather, we have to reach the women through the men, by appealing to the man's sense of responsibility and his desire to live up to traditional cultural expectations. And since it is the man's behavior which is ultimately linked to the transmission of the virus in Lebanon, perhaps it is only rational that we direct our educational efforts at the husbands in order to protect the wives. However, we have started a campaign to encourage more frank and effective communication about sexual and health matters between husbands and wives."

Another hindrance to responding to AIDS in Lebanon is the lack of ethnographic data about actual practices and beliefs which facilitate the spread of AIDS. Although medical data are not hard to obtain, it is much more difficult to discern what sorts of practices between which categories of people actually transpire in the privacy of the Lebanese home. Such sensitive data would be hard to collect in any society, but it is especially challenging to conduct such research in Lebanon, a religiously conservative society. "We want to do some intensive, qualitative field studies, but first, we must obtain the support and permission of relevant governmental ministries, religious and political leaders, and academic institutions. The controversial nature of sexuality makes it difficult to get the support we need to initiate this research project. It is especially difficult to discuss, let alone research, such controversial issues as bisexuality and homosexuality, which are literally illegal in Lebanon. We suspect that there is a high rate of bisexuality in Lebanon, however, since most families of homosexual men are eager to marry them off as soon as possible. Once married, most of these men continue a secret homosexual lifestyle parallel to their married life, which obviously places their wives and children at increased risk of contracting AIDS."

Dr. Radi feels that qualitative studies would be useful in understanding changing routes of AIDS transmission in Lebanon, thus enabling her staff to design better educational programs. Such data are crucial for understanding, and hence preventing, women's vulnerability to HIV. "We have significant anecdotal evidence that anal sex is used in the marital relationship as an alternative form of contraception, and this, or course, is very high-risk sexual behavior! Another suspected route of transmission is the practice of *ziwaj muta'a*, 'pleasure marriage,' which is increasing among Lebanese sects which permit this

form of temporary marriage. For many young men, the current dire economic situation prevents them from obtaining enough money to marry and build a home, so they meet their sexual needs through this religiously-sanctioned institution, but this practice increases the number of sexual contacts between men and women, and may constitute an avenue for the spread of AIDS, though it is probably not a primary route."

Finally, Lebanon's pronounced confessional pluralism and the country's post-war sectarian and geographic fragmentation pose a challenge for the National AIDS Program's staff members responsible for designing effective media campaigns with a limited amount of funding. "Although Lebanon is a relatively small country, we sometimes feel that we are trying to reach out to ten different countries within this one nation! The message we design for one section of the country cannot always be used to communicate with another section because of pronounced socio-cultural differences." Radi indicated that she and her staff do not rely only upon the informal educational sector to disseminate the message that AIDS is deadly but preventable. "We are currently working on a big project with the Ministry of Education to introduce AIDS prevention curricula in all secondary schools in every region of Lebanon."

As Dr. Radi stepped away from her desk to find more reports for me in her large filing cabinet, I went back to the notes I had jotted down about women's passivity and resignation before the risks of AIDS. It was difficult to grasp that any woman could be so disempowered as to accept the danger, damage and eventual death brought on by AIDS as simply "her fate." Speaking more to myself than anyone else, I asked aloud: "What would happen if Lebanese women actually began to value and stand up for themselves?" One of Dr. Radi's colleagues, a young man in his late twenties, looked up at me from a report he was reading and said "*thowra*" ("revolution"). Thinking about his surprising comment later, I realized that he was only partly correct: the revolution would have to precede, rather than follow, Lebanese women's empowerment, and would have to be a psychological, rather than a political, revolt. Arab women must undergo a revolutionary change of thinking about their rights and duties in the context of the family. It is time that they claimed more rights and began to hold their husbands accountable for their lack of responsible behavior. If Lebanese women don't value and protect themselves, who will?

### Endnotes

- (1) According to the World Health Organization, approximately fifty percent of children born to HIV-positive mothers will also be infected themselves.
- (2) This figure represents only Lebanese citizens who have tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS; it does not include HIV-positive Palestinian refugees or foreign workers residing in Lebanon.

# REPORT

## HEALING VERSUS HYPOCRISY:

### *Rehabilitation of Prostitutes in Lebanon*

by Ghena Ismail, Assistant Editor

“Ever since I was a child, I felt I was a stranger in the family. Why, I don’t know. All I know is that I didn’t feel comfortable, and at the age of ten I found myself running away from the house. Unfortunately, though, my parents always managed to find me and bring me back home.” Suspecting that Nada might have slept with somebody, her parents took her to two doctors to check on her virginity. While the first said that Nada wasn’t a virgin, the second affirmed that she was. Apparently, Nada’s virginity mattered a lot to her family, especially to her father, who could not but check on his daughter’s virginity himself. “I told my mother and sisters about my father’s repetitive sexual behavior with me; however, they refused to believe me.” Nada adds, “They never cared about me, anyway.” Nada ran away again at the age of fifteen, but this time she was determined not to go back. She didn’t. Since then, Nada’s life has taken a different course. “It was a mixture of pleasure and misery. I did not work, because I was too lazy. I started sleeping with men, not only for the sake of the money, but also to satisfy my needs. Every woman has needs which ought to be fulfilled, after all.” Today, Nada repents her previous pattern of life, for which she holds her father chiefly responsible. “I gave sincere emotions to people, none of which were appreciated, however. One of the men I loved the most left me just four days after I bought him a car.”

*“Nada’s virginity mattered a lot to her family, especially to her father, who could not but check on his daughter’s virginity himself.”*

“I do not want my sister to become like me. I want her to continue her education and become someone of value in the society.” Hanadi’s face lit up as she said, “My sister is doing well in her studies.” Why don’t you want your sister to become like you, Hanadi? What’s wrong with your life? Her reply: “*Min eid la eid*,” i.e., “from one hand to another”. She continued, “Since my father died during my infancy, my mother remarried. My step-father

never allowed me to sleep at home unless I had money, and when I turned nine, he married me off to a very old married man. My husband was no better than my step father, however. Being harsh and abusive, he used to beat me mercilessly and he never cared about me. At the age of thirteen, I ran away from this marital home, only to be kidnapped by some dirty creature who wanted to have sex with me forcefully.” Hanadi explained that this man would not be satisfied by touching her breasts only; he insisted on having full sex with her which was not acceptable to Hanadi. Being fed-up with Hanadi, this dirty old man handed her on to a friend, who handed her in turn to another old man. “This old man was extremely sympathetic and kind, and he did not touch me. He took me to Burj Hammoud, bought me all the toys and clothes I wanted, rented for me a room in a chalet for five days and gave me money. He insisted on taking me back to my parents or husband, but I refused to go back, as I was extremely afraid of my husband. However, he managed to get my address from my girl-friend and took me back to my parents.”

Since then, Hanadi has been involved in prostitution.

Who is responsible for Nada and Hanadi’s lives of prostitution? Is this life necessarily harmful to a person’s self-esteem? Is there any hope for women like Nada and Hanadi to change and start anew? And is their repentance accepted in our society?

According to *Dar el-Amal*, (“House of Hope”), a social service agency, prostitutes are victims of family degeneration, emotional deprivation, and an unfair, exploitative society. Given a second chance, they can change. *Dar el-Amal* has been trying to extend a helping hand to these women since 1970. Prostitutes learn about *Dar el-Amal* from one of three sources: their colleagues who have come earlier to the center, the police, or the

*“I do not want my sister to become like me. I want her to continue her education and become someone of value in the society!”*

*"Dar el-Amal gives prostitutes a second chance, or at least tries to do so. Most importantly, we try to give her back her lost sense of dignity."*

women's prison in Baabda. Welcoming the prostitutes, listening to their problems, accepting them, understanding their situation, and providing them with good company, *Dar el-Amal* gives prostitutes a second chance, or at least tries to do so. "When a young woman comes to us, we try to give her hope. We show her that we accept her and that we are willing to help her. Most importantly,

we try to give her back her lost sense of dignity."

*Dar el-Amal* tries to carry out its humanitarian mission through a limited team that consists of the director of the center and two social workers. "Unfortunately, we have a limited financial capacity. Besides, voluntary work is not possible nowadays, due to the difficult living conditions. The social workers try to do their best, though, in order to provide the beneficiaries with the help needed. They visit the neighborhoods and bars where prostitutes work in order to have a better understanding of their background." *Dar el-Amal* consults with a psychotherapist, who discusses with the social workers the problems of these young women and tries to guide them on how to help them.

In an attempt to form a clearer idea of the circumstances that may lead a woman to prostitution, we carried out a brief interview with Dr. Maurice Khouri, the psychotherapist consultant for *Dar el-Amal*.

Dr. Khouri states that a common factor among most prostitutes is having an early sexual experience in their lives. "Most prostitutes were either led into early marriages (9-13 years old) as part of a trade deal, or they were subject to sexual abuse by one of their family members. When subject to an exploitative sexual experience, the child feels something; yet he or she is incapable of translating its meaning. The meaning of the incident becomes clear only later. Having had such a disturbing experience without being able to tell someone or being able to understand what had happened leads the child to the "compulsive-repetitive" reaction. Unconsciously, he or she starts to search for this past experience which could have been pleasurable or even painful. The child feels compelled to put him or herself in situations similar to those in which the early incident took place in order to make sense of the

violation they experienced. As a result of this unconscious repetition of past experiences that involved something sexual, prostitution can develop."

Prostitution is necessarily the result of a bad experience. It is not a simple choice of profession, Dr. Khouri asserts. "No prostitute is proud or happy about what she does. Even if the prostitute claims that she has chosen this profession, and even if her background and family life appear to be normal, digging deep inside her life, you are bound to discover something which is improper."

Many people in our society think differently, though.

"Immorality runs in their blood, and trying to change them is hopeless." "They are lazy people who chose an easy way out for living," "They are dirty creatures, unworthy of respect," "I despise them, and have no sympathy whatsoever for them," "If they're in need of money, why don't they scrub the floor. Isn't it better for them than this cheap profession?" These were some of the reactions I got when asking people about how they viewed prostitutes. However, not all the reactions were so negative. Many people showed some awareness of the circumstances that might have led a woman into prostitution. A number of the young women enthusiastically said that they had no problem in socializing with prostitutes. "If it wasn't for my parents, I would have interacted with them," one of the young women said.

Although the majority of the people I spoke with seemed to sympathize with the prostitutes, most of them did not completely excuse them for their choice of profession. "Obviously, the poor woman was faced with very difficult circumstances, but probably she wasn't strong enough to handle them," or, "Circumstances must have driven her into this life, but probably she lacked the wisdom to deal with them in the right way."

Dr. Khouri says that instead of judging prostitutes, it would be a good idea to help them. "If given the proper help, a prostitute can change." However, he points out that the help a prostitute needs is not just psychological. Besides the emotional problems a prostitute may have, there are other external problems, mainly financial, which make it difficult for her to quit this profession. A

*"Prostitution is necessarily the result of a bad experience. It is not a simple choice of profession."*

*"If given the proper help, a prostitute can change. However, the help a prostitute needs is not just psychological."*

prostitute needs a skill or a craft through which she can support herself.

Does *Dar el-Amal*, the only center in Lebanon that is concerned with the rehabilitation of prostitutes, provide its beneficiaries with such skills?

"We teach the women how to read and write. Also, we teach them sewing and we pay them a little sum of money for every piece of

work they finish." This, of course, does not solve the financial problem, especially since *Dar el-Amal* fails to provide these poor women with any shelter to which they could return at night. The director sadly reports that the center opens from 8:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. After that, the girl often goes back to her customary life. Most of these young women have no home, and the pimps are always ready to provide them with a quick and easy solution. In fact, some of these pimps, who are of course aware of the influence they have over these women, even come to *Dar el-Amal* in order to take the young women with them, hence placing the woman in a severe dilemma! "We give the woman the moral support she needs to fight the temptation. However, I have to say that sometimes we fail to protect the beneficiary from going back to her degrading life, since we have no practical economic alternative to offer."

The lack of proper financial support, in addition to the fact that we live in a society that does not acknowledge the right or the ability of an individual to change, apparently makes the job of the social workers at *Dar el-Amal* very hard.

*"Sometimes we fail to protect the beneficiary from going back to her degrading life, since we have no practical economic alternative to offer."*

What can the solution be? Should we give in to the fact that there will always be prostitutes and thus accept legalizing the business of prostitution as the best solution, or should we fight this industry based on women's exploitation and humiliation? As a psychotherapist, Dr. Khouri cannot claim that he has a well-rounded solution to the problem. However, he thinks that try-

ing to stop the industry of prostitution is not realistic. "Many people strongly believe that the presence of prostitutes is important. Legalizing the industry, along with having centers like *Dar el-Amal* which help women who want to be helped is the most realistic solution."

But it is this very approach that many feminist groups concerned with the problem of prostitution are totally

against. In a remarkable speech given in the Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship Conference in Brighton, U.K. on November 10-15, Ms. Janice Raymond\* asserted that professionalizing prostitution does not dignify prostitutes, but rather, dignifies the sex industry and the pimps who want to become ordinary businessmen. "It is the exchange of money that transforms sexual harassment into a trade." Interestingly enough, though, the Beijing Platform for Action that emerged from the 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference, which is a strong document in its condemnation of violence against women, exempts prostitution *per se* from the category of human rights violations and instead condemns only "forced prostitution."

Why this mounting tendency in international policies and legislation towards omitting prostitution from the category of violence against women? Why this insistence on making prostitution a "free zone?" Why are these distinctions and others confusing and misleading, and what impact are they having on international policy and legislation? These are all questions that inevitably come to one's mind while thinking about the problem. Ms. Janice Raymond concluded her speech by saying that if prostitution is factored into national accounting systems, governments will be relieved of their responsibilities to give more economic opportunities to women.

Should the ultimate goal be the relief of the governments from their responsibilities towards their citizens, or the relief of the prostitutes from a life of continued humiliation and slavery that is usually imposed on them by circumstances? The answer to this question probably provides the key to any future solutions.

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*"Professionalizing prostitution does not dignify prostitutes, but rather, dignifies the sex industry and the pimps who want to become ordinary businessmen."*



# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

by Mary Bentley Abu-Saba, Ph.D.,  
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**“T**he women of our age in most countries of the same degree of development are outgrowing the artificial restrictions so long placed upon them, and following natural lines of human advance. They are specializing, because they are human. They are organizing, because they are human. They are seeking economic and political independence, because they are human...Women will never cease to be females, but they will cease to be weak and ignorant and defenseless. They are becoming wiser, stronger, better able to protect themselves, one another, and their children...”

— Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*Harper's Weekly*, May 25, 1912)

While contemplating women's human rights, three recent television stories came to my mind. One is set in Afghanistan. After the overthrow of the government, the new leaders demand that women cover their heads, including faces, and refrain from further employment outside the home. We see shapeless bodies shuffling across the streets, head scarves billowing in the wind. They seem to be ephemeral, shapeless, and anonymous images of humans.

Shift to the West Bank, where a coterie of women are taking sculpture classes. They are shaping forms of women's and men's bodies as part of an exercise leading to self-empowerment. Each woman in the class has a story to tell of being a “misfit” in her society, a distinct narrative of her own search for personal freedom. One woman was married at the age of 13, but didn't produce any children, so her husband divorced her when she was 15. She was left to languish at home with her parents, shamed and forsaken. “I knew that life could hold more for me than this. I needed to find myself, and find my own worth. I have found it in my artwork.” Massive bodies of women, with deep curvatures and strong arms rising to the heavens protrude from the screen. A clay woman and man embrace; the woman engulfing the man because her size is twice as large as his. “I wanted a sense of myself not being dominated by any man, yet communing with him,” explained the artist.

Another woman eloquently states that, “We fight not only the enemy who oppresses us outside our homes (Israel), but the enemy within. We work against anything or anyone which lim-

its our freedom as full human beings. We also work against our own self-oppression. By forming ourselves with our hands, we discover ourselves.”

Flash to the United States: As many as 30 women have brought charges against their “superiors” in the U.S. Army for rape, sexual harassment, and forced oral sex. The Army Chiefs seem shocked and disturbed. “We will get to the bottom of this! We will make sure that this does not happen again in the Army,” they declare. Three Army officers have already been jailed, their names undisclosed. The investigation proceeds. A young female Army soldier declares on screen that “This is only the tip of the iceberg. It happens so much because the male culture is one of subjugation of women; this is taken for granted. In order for a woman to succeed in her chosen career in the Army, she feels she has to fulfill the usual female role as sex object.”

These images of women, though differentiated across cultures, portray women's common struggles to obtain their rights to full freedom and equality. Throughout the world, the message is out, argued, praised and damned: human beings need to be treated with respect and dignity. And this means women, not just men.

The invisible walls separating people are collapsing all over the world, as surely as the Berlin wall crumbled in 1989. Our television sets first, and now the Internet, bring us immediate and daily communication with each other that previous generations could never even have dreamed of. In these pictures, we see how people are treated fairly, and we see how people are mistreated daily. The awareness snowballs, hastening the breakdown of our denial of how far we need to go before we can obtain full human rights for all, and yes, to obtain full human rights for ourselves as women.

Television images of women can inspire us, or they can horrify us. Stripped of clothing, except for some flimsy tatters, the bared female bodies in advertisements and rock videos seem lurid, violated and distasteful. Is this the freedom of our own bodies we seek? Indeed, it is no surprise that such vulgar images could send some women back into the private sanctity of their veil, and me, a Westerner living in Beirut, into long skirts. In fact, some authors have noted that the renewal of women's interest in veiling is closely related to recently attained patterns of female mobility among educated women whose foremothers would have been limited to house and



*Photo Credit: Delphine Garde*

neighborhood (Kandiyoti, 1995).

How thoroughly intuitive, and precisely on target, is the comment of the West Bank women that we empower ourselves when we know our own bodies. Our concept of self begins with an awareness of self-as-body. Thus, one of the psychological underpinnings of women's rights is that she should have control of her own body. That means to be knowledgeable about her own anatomy and how it functions, to have control over the life-giving processes of conception and birth, in essence, to own and respect her own body.

Because of the importance of the affirmation of the body, I was dismayed when I discovered cases of eating disorders among Lebanese high school and university women. At the root of bulimia and anorexia lies an overriding concern for the body as object, a fixation on how the body looks to others, rather than how it feels to oneself. Bring on the art therapy of the West Bank; it's needed here!

"What do women want?" wailed Freud in unknowing despair. After the hours he spent listening to women's stories, he still did not know. Nor could he know, since he did not believe that women are thoroughly human, desiring only their freedom to

pursue their development. Instead, in his mistaken notions about women's inferiority, he fantasized about their "penis envy," their striving for "vaginal orgasms." (We suspect deeply the existence of "womb envy" on the part of men who may speak of female "penis envy." We suspect ignorance of female anatomy in the denigration of the clitoris.) He turned women's claims of having been sexually abused as children into a fantasy theory of possessing their fathers, *i.e.*, the "Electra complex". No such truth! Had he instead been able to see women as humans, he would have known what we wanted: to love, to work, to play, unfettered by abuse, domination, or ownership. Such a human psychological need!

I was heartened by Fatima Mernissi's description of women's sexuality as being active and affirming, according to Muslim concepts expressed by the twelfth century Imam Ghazali. "By contrast with the passive, frigid Freudian female, the sexual demands of Imam Ghazali's female appear truly overwhelming, and the necessity for the male to satisfy them becomes a compelling social duty" (Mernissi, p. 39). At least we see here a more realistic assessment of the female as having her own internal sexual needs.

Though Freud had a negative effect on women's development

in the first half of this century, fortunately for women in the West, psychology neither began nor ended with him. (And fortunately for non-Westerners, they did not have to live with the restrictive yoke he placed on women's psyches.) Karen Horney broke away and saw women's reality with more clarity: women's need to fulfill their biological role, while also staying connected to others, while also developing their potentialities. And she was followed by so many other female psychologists who perceived women similarly: Frieda Fromm-Reichman, Melanie Klein, Carole Gilligan, Virginia Satir, and Jean Miller, to name only a few. All these women psychotherapists had a common theme: women want to be free to develop themselves throughout their lifetime.

Alfred Adler, far ahead of his time, perceived the inequality between the sexes, and broke away from Freud in disgust. He established as one of his principle goals of therapy that mentally healthy humans would embrace equality. Erik Erikson joined with Adler in eschewing the emphasis on the sexual dimension of humans in favor of their development as social beings. Do humans struggle with a raging libido? No way, says Adler. Humans struggle against inferiority, our childhood state of having so much to learn. We have an innate need to develop our competencies, to move from a position of inferiority to superiority. This is not a superiority over other people, but an empowerment of self from within (Ansbacher, 1956).

Thus, we discern the psychological principle underlying the demand for increased education of females. This has become a prime goal world-wide as we move into the twenty-first century. The spread of education for women has a snowballing effect on the pressure for more rights to public spaces, for gainful employment, and economic independence. This struggle will continue, since we cannot say that it has been fully achieved in any country of the world. In the U.S., women are acknowledging the reality of the "glass ceiling", that invisible obstacle to highest governmental and business positions. Although women's educational level is high, they still have not found the routes to the top decision-making positions of national power and influence. Only three women occupy seats in the U.S. Senate, the same number occupying seats in the Lebanese Parliament. Contemporary American culture has produced its own backlash against women's rights, as Susan Faludi (1991) has so aptly demonstrated.

Thank goodness for Elizabeth Davis, a child psychologist who urged Carl Rogers to pay attention first and foremost to the emotional content of his client's revelations. He was thereby able to conclude succinctly that human beings (yes, all of us, as well as all organisms) have an innate tendency to grow toward autonomy and actualization. Human beings' deepest motivations tend toward development, differentiation, and cooperative relationships; their life tends fundamentally to move from dependence to independence; their impulses tend

naturally to harmonize into a complex and changing pattern of self-regulation; and they tend to preserve the species and move it further in an evolutionary movement of continuous development (Kirschenbaum, 1989).

Herein is another psychological underpinning of the struggle for human rights, and therefore women's rights. Since the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, followed by conferences in Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing, there have been significant changes in thinking about individuals' rights. These changes keep moving in the direction of the ability of humans to actualize, to grow, and to become more autonomous, while also being connected to fellow humans. Out of this change of thinking has come the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This has become a key rallying point around which women's rights activists can operate throughout the world. That it places us all in "the same boat" can be seen in the fact that even in such developed countries as the U.S., activists have not been able to ratify this basic document.

Non-Westerners have good reason to look askance at the human rights development in the West, in which an individualistic conception of freedom leaves humans seemingly lonely and disconnected from each other. The movement toward a greater span of human rights needs the energy and thoughtfulness of people from all cultures. No single culture has proven to have found "The Way." The psychological principles for the demand for human rights can be found in all cultures, though expressed differently from place to place. These principles uphold: our rights to own our bodies, our need for education and development of the self, our need to contribute to the wider world through work, our right to freedom and safety in public and private, and our needs for contributing to the wider social order. A tough agenda, but pursue it we must.

