

Welcoming an Abusive Husband back from Jail

Rabiah ponders her choices and chooses to give him “one last chance”

■ Salpi Simitian

Communication Arts – Journalism student at LAU

In two months Rabiah’s husband will be out of prison. He will be returning home, and she hopes that he will keep his word – and that he has really changed, and will no longer abuse her. This is not the first time he has made that promise.

Rabiah, 22, met her husband when her mother was hospitalized with a nervous breakdown, and he too was visiting a relative. Soon she learned that he was raised by an abusive father, and Rabiah sympathized with him. She assumed that coming from similar backgrounds he would be as determined as she was to start a better life. They were soon married. Rabiah dreamed of home sweet home, and of living happily ever after. Only it wasn’t going to be, and soon enough she was reliving her childhood, but this time the abuse came from her husband, instead of her father.

At The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECRVAW) Rabiah nervously wrung her cold and damp hands, and hesitantly and in almost a whisper, confided: “My husband b...beats me, you know.” Her father used to beat her mother. The beatings eventually led to the mother’s nervous breakdown and finally to her suicide. One day, as Rabiah and her siblings looked on, their mother walked out to the balcony and jumped into the

street and to her death. That image is stuck in Rabiah’s memory.

Today, Rabiah is not comfortable discussing her painful childhood and what she sees as her “current shame” with a stranger, particularly with a journalist. She is quick to want to divert the conversation to the fewer, happier moments in her life. Pressed, asked about her memory of the beatings, and the thoughts that rushed into her mind while curled up in a corner, her large black eyes go blank and her face cold and expressionless.

“To revive the details of a painful memory, to have to relive it, and describe feelings in words is extremely difficult,” said Ms. Romy Nassif, Rabiah’s psychotherapist, who declined to discuss her client’s case due to patient confidentiality. She added that women in similar situations will go through different phases; at times they might remember and want to discuss, but at other times they shut out the painful memory. “It is easier for them to think of the happier moments to be able to go on.”

A couple of years ago, Rabiah’s 28-year-old husband served a one-year sentence, and after getting out for a few months, he was soon back in jail for stealing a car. In

two months, once he serves his year-long sentence, he will be coming home to Rabiaa and their two children; a five-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter.

Rabiaa believes that her husband physically and verbally abused her under the effect of alcohol and drugs. "I love him and pity him. He's everything to me... Deep down he's a nice person, he writes poetry, likes art and music." Rabiaa believes that when treated for alcoholism and abuse, her husband will change. "I want to give him one last chance," she says. She wants to look at his return home positively, unclear as to the alternatives. The children's father was finally returning home to his young wife and family. The alternative, after all, seemed to be a divorce that would separate a mother from her children, and the likelihood that the woman would be blamed. And then she would need to make a living, find a job and support herself and most likely the children. Caught between hope and reality, she preferred to hang on to hope.

The prospects that her husband had actually changed seem doubtful. "He refused treatment in jail by Oum el Nour*, he gets alcohol and drugs smuggled in, and although he promises to recover when he's out. I highly doubt it," says Ms. Raghida Jhamlouch, one of the social workers at LECRVAW where Rabiaa goes for help. Still Rabiaa wants to give him one last chance. "Women still living with their husbands, deny or more precisely accept their situation to be able to live with this person," said Ms. Nassif.

Ms. Jhamlouch explains the emotional cycle that abused women go through. It starts with hope and bliss between the couple, then as the misunderstandings and anger accumulate, there is a period of violence, when the violent husband feels guilty and the woman loses trust, he apologizes and she has hope again. "Sometimes women go through this cycle for twenty years," said Ms. Jhamlouch. "Rabiaa has to make a decision before she's caught in the cycle and it's too late."

"I would tell all women in similar situations that the law protects them," said Ms. Nassif, "once they overcome feelings of guilt, women seek help. And there are professionals who will help them confidentially." In theory, the law may protect abused women, but in practice, matters are different.

"The law needs to be implemented to protect the women," says Ms. Amira Abu Mrad, Law professor at the Lebanese University, who is also lobbying in the parliament and with the council of ministers to secularize personal status laws. According to Ms. Abu Mrad there are various reasons for the lack of implementation; some women actually don't know they have rights, others who

have complained to the police are sent back home because the police don't want to interfere with personal and familial issues; at times when the police have interfered, the women have faced more severe violence from the husband. In worse cases, a woman is blamed by her family and immediate society for the violence she has to bear. "Ironically, women in abusive relationships raise their children to accept abuse and succumb to the situation," adds Ms. Abu Mrad.

"Psychiatrists follow theories. Realistically speaking a woman (in a similar situation) feels humiliated by society," says Ms. Abu Mrad, hence, she prefers to tolerate the torment and anguish for the sake of her children so that her family won't blame her and society won't disgrace her.

"Clause seven of the Lebanese Constitution states that all Lebanese are equal under the law," says Ms. Abu Mrad, but when it comes to personal issues, every Lebanese citizen has to resort to a religious court which contradicts the core idea of clause seven. This implies that rather than belonging to the nation, citizens belong to their religious sects. Ms. Abu Mrad advocates that women lawmakers take part in the process of secularizing personal status laws, such as civil marriage and a high quality public education be mandatory, and that women have the tools to be economically independent before marriage.

Rabiaa is one of the few who had the courage to report her case. While there are no official statistics, an average estimate of 65 new cases have sought the assistance of LECRVAW in the past six months.

"All I want is stability, just like anyone else. Not to be beaten or humiliated." This is Rabiaa's ultimate wish, but she believes that she should give her husband that one last chance. At least for the children's sake, especially her five-year-old son. "Every time I tell him how much I love him," says Rabiaa, he asks: "dad also loves me too, right?"

Rabiaa has scars from broken glass on her body. But her husband has been away long enough for her to be selective in her memory about him. She is determined to believe that maybe this time when he's out of jail, there will be a happy ