



Combatting Crimes of Honor

■ Rana Hussein

Journalist, *Jordan Times*

In January 1999 a Jordanian pharmacist approached me following a series of documentaries on so-called honor crimes in Jordan that were broadcasted on the American networks ABC and CNN. Because of my participation in those documentaries and the Reebok Human Rights Award that I won, the issue of so-called honor crimes in Jordan was becoming a hot and public debate.

He commended me for all my efforts to bring the issue to the surface and proposed that we start a grassroots movement in Jordan not only to have this issue widely publicized in the foreign media but also to fight these brutal murders and bring them to an end.

The reasons behind his decision, as he stated them, were my expertise and the comprehensive knowledge of this issue that I gained working on it for over six years (back then). I welcomed the idea, since my main concerns were first to see an end to so-called honor crimes in Jordan and second the abolishment of all the laws that discriminate against women, especially laws used by court tribunals to offer leniency for murderers in such crimes.

We decided to email our respective friends and any potential volunteers. Many people expressed interest and

over 20 people showed up for the first meeting.

Brain storming meetings were held on a weekly basis to come up with the best approach for raising public awareness, draw up strategies, and at the same time lobby the government to abolish laws that discriminate against women.

The number of people meeting regularly declined to 11 within a two-month period. A few months after our initial meeting, we decided that our first step and one of the best means to raise public and politicians' awareness was to organize a nationwide petition signing campaign. Such a petition was to be presented to parliament upon collecting a large enough number of signatures.

Another step was to hold a series of activities, which included preparing pamphlets that included information and statistics about the size of the problem in Jordan and holding lectures in public and private arenas to raise people's awareness about the issue and to encourage them to sign our petition.

The group also voted against working under any organization's umbrella or establishing our own organization

because we feared that going into such a matter could divert us all from our real goal: fighting for the right of life for women.

In August 1999 we held our first press conference, appealing to the public to join in and support our campaign by signing a nationwide petition. We wanted each and every Jordanian to know that he/she bears a responsibility in fighting for this noble cause.

As such we highlighted the fact that the numbers of women killed in Jordan annually in so-called honor crimes ranged between 20 and 25 and stressed the need to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code. (Eleven women were reported killed in 1999 until the day we launched our campaign.) We also explained that Article 340 includes two clauses. The first stipulates: "He who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery (with a man) and kills, wounds, or injures one or both of them, is exempted from any penalty." The second states: "He who discovers his wife, or one of his female relatives with another in an adulterous situation, and kills, wounds or injures one or both of them, benefits from a reduction in penalty." The origins of Article 340 (copied from French Law by the Ottoman Turkish rulers, and incorporated in turn into our laws when the Kingdom was established) and its discriminatory inhumane aspects and implications were also stressed.

During the press conference we also pointed out a second article, 98, that was being used by the courts to enforce a lenient punishment against criminals ranging between three months and one year maximum depending on the circumstances of the case in question.

Article 98 stipulates: "He who commits a crime in a fit of fury caused by an unlawful or dangerous act on the part of the victim benefits from a reduction of penalty."

We finally announced that around 380 petitions had been distributed in the Kingdom and that group members and other supporters had managed to collect around 3000 signatures over the last two weeks before the official launch. We urged people to sign the petition to collect as large a number of signatures as possible to be submitted to His Majesty King Abdullah, Prime Minister Adur-Ra'uf S. Rawabdeh (then) and the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament to emphasize people's desire to abolish Article 340.

A month before the campaign was launched, a special

committee at the Ministry of Justice decided to cancel Article 340, and referred its recommendations to the Upper and Lower Houses for debate. At the same time, the committee decided to toughen the punishment against adulterers "to prevent people from committing adultery." His Majesty King Abdullah had instructed the government of Prime Minister Abdur-Ra'uf S. Rawabdeh in February of 1999 to amend any laws that "discriminate against women and inflict injustice on them."

During the same year, the King promised leaders of Jordan's women's movement that he would back their drive to amend all discriminatory legislation, by stating that he "would support women's cause... and concerning the discriminatory laws, you have my full support. We should do something to amend them." We used all kinds of means to collect as many signatures as possible. We used the internet, fax, free and paid ads in the newspapers and interviews on television and public radio to encourage Jordanians over the age of 19 to sign our petition.

Many people approached me personally asking for petition sheets to fill up in their own organizations or towns.

We also divided ourselves into groups, visiting deputies, officials and various governorates to lobby against discriminatory laws and urging people to sign our petition.

Moreover, we approached the foreign community in Jordan and explained that we are not seeking any financial support from anyone, but rather a moral one. Our aim was to draw attention to the real positive efforts and changes taking place in Jordan. Besides, we promised to provide them with more information later on in the future.

Many people were convinced about what we were doing and signed our petition. Others argued with us about the whole matter and refused to sign it. Some feared the idea of signing a petition since such activities have always been banned in Jordan and many of those who signed were prosecuted or questioned by the security forces. Others were against what we were doing, arguing that women who committed a "wrongful and immoral act" deserved to die and killers needed to be protected.

This was evident in remarks made by conservative deputies and Islamists who accused the government of succumbing to Western pressures that aimed at destroying the Jordanian cultural values, tradition and women.



Rana Husseini



As put by Lower House Deputy Mahmoud Kharabsheh who told me when I asked him about the proposed changes by the government: "Women adulterers cause a great threat to our society, because they are the main reason that such acts [of adultery] happen. If men do not find women with whom to commit adultery, then they will become good on their own."

On November 21, 1999, a sweeping majority of the Lower House deputies rejected the government's proposal to cancel Article 340, describing the move as "legalizing obscenity."

When the Upper House reviewed the Lower House's decision, it decided to uphold the government's amendments and returned it to the Lower House again. On January 26, 2000, and during a quick three-minute debate, the Lower House voted against the draft amendment again.

Despite this disappointing vote by the Lower House and strong criticism by many, the campaign continued strongly. By February 2000, we were able to collect over 15,000 signatures. With royal and governmental support, a public march was organized during that period and we presented the petition and the signatures to parliament.

A week following our march, the senate reviewed the draft for the second time and upheld its previous deci-

sion, forcing a joint session to vote on this draft law. But a joint session was never held. Many people said that we failed in convincing the Lower House to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code. But to me, I believe we succeeded in many other ways.

A few months following the heavy debate in the Kingdom, committee members headed to some popular neighborhoods in Amman to talk to people and see the level of awareness they have regarding this issue. We also wanted to collect more signatures for future activities.

To our delight and comfort, almost 95 percent of the people we spoke to had knowledge of the problem of so-called honor crimes in the Kingdom. Many were eager to sign our petition and the rejection was less than five percent.

Unfortunately, the committee's work weakened following the Palestinian Intifada and the war on Iraq. Despite this, it is my belief that the issue was exposed for good and it is no longer a taboo subject. People in Jordan are proud that one of the most brutal violations against women was heavily debated in public and that people had the will and ability to express their views by signing petitions, which was considered a rare privilege at that point in Jordanian history.

<http://www.jordanembassyus.org/Aug2499.htm>

Forthcoming: The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Arab

The National Jordanian Campaign to Eliminate the so called “Crimes of Honor”

We are a group of Jordanian citizens who have no personal, political, or racial interests, but are gathered with one unifying issue as free individuals, which is our right to a good and safe life, free from violence in a society that protects the rights of all, which abides by the rules of the Constitution which assures equality to all in front of the law in rights and duties.

Through the years, our country has witnessed abhorrent crimes that are refused by every clear-thinking and honest Jordanian. These crimes were committed in the name of honor, and those who have committed them received very soft sentences, which in turn have encouraged their belief and that of others that the crime they committed is socially acceptable.

Since the victims no longer have a voice to raise, and since we jealously guard the life and the safety of all Jordanian citizens (men and women) and the right of each Jordanian to live in peace and harmony based on the respect of human dignity, individual rights, justice, security, fair trial and defense and because these crimes contradicted Islamic Law (shari'a), the Constitution and the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), we express our support of the decision of the Minister of Justice Hamzeh Haddad and the government, who, in moving to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code, have acted according to the spirit of His Majesty King Abdullah's directives to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

Based on these principles, we decided to organize this campaign to practice our civil rights to demand that legislative, judicial and administrative authorities and the various national official sectors take all necessary measures and use all legal, democratic means at their disposal – judicial, legislative, educational and media – to eliminate this ugly phenomenon of the so called crimes of “honor.”

In the name of our sisters, daughters and mothers who do not have any voice, in the name of those who this minute unjustly suffer different forms of violence and injury to protect honor, with no one to protect them and guarantee their human rights, we raise our own voices.

We call for the immediate cancellation of Article 340 in its entirety, which gives reduction and exemptions to those who kill or injure in the name of honor.

We stress the need to implement the law so as not to waste any chance to punish killers and to show society that these crimes will not be tolerated. We stress the need to implement a fair and preventive punishment against anyone who commits crimes against women or a female in the name of honor.

We call on all the concerned citizens of this country to share our work to ensure that this initiative is a national effort which allows Jordanians to express their opinion and help the authorities to become aware of the public's directives in order for the authorities to take the appropriate and necessary decisions to protect the safety of dozens of innocent women who are victims of traditions and social norms that are outside the rule of Islam, the Jordanian Constitution and basic human rights.

We announce that we have prepared numbered petitions which contain five columns including the name, date, number of official document, phone number and signature. Jordanian citizens only, who are legally eligible to vote, will sign these petitions. Our aim is to collect thousands of signatures to emphasize the desire of a large percentage of voters to cancel Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code and to work intensively with all means available to abolish this inhuman practice.

We launch our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce some of the names of the first groups who lent great support to this national effort, which helped to strengthen our convictions of the necessity of this campaign.