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# Special Features

## LINDA MATAR:

### PRESIDENT OF THE LEAGUE OF LEBANESE WOMAN'S RIGHTS

By Ghena Ismail

Without any significant political, social or financial background, just a strong will and firm belief in her right and the right of other women to an active, dignified life, Linda Matar made her way to the Presidency of the League of Lebanese Woman's Rights in 1978 and the leadership of the Lebanese Women's Council in 1996. This was no small achievement for a woman who had to leave school and take evening classes at the age of twelve in order to help her parents financially. Although her formal education stopped after she received her baccalaureate degree, Matar asserts that her learning never ceased, since life itself was her real school. Ever since she was a young girl, Matar found herself confronting two big questions: 'Where is justice?' and 'Why is there discrimination between men and women?' These questions disturbed her, because they remained unanswered for quite a long time.

Married at the age of 17, Linda Matar's struggles in life continued. Her entry into the social domain began in the 1950s. She recalls that once during the parliamentary elections, she was standing on her balcony and saw a man in an epileptic state being taken in to cast his vote. She found it very ironic that an epileptic man's vote was accepted, but a woman's vote was not. After a while, when women's movements became active, two ladies from a woman's organization knocked on her door. She greeted them and took them around to meet the people in her neighborhood. Eventually, she founded a branch of this organization in her area. She started as an ordinary member in The League of Lebanese Woman's Rights, later becoming Secretary General, and finally, President. It is worth mentioning that The League of Lebanese Woman's Rights is one of the very few Lebanese women's organizations that address political issues directly.

In 1996, soon after being elected President of the Lebanese Women's Council, The League of Lebanese Woman's Rights asked Linda Matar to nominate herself for the Lebanese Parliamentary elections. At first she refused, since candidates were required to contribute 10 million Lebanese pounds (more than six thousand U.S. dollars), which neither the Union nor Linda Matar could afford. Eventually, however, she decided to nominate herself. "Women cannot keep asking for their political rights while refusing to take part in the political system, regardless of how they may view it." As soon as she announced that she wanted to nominate herself, the funding was secured.

Part of it was contributed in the name of the late Surayya Adra, the founder of the League of Lebanese Woman's Rights, who had asked her husband before she died to contribute whenever he could to women's issues. The rest of the funding was secured by other friends of the League. The considerable support Linda Matar received convinced her, and probably convinced other women as well, that it is not necessary for a woman to have a weighty social or political background to gain the public's trust. People's belief in a woman can arise from her own fighting spirit. Many people voted for Linda Matar without even knowing her. Of course, all women in the League of the Lebanese Woman's Rights registered in Beirut voted for Linda Matar, but not all of the women in the other committees supported her candidacy. According to Linda Matar, the reason why women in other committees did not vote for her is that not every committee believes in the necessity of women's participation in the political process. Many believe that a woman's responsibilities towards her family and children outweigh any other activities.

Obviously, women are incapable of unifying their various and often conflicting demands, which makes a woman's mission harder in the parliament, since there is no agreement on what she is expected to achieve. Linda Matar believes that the war has shaped the current realities. "War contributed to dividing people in general, and consequently, women. Today, every woman is subservient to her confessional sect. However, the Lebanese Women's Council remained united and was not divided as some people wanted it to be during the war. This is due to the efforts of Ms. Emily Fares Ibrahim, who was the head of the Council during the war. Despite all the threats and pressures she received to divide the union into two parts, one in the West of Beirut, and another in the East, Ms. Ibrahim strongly affirmed that she would rather halt the activity of the Council than divide it." So, differences among women do exist, especially concerning the Personal Status Code. However, Linda Matar asserts that even if a woman's sectarian membership prevents her from openly protesting a particular law, it does not necessarily mean that she will not support a legislative change, once it does occur.

Linda Matar's national scheme triggered so much debate since many people believed it did not focus specifically on women's rights. Among the twelve goals of her campaign platform, only one called for improving women's status. However, Linda Matar, who cannot perceive the woman outside the framework of her society, asserts that if a woman succeeds in becoming a

Member in the Parliament she should not focus her attention exclusively on women's rights. Whatever affects the country inevitably affects women, too. She also notes that if one carefully reads her campaign platform, one will notice that women's issues are implicit in every article. "I called for Lebanon's independence and unity in the first article. I also called for the release of the hostages and a just solution for the families of the kidnapped. No one is expecting the 18,000 hostages still missing to return, of course. However, problems related to their absence need to be resolved. The government should issue a law that pronounces these hostages dead. Otherwise, the social and economic status of many women and children will remain undefined. In Islam, although a woman is automatically considered divorced after the absence of her husband for more than five years, she does not inherit anything if her husband is not officially declared deceased." By tackling the issue of the disappeared, Linda Matar is trying to find a fair and humane solution for thousands of Lebanese women and their families. Her platform also emphasized the importance of good working conditions and a decent wage for all employees, which obviously includes women. Additionally, she stressed the right of every citizen to attend school and college, and noted the importance of respecting the rights of all teachers. "The woman is more involved than the man in this domain, since seventy-five percent of all teachers are women," Matar points out. She also stressed the necessity of providing every citizen with proper health services, shelter, and a healthy environment. Due to a lack of affordable housing, many young people are either unable to get married or are left with no choice but living with the husbands' families. She called for the elimination of discrimination among all citizens. "I believe that many men and women suffer injustices due to class differences." She also called for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in her campaign platform. "By carefully reading my platform, one will notice that women's issues are implicated in all of the issues presented. However, as a person who has spent most of her life engaged in social and political struggles, I cannot place any goal before that of a free and independent Lebanon."

Making women's issues a priority in one's election platform does not necessarily mean that these issues are more important than liberating Lebanon. Rather, it means that as an activist in the women's domain, this may be an area in which Linda Matar could perform best and thus benefit people the most. However, Linda Matar explains that the basic demand of the women's movement in Lebanon is eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and adding new laws to protect and advance women, which she has included in her national scheme. Linda Matar believes in giving women's issues special emphasis only when one is preparing for an exclusively women's event, such as the Beijing Conference. The specialization to which people refer is made once one is elected to the parliament through the formation of different committees."

Linda Matar is now planning to demand the formation of a parliamentary women's committee that will be partially represented by women from the non-governmental sphere. However, she stresses that being a member in a certain parliamentary committee does not obviate an MP's responsibility towards other issues. Undoubtedly, Linda Matar believes that a member is likely to represent the perspective from which he or she came, and to emphasize the demands of this particular group of people. However, this emphasis does not exempt Parliamentary members from addressing issues related to the country's welfare in general.

Although Linda Matar did not succeed in winning a seat in the Parliament, she did win the support of many people. She received 7,500 votes, when it was not expected for her to win more than 1,500 to 2,000 votes! This proved that a woman can make it on her own, without having a political family heritage. "Even if I do not nominate myself for the coming elections, I consider that, through my participation in the 1996 elections, I have opened the door for other qualified women to nominate themselves." As for Linda Matar's evaluation of the 1996 elections, she believes there should be one electoral district, or electoral areas represented proportionally, *i.e.*, a given number of people should vote for a certain number of candidates. "It is unfair that one candidate needs 120,000 votes to win, while another requires only 10,000 votes to be elected to Parliament. Until we change this, we cannot claim that we have truly democratic elections in Lebanon." Moreover, Linda Matar wishes that non-sectarian elections be conducted without any pre-determined quotas of candidates or seats based on the proportionality of Lebanon's different sects. Although she acknowledges that the Lebanese people are not ready to participate in non-sectarian elections right now she strongly believes that if we work from now on to change the public's mentality, there will be a greater possibility for conducting democratic elections in the future. According to Linda Matar, quotas are not the ideal solution, not only with respect to the sectarian problem, but also with respect to woman's issues.

"A quota system guided by certain rules may be a good idea. Women should be nominated by the sectors they represent. For instance, the Lebanese Women's Council should elect a number of women in the Council, the Lawyer's Syndicate should elect a number of women as well, and the same applies for every other union. Such a procedure minimizes the likelihood of forgery and political favoritism."

If Linda Matar nominated herself again in the future, she would definitely start preparing earlier. However, as for her national agenda, she would not change anything, since she considers it integrative. To those who thought that she neglected women's issues, she says that she did not. "Women's issues are an inseparable part of my work. "Through my long experience, I have learned that women's issues cannot be separated from social and national issues."

# A N ENCOUNTER OF ARAB WOMEN RESEARCHERS

by Dr. Nadia Cheikh  
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Between July 25th and 27th, 1996, *Al-Baahithaat*, the Association of Lebanese Women Researchers, held a meeting which was attended by a number of Arab women researchers from Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Palestine, Bahrain, Sudan and Lebanon. The first inter-Arab meeting of its kind, it enabled women researchers to get acquainted and to share their research experiences.

During the first session, the women introduced themselves. Coming, as they did, from different countries, age groups, and social backgrounds, and bringing with them a variety of experiences and expectations, their candid self-introductions and open-hearted comments were enriching and inspiring. This introductory session revealed some of the women's self-perceptions and the problems they face in speaking publicly about themselves. As one researcher noted, "The hardest thing for a woman to talk about is herself."

Each of the participants discussed the stages they went through in becoming women researchers, stressing the decision, the isolation, the multiplicity of interests, and the resistance of parents and others to their choice. One woman, who wanted to study politics, was forced by her parents to study English Literature instead. This was a real punishment for a woman whose chief goal was to become a politician! It is significant that most of the women confessed to having developed an interest in women-related research topics only after a passage of time. None began their research careers with the clear intention of studying women's issues. The women also discussed the complicated task of balancing research projects with their roles as mothers and wives. Many spoke of the all-pervasive sense of guilt they feel towards their children.

An interesting discussion arose later in the meeting concerning research on national issues from a feminist perspective, with the most memorable comments coming from the Palestinian participants. Palestinian women have had to face the dichotomy of being at one and the same time women with specific concerns, and political beings struggling for a national cause. Algerian and Moroccan participants raised the important issue of language. An Algerian researcher related that as the product of colonization, she studied Arabic as a foreign language. The language question is further complicated by the fact that women researchers in Algeria cannot publish articles under their own names, the ultimate symbol of silencing a woman's voice.

During the following two days, workshops addressed theoret-

ical and methodological issues of particular interest to women researchers. A number of participants expressed feelings of isolation, which increased whenever their research topic dealt with women's issues since such research tends to be marginalized in the Arab world. Some of the women also complained about the absence of coordination between women's research groups in the Arab world.

A key remark concerned the noticeable change of direction in women's selection of research topics. The trend has moved away from research on "women and work," "women and education," and "women and family" to a focus on more specialized topics and a re-writing of women's history from a feminist perspective. It was also noted that increased funding from various international agencies has presented more opportunities for research, although simultaneously limiting the focus to particular topics. A number of researchers asserted that an enhanced feminist awareness was needed if women were to avoid gender stereotyping on the level of research.

The result of this land-mark meeting was increased ties of friendship and collegiality between Arab women researchers. The meeting also resulted in some important decisions, foremostly:

- the creation of a communication network between women researchers.
- the creation of a directory of Arab women researchers.
- the establishment of a journal for young women researchers.
- calls for similar meetings on an annual basis.

At the close of the meeting, several participants exclaimed that it had been "a historical event;" "We have been dreaming of convening such a meeting for so many years!"; one woman stated. The meeting was indeed vital and enriching. It is to be hoped that the many connections and contacts that were made will generate further fruitful encounters in the near future.

#### For more information about *Al-Baahithaat*, contact:

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*Al-Baahithaat*  
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Beirut, Lebanon

*Al-Baahithaat* is currently forming a network of Arab women researchers. If you are an Arab woman researcher, living in the Arab world or the West, please send you c.v. and four or five publication references, along with your complete address, including e-mail, to the above address.

## *Sisters of Men*

by Dr. Shereen Khairallah,  
Beirut: Institute for  
Women's Studies  
in the Arab World, 1996  
280 pp.

