

# Cross-Generation Sexual Abuse Within the Extended Family<sup>1</sup>

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There are many signs indicating the presence of sexual abuse within a family. Yet, many factors stand in the way of the diagnosis and the prevention of that abuse. Among these factors are: parents' psychological health, their sexual education, patriarchal authority, and authority of adults over children. Through the following example, namely Salam's case (a victim of sexual abuse that started when she was three years old and lasted until 14 years of age), we would like to highlight the family's role in the perpetuation of sexual abuse. In addition, we want to stress the extent to which sexual abuse affects the psychological health of the victim, as well as the necessity of a systematic therapeutic plan which includes individual, family and group therapeutic interventions to secure the rehabilitation of the victim and his/her family, ensures this phenomenon would not recur in the family and would not be transferred to the next generation.

## **Salam: A Sexually Abused Girl in a Family Where Sexual Abuse was Transferred Through Generations**

Social services took custody of Salam when she was 14 years old after she had complained to the counselor that her brother, Samer, had been raping her for three years. After the Welfare Ministry interfered, it also took custody of Salam's twin sister, Samia. At the same time, Samer,

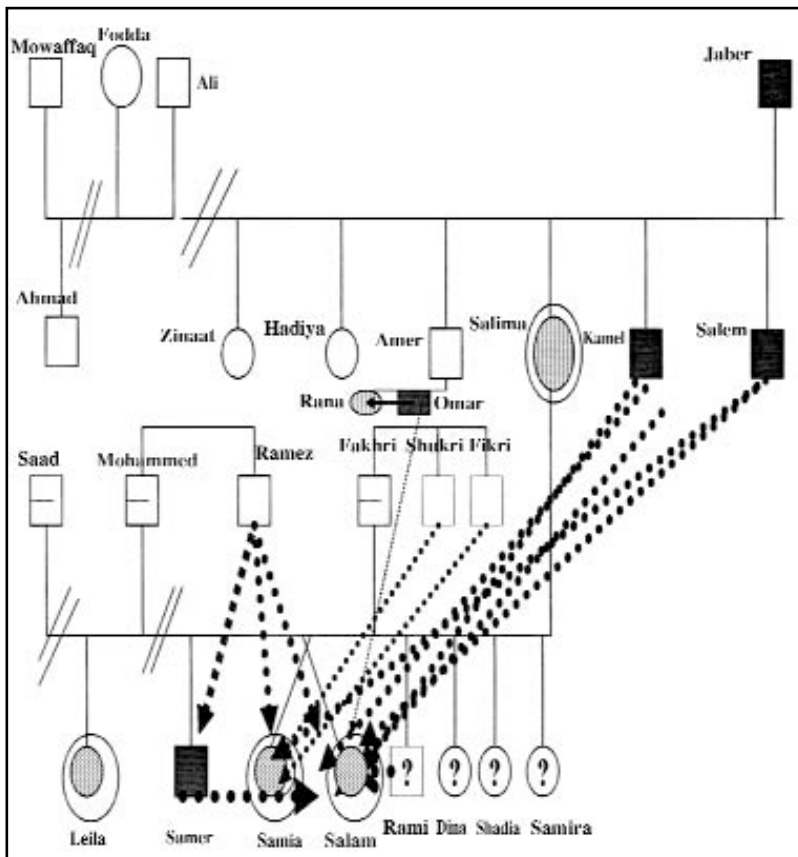
who was 17 then, was put in a rehabilitation center after the complaint was verified, and at 18, he was moved to prison.

Salam's psychological health was very poor, as she suffered from many psychological problems:

- a. Dissociation
- b. Low self-esteem
- c. Suicidal thoughts
- d. Self mutilation
- e. Flashbacks
- f. Nightmares

Salam's body was introverted, in the literal sense of the word: She walked with her head between her shoulders, her arms wrapped around the lower part of her abdomen, and her legs close to each other. Sometimes, she covered her body with baggy clothes, while at other times, she put on daring clothes revealing more of her body than what was socially accepted. At times, she was calm and introverted, while wild and hostile at others. She used to attend school regularly for a period of time, and then be absent for another. At times her language was childish, shallow and weak; at other times it was deep and mature.<sup>2</sup> At times she was psychologically healthy, while at





other times she was disturbed. She would look at herself and ask aloud: “Why did it happen to me?”

Salam used to miss her mother and long for her love, but at the same time, she was mad at her since she denied Salam’s claims in order to protect Samer from jail. Her mother punished her by neither visiting nor calling her. Salam, on the other hand, tried to call her mom from time to time, but her mother used to set a list of conditions and hung up the phone, shouting: “No daughter [of mine] lives in institutions away from home.”

The day when Salam contacted her mother used to be hectic. She used to prepare herself four to five hours before calling. She would raise her hopes by telling herself “This time mother will have missed me and will agree to talk to me. She is a mother after all. She surely wants to talk to me because she hasn’t for a while.” Then, she would remember all the times her mother scolded her... and hung up. When it was time to call, Salam’s mind would be torn between contradicting thoughts. When Salam would enter the phone room, she would rotate around herself as fast as a compass needle that cannot find where North is. With the remnants of strength left, she would dial the number to hear her mother’s voice,

and then her mood and attitudes would flow.

When her mother hung up the phone in Salam’s face, the latter would get outraged, and her rage would then turn into agitation. She would fight with everybody around her and would start cursing, using sexual swear-words that she never uttered when calm. At this time, her body language also became different. She either wore revealing clothes or summer clothes in the dead of winter in order to make herself ill (self-harm); or she would lie on the ground under the burning sun, indifferent to the harm she could cause herself. Salam also changed her attitude towards the staff at the organization: She would become insolent, wild, violent and stubborn with them. Some counselors misinterpreted her reaction and felt repulsion towards her conduct.

The mother’s reaction to what had happened within her family resulted from an unhealthy psychological and family environment. Not all her family members knew about the details presented although they all witnessed samples of the conduct explained here; yet, they never judged any of the following phenomena as a psycho-

logical or social illness inside their family. Everyone considered the apparent part of the phenomenon a temporary conduct. They did not know that such conduct infiltrates deeply and is transferred through generations. After meeting Salima, the mother, a few times, and treating Salam and Samia for many years, the following family history, reflected by the network of relations inside the extended family, unfolded:

In the first generation, Fodda divorced her first husband, Mowaffaq, and she was forced to leave her eldest son, Ahmed, in his father’s custody. Her daughter, Salima, does not know the reason for the divorce (or she prefers to convince herself that she does not know). Later, Fodda was married to Jaber, and she gave birth to three girls and three boys. When she was pregnant with her youngest son, Salem, her husband told her that he would divorce her once she gave birth to the child, accusing her of cheating on him. Fodda was divorced when Salem was 40 days old. Then, her sons and daughters were handed to the foster care of abbeys and nursery organizations. For an unknown reason, she forgot her daughter, Salima, in the street, and the latter was not entrusted to any institution. The father used to leave for work at 5 a.m. and come back at 5 p.m. while his daughter was dumped alone in

the streets. Her father was an alcoholic, and he used to peep at women. Once he divorced Fodda, he got married; however, his wife divorced him, accusing him of sexual perversion. Today, he is married to a woman with whom he quarrels a lot due to his suspicions about her conduct. Salima used to suffer from the fact that her father peeped at her while she changed her clothes, took a shower, sat with her girl friends, or even when she slept. At 16, Salima got married to Saad without understanding the real sense of marital commitment. She got pregnant soon after, and she gave birth to Leila in less than a year of marriage. Her husband asked her to work as a prostitute, but she never realized what he had asked her, as she was naïve and simple-minded. When her relatives knew of that, they divorced her from him. Her daughter was five days old then. The little child remained in the custody of her father's family, while Salima returned to her father. Two years later, Salima got married to Mohammed, a drug dealer, and she gave birth to a boy, Samer, and twin girls, Samia and Salam. She divorced him three years later as a result of poverty and went back to her country. When her children visited their father during the summer vacation, their uncle, Ramez, sexually harassed Samer (five years old) and the twins (three years). This went on for two months without any of the family members noticing the sexual violence perpetrated against the children. When the children returned home, Samer kept imitating what his uncle had done to him. His sister, Samia, was physically stronger, and she succeeded in pushing him away a few times, so he stopped trying. However, he continued harassing Salam, who surrendered and did not know how to defend herself.

One of the major impacts of sexual abuse on children is that it renders them involved in sex in a way that is inconvenient for their age or their physical, emotional and psychological maturity. Samer was his uncle's victim, and he became obsessively interested in sex. He watched sexual pornographic movies with his friends, teenage relatives, and he used to play sexual games with them. When he became 13 years old and his sister 11, he raped her in a relative's house, which had been under construction and was uninhabited then. Ever since that date and until his sister Samia complained to the social worker, he continued raping Salam on a daily basis, hitting, threatening and cursing her.

Everything happened in a house, where the mother and her husband, Fakhri, lived, as well as four other children. How come Salima did not pay attention to what was happening? How is that she did not know that Ramez, Mohammed's brother, was not the only one who sexually abused her children, but also her brothers-in-law, Shukri and Fikri, who were still pursuing Samia, and who used to chase Salam when she lived in the house? Even

Salima's brothers, Kamel and Salem, tried to convince Samia to have sex with them, knowing that each was engaged to be married. In addition, Rami, Salam's brother, tried to rape her with the help of his cousin, Omar. Furthermore, Omar and Rami raped cousin Rana, who is Omar's sister. How could this happen without the family noticing any suspicious act, conduct, or even any imbalanced psychological state of the harassed little girls?

Salima was raised in an environment where she never felt secure, whether regarding her body or her privacy. Her father used to peep at women, and everybody knew that. However, instead of dealing with this as a psychological illness of sexual background, his surroundings forgave him and described him as a man "with a soft eye". Often, men join each other in peeping at women and girls, and they encouraged one another, whether in private homes or public places such as coffee shops, markets or parties, where their conduct was never designated as sexual harassment; though in reality, it was.

Everybody, including social workers, knew that Jaber used to be suspicious of people, and this was the main reason why he divorced Fodda. People then learned from his wife, whom he married after Fodda and then divorced, that he was a pervert. This was never verified, and we do not know how his sons and daughters, who came from the different institutions to visit him on their vacations, suffered from their father's perversion. What we know is that Kamel and Salem did not mind sexually chasing their nieces. We do not know, however, what they did to their other nieces and perhaps nephews. Yet, we do know that the grandchildren, Omar, Samer and Rami sexually abused their sisters and cousins. Therefore, it is obvious that the environment of sexual abuse, adopted by the grandfather, infiltrated into the emotional ambiance of the family, and affected his sons and grandchildren's conduct. Moreover, the victim's conduct infiltrated from one generation to another into the general ambiance of the family. Fodda is the victim of at least one sexual experience. Salima is also a victim of her father's perversion and her husband's exploitation, who forced her to work in prostitution. Another victim is Salima's daughter, Leila, who got married and then divorced, and who went on to work as a prostitute in a major city. Samer is a victim of his uncle, while Samia and Salam are victims of their first cousins. We could not gather the necessary information about Dina, Shadia and Samira since Salima feared the intervention of the Welfare Ministry.

Nobody interpreted what had happened to Fodda, Salima's mother. If her husband cheated on her, Salima should have learned the meaning of a healthy commitment. And if the mother were a victim, the daughter should have learned how to be safe from society. No one



ever talked to her about this issue that turned her life upside down.

Salima's children used to visit their father, Mohammed, during school holidays. Their visits were never supervised, although Salima knew some of the family members were drug users and dealers, and they used to host friends of similar conduct. The rupture of relations between the father, Mohammed, and his family, on one hand, and between Salima and her family on the other, made the children think that any mention of whatever happened would result in a fight between both families. Salima used to leave her children with their father's family without calling or visiting them, or even sending a social worker to check on their conditions there. Her emotional immaturity did not prepare her for the maternal role with all its responsibilities. Salima got married and decided to have children for sick childish reasons, so they were not based on maturity and readiness. Thus, she used to see comfort in her children's absence from home, a time when she never thought of her responsibilities towards them. This led the children to live a bad and dangerous experience with their uncle, without their father's or his family's knowledge. They got used to not sharing their pain with any adult or mature person.

There are many reactions which the parents did not understand and did not try to question about the change occurring in their children. For instance, Salam was happy and enthusiastic, and she turned into an introverted girl. She started wetting herself after being accustomed to using the toilet. She used to cry whenever her mother left her with her brother. At five years of age, she feared boys and men, and her mother used to mock her fear instead of trying to understand its reasons. She injured her body and she did not care about harming it ever since she turned 11 years old, and this conduct was a clear indicator of psychological instability. However, her mother only used to give her the following remark: "Are you stupid to hurt yourself?" This question was asked sarcastically and was humiliating rather than seeking an answer.

Salima was used to living in secrecy. Ever since she was born, she must have hidden some kinds of behavior from the outside world, but this lifestyle continued throughout her life. When Salima met her third husband, Ramez, she did not tell him that she had children from two previous husbands since the children had been living with foster families. This restores the history of the family Salima emanated from. After Ramez found out about her children, she hid all that was happening with them from him, as she genuinely thought that he should not "suffer" from her children's problems and should not "feel their presence". Thus, Salima's main concern was to hide the main reason for her three children's leaving the house. Keeping the

secret was what worried Salima the most in her life. This is considered one of the environmental and psychological bases characterizing families that witness sexual abuse.

The treatment of Salam's psychological state included many types of interventions, whether with her or with some of her family members. These interventions were all aimed at correcting the psychological health of the family so that they might understand the situation of sexual abuse, and in order to prevent its infiltration to the rest of the family members and the future generation. The therapeutic plan included the following interventions:

First: An individual therapy with Salam and one with her sister, Samia.

Second: Double therapeutic meetings for Salam and Samia, which continued until Samia left the institution.

Third: A group session in sexual education attended by Salam and Samia.

Fourth: An evening group session where Samia and Salam sat with girls with similar experiences.

Fifth: Individual meetings with the mother, Salima, aimed at comprehending her experience as a victim. These meetings took place in the institution and at Salima's house. It became evident that although she was an adult, she was psychologically immature, and this was proven by her conduct, where she appeared to be a girl in a critical situation. She had not had a family in the true sense since she was five years old. Later, she gave birth to children and was married three times, but she did not know how to bring up a family in the emotional and social sense of the word. Salima was behaving as a frustrated girl with her daughters and not as a mature mother. She was easily frustrated, and even tried to commit suicide three times. She took pride in these attempts in front of her kids, not aware that she might be a model they might imitate. She said: "I was so sad when I tried to commit suicide, so why should she imitate me? Did she live my life? Or is it that she was merely jealous of her mother?" She was suffering from a very difficult distortion of reality. She used to offend, using swear-words, the friendships between her daughters and young men of their age, but she did not see all the attempts of sexual abuse by her own two sons, nephew, brothers and brothers-in-law. Accepting and understanding Salima's experience was the key to making her feel safe and narrate the history of sexual abuse and neglect which were transferred from one generation to another in the same family. By the end of this step she became partially ready (due to her psychological state and her narrow-mindedness) to support the therapeutic plan. Salima's social worker used to accompany her in the sessions and support the therapeutic plan during their meetings in the town. Salima did not attend all the meetings regularly because she convinced herself that this was the way to tell everybody that she has a say and an opinion, and that not all sessions

should take place according to the physicians' schedules. Sixth: Family therapeutic meetings to treat the issue of sexual abuse inside the family. In addition to the mother, the meetings were attended by Salam, Samia and the social worker who was in charge of Salima's file. Seventh: Consultative meetings with Salima's social worker to set an intervention plan to be carried out by the social worker, concerning the family's psychological health.

The possibility of making the biological father take part was considered, but it turned out that he spent most of his time in jail, and that he was not a positive person, so that possibility was ruled out. The situation of the family's other relatives was also studied. A cousin of the mother was found. She had five children who have graduated from college and built successful families. The social worker promised to encourage the relation between this cousin and Samia to give her a chance to get to know a healthy family in the context of the large campaign of identification and simulation.

After Salam spent some time in the institution, the situation was still not safe for her to go back to her family, and another secure frame was found.

After finishing working with the family, it is important to point out the following issues:

1. Though Salima was married three times, she ignores everything related to sexual education, starting from the reasons for the menstrual cycle and finishing with the concept of the relation with the body. Due to her psychological state, her ignorance and illiteracy, she cannot be held responsible for this issue with her daughters or sons. In this regard, educational institutions, such as schools, and public places such as clubs have to contribute in educating Salima, her sons and her daughters to help in preventing the occurrence of sexual abuse.
2. Salima's psychological capacities are very limited. Despite her good intentions most of the time, she got quickly frustrated due to the diverse psychological problems of her children and her family. Meanwhile, she was deteriorating and losing her energy. That is why she could not keep pace with her two daughters' therapeutic development on one hand, nor could she support them when they needed her, on the other. It is important here to deal with Salima as a woman who spent her youth in a critical situation. She suffered from neglect in her childhood, and she was maltreated and subjected to violence in her youth. At many points of her therapy she would regress to a situation of a child who was mistreated, i.e. she was not able to play the role of a supportive mother.
3. The partial therapy of the girls does not solve the problem inside the family, since Samer, the brother, needed therapy and he never received it inside the rehabilitation

center or in jail. Rami, too, has never received therapy, knowing that both have sexually attacked Salam, and Samer had raped her for years. We do know that Samer was a victim himself, but we are still short of information about Rami; and we don't know whether he was a victim of his environment, his relatives or others. This can be clarified with the help of a specialized social worker or an officer from the Welfare Ministry. In addition, Salima said that her daughter, Leila, divorced a man who was from her father's hometown, and she gave up her son and moved to live with her mother for a while. However, she could not manage living with her mother because, actually, she never lived with her. Progressively, she estranged herself from her, and she turned into a prostitute living in a major city. Leila was 19 years old when her sexual conduct began to fall apart: She was a girl living a critical situation, just like her mother when she was her age. Indeed, she needs therapy and rehabilitation to get her out of these infected surroundings and to let her acquire the skill to self respect.

The family needs two parents who can fulfill the role of protecting and caring for all the family members, particularly the children – Dina, Shadia and Samira. Thus, educating the parents on their role is necessary to protect the kids from future maltreatment and to rehabilitate the family unit.

It is necessary to gather as much information about each family member as possible, particularly about the childhood of the biological parents or the foster parents and how they were brought up. When planning therapeutic intervention, roles should be distributed according to the urgent need for the service, since systematic therapeutic intervention does not mean that all professionals work with the same family at the same time and during the whole period of therapy. What we mean is building a therapeutic plan which guarantees the family's needs: Teaching as an educational material and a preventive means, individual therapy, group therapy, family therapy, and the support of both parents and spouses.

Translated by Nadine Houry

## END NOTES

1. This material was inspired from Dr. Khawla Abu Baker's book *Sexual Abuses in Arab Societies: Phenomenon and Therapy*, which is under print with the support of Ashalim Association, the Welfare Ministry and Beit al-Hanan Institution.
2. Salam used to write her thoughts in a notebook and bring it to therapy from time to time. It was easy to notice "two voices" or "two personalities" writing the thoughts, whether regarding the topic, the language, the style or the expression.