Reviewed by Samira Khoury,  
Instructor, Civilization Sequence,  
American University of Beirut

Let me begin by asserting that this text is a most informative and enjoyable book, thoroughly researched and clearly presented. It constitutes a welcome reference in English on Arab Lebanese women. I personally feel greatly indebted and enlightened after reading this work. One of my key criteria for a good text is the questions it raises and the curiosity it ignites, rather than the ready-made answers it may provide. Khairallah's book certainly raises penetrating questions that challenge our assumptions about Lebanese women and Lebanese history.

The first thing that attracts one's attention is the title of this work: *The Sisters of Men*. The author explicates the title by indicating that it is a variation on an oft-heard "expression signifying an unusual woman, a woman as capable as any man, as brave, intelligent and courageous, in brief, a great compliment indeed." (p. 5). But, is it truly a compliment? To my mind, it is biased and disturbing, not because I am a vehement feminist, but rather, because of the implied status such an expression assigns to women in our society. The expression, "a sister of men" suggests that only an unusual, extraordinary woman could attain such a title. This implies that noble and commendable qualities are naturally the attributes of men, whereas poor, deficient women have to work twice as hard to join the vaunted "sisterhood" of men, if we may coin such a phrase.

A second observation is that Khairallah's decision to analyze the roles of women only after they have passed away lends a panegyric mood to the work. Eulogizing women may lead to a biased appraisal of their impact during life. The following three examples of eulogized women illustrate the problem of biased panegyric. The first of these "sisters of men" is `Alya' Fransis, who was renowned for her bravery, generosity, wisdom and good counsel. In addition to being an excellent traditional healer and an outspoken woman who took a stand on every issue of importance, Fransis was also an accomplished horse-woman who defeated a number of male equestrian heroes in competitions. For "the sake of her eyes," her native city, Marj'ayoun, was spared during a period of conflict, and because of this event, we enjoy to this day the beautiful proverb "*kurmal `ain, tikram Marj'ayoun.*" Yet, despite all of `Alya's extraordinary accomplishments, some men who witnessed her amazing performance of swordswomanship could not praise her directly, but instead exclaimed to her father "O Abu Mulhim! If such are your women, what must your men be like!?" (p. 133). This compliment takes away from `Alya's achievements and places the focus on men as the ultimate measure of all that is noble and valuable.

A second example is the following laudatory remark saluting Hind Nawfal, the first woman publisher in Syria: "she combined the grace of a woman with the strength of a man" (p. 177), and this remark was made by none other than the great intellectual of the Arab *nahda* (Renaissance), Jurji Zeidan! But the foregoing examples are drawn from the 19th century. How did women fare during the 20th century?

Salwa Nassar was praised in a 1963 newspaper article as follows: "She is an atomic physicist and equal to ten men," although her father was quite furious when she was born a girl" (p. 259). All these examples, regardless of the century which gave rise to them, illustrate that man is the norm or criterion against which women are measured. This is objectionable on the grounds that it ignores the intrinsic human value of each person, regardless of

gender.

Yet Khairallah's choice of title is justifiable because of her sub-title: "Lebanese Women in History". Is there a more appropriate title for women's condition at that point in Lebanese history?

Another concept I must question is that of feminism, as it is described on p. 22. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, I do not think that either the term or the concept of "feminism" had yet been introduced into the Arabic language or local cultural practice. Feminism has been a rather recent import. Consequently, I hesitate to agree with the author's reference to "liberated" women as "feminist leaders," or to label the call for women's emancipation or liberation as a "feminist movement."

The final observation I wish to make is that we see these women pioneers as products of experiences of exile and immigration. This factor might provide a plausible explanation for the secularism and tolerance which the author sensitively traces in the lives of each of the remarkable woman profiled in the book. When I speak of exile, I mean exile in both the literal and metaphorical senses of that term. Nearly all of these "sisters of men" traveled or immigrated during their lifetimes, most of them to Egypt, but a few to Europe and the Americas, too. Could we hypothesize that their travels, or the foreign, modern educations received by the few who remained at home in Lebanon, gave these women a wider, double, perspective which provided fertile intellectual ground for their secular attitudes and tolerance?

My second group of comments pertains to factual matters. In her introduction, Khairallah salutes the women who have given of themselves so selflessly — and still do — in social voluntary work. But, understandably enough, she did not include these women in her text. I found it puzzling, however, that no mention is made of pioneering artists, such as the dancers Badi'a Masabni and Nadia Jamal, or sculptors like Moazzaz Rawda, or actresses such as Feryal Karim. I also would have preferred to see the inclusion of some intellectual and cultural trend-setters, like Salwa As-Sa'id (the first Lebanese woman to serve on AUB's Board of Trustees and a dynamic member of the Ba'albeck Festival Committee). And where are all of the women lawyers? Sulayma Abi-Rashid is mentioned

as the first woman lawyer to stand before the Ba'abda courts (p. 176); but she is grouped with the journalists. Is it because she "failed" as a lawyer, and why? Was it due to poor legal skills on her part (doubtful) or, more likely, did she leave the law for journalism because of discrimination?

In a country famous for its inhabitants' entrepreneurial skills, it is surprising to see no mention of successful businesswomen. Khairallah states that any omissions are due to "the sin of ignorance" (p. 9), yet her exploratory research and deep digging in diverse and rich sources makes such a sin very unlikely. After all of her diligent searching, Khairallah must have come up with much more information than she used in the final version of the book, so the question is, what would explain the omission of some of the above-mentioned categories of women pioneers?

Khairallah concludes the book's Introduction with this query: "What price being a woman?" (p. 25), and in the Epilogue she provides some penetrating answers to this question of the costs we pay for being normal, not remarkable, "sisters of men." Is there any reason to hope that the 21st century will usher in an age in which Lebanese men take pride in their sisters, daughters, wives, friends and colleagues for their own sakes, because of what we are, as did the men of the al-Hawaytat Bedouin tribe, who referred to themselves as the brother of such-and-such a woman with pride and dignity (1)?

Until such an era dawns, women and men must strive to transcend all the barriers — not only gender limitations — to go beyond the "misery of being a woman" to the joy, blessings and challenge of being a human being. When that day comes, our author, Shereen Khairallah, will certainly feel that her efforts in producing this unique and revealing book have been amply rewarded. Both the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World and the author herself have given us a true gift which illuminates our understanding of the accomplishments and adventures of these first "sisters." The rest is up to us!

#### Footnotes

(1) From an unpublished research article by Aseel Sawalha, a Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Anthropology.



## *Men, Women and God(s):*

*Nawal El Saadawi and  
Arab Feminist Poetics*

by Fedwa Malti-Douglas

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995  
273 pages.

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Malti-Douglas's in-depth analysis of the work, life and criticism inspired by a leading Arab feminist, often called "the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world," is must reading for anyone wishing to learn more about an Arab pioneer of the women's movement, who is also an accomplished novelist, playwright, physician, and a beautiful human being. Malti-Douglas's new study greatly contributes to our understanding of the complex work of this stimulating and controversial woman writer.

Malti-Douglas addresses El-Saadawi's polemical nature. Why does she elicit so much love and hatred? Why does so much misunderstanding surround her work? Is it due to fear, ignorance, or something else? Malti-Douglas notes that El-Saadawi's critics have often read her work only in bits and pieces, choosing to be picky about certain details while ignoring the totality. Consequently, these critics are unable to appreciate her literary and intellectual complexity. Malti-Douglas also notices how very little has been written on this seminal literary figure, in spite of the fact that El-Saadawi has given us some of the most explosive feminist narratives of the second half of this century, boldly addressing sexual violence, female genital mutilation, stereotypes which harm women in

the Arab world, theological questions, and other politically charged themes.

Malti-Douglas focuses on El-Saadawi's pivotal concern with patriarchy in the social, religious, and political spheres as they are related to gender issues, tracing the links between these scholarly concerns and her political activism. This aspect of El-Saadawi's work has received attention in the past, but what makes Malti-Douglas' analysis unique is her interpretation of these interactions as well as her sensitive and successful depiction and revelation of El-Saadawi's linguistic games, literary allusions, and erudite religio-legal intertextual references. I had already admired this facet of El-Saadawi's writing in her preface to her most recently translated novel, *The Innocence of the Devil*, but I would have found this dimension rather hermetic were it not for Malti-Douglas excellent presentation and interpretation of a text I had failed to see as based on close readings of the Islamic tradition. This book, *Men, Women and God(s)*, goes many steps further in showing us the connections between El-Saadawi's work and her Arabo-Islamic heritage. It is an eye-opener.

Malti-Douglas raises important questions which have universal ramifications. She discusses the debate between art and political engagement, observing that, contrary to what many critics have claimed, El-Saadawi handles both successfully. The question of medicine and its impact on society and the body is analyzed through *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. The physician and the prostitute, a pairing divided by class but united by gender, constitute the theme of *Woman at Point Zero*, El-Saadawi's most widely read and carefully studied novel. In another novel, *The Circling Song*, the problematic pair of brother and sister is united by class but divided by gender.

Among the most interesting chapters of the book is Malti-Douglas's analysis of *The Fall of*

the Imam, or the "rewriting of patriarchy." She demonstrates how El-Saadawi challenges all three monotheistic patriarchal traditions and superbly plays intertextual games with the literary and religious heritage. Her analysis of the references to all three Abrahamic religions is well rendered and forceful. The chapter entitled "Between Heaven and Hell," which examines *The Innocence of the Devil*, is a continuation and expansion of her preface to that book, already mentioned above. Here, Malti-Douglas argues that, even more than *The Fall of the Imam*, the religious text dominates, restructuring the political and social spheres. El-Saadawi's ability to tackle religion with great skill was facilitated, according to Malti-Douglas, by the Islamist movement's implantation of its cultural agenda in the region, which El-Saadawi responds to with her own feminist interpretation. She shows how El-Saadawi's deep and wide readings of the Qur'an, the Hadith, as well as secondary religious sources have helped her achieve what she sees as "El-Saadawi's *tour de force* novelistic foray into theology" (p. 119).

But El-Saadawi does not only contest patriarchal traditions found in monotheism. As Malti-Douglas shows us in "Of Goddesses and Men," this contestation is also found in her play *Isis*, whose roots, like Egypt's, are planted in polytheism or paganism. Here patriarchy, religion, sexuality and violence redefine our perception of this ancient Egyptian goddess. Even though we think *Isis* might re-institute a matriarchal order, it is patriarchy that triumphs in the end, with murders and mutilations continuing. Unlike Andrée Chedid's similar theme in such works as *Nefertiti, ou le rêve d'Akhnaton*, where the relationship of this famous historical couple gives us an example of a love able to triumph over politics, El-Saadawi does not give us such a message, nor does Malti-Douglas underline it.

*Memoirs from the Women's Prison* is analyzed as El-Saadawi's rite of passage at the age of fifty. Her incarceration under Sadat generated quite a literary legacy: memoirs and a play. Malti-Douglas shows us how those memoirs extend beyond the prison and are embedded in multiple layers of events, how killers and prostitutes are

made to travel in the same literary universe as political activists and veiled Muslim women, how religion and secular politics inhabit the same textual world. Finally, in her analysis of *My Travels around the World*, Malti-Douglas illustrates that El-Saadawi's text constitutes an act of transgression.

Loaded with an incredible amount of references and complementary readings, and evidencing in-depth knowledge of the various feminist, religious and political debates, Malti-Douglas's work on this important literary and political figure is an impressive scholarly work which rehabilitates El-Saadawi and gives her the honor and sensitive understanding which have long been her due.

*Al-Raida* welcomes reviews of books on any and all topics related to women in the contemporary Arab World.

Book reviews should not exceed six double-spaced typed pages. Please submit a hard copy and a diskette.

Our office receives many books for review purposes. If you are interested in reading and reviewing one of these books, please visit our office, IWSAW, in Shannon Hall on the Beirut Campus of the Lebanese American University during working hours (Monday - Friday, 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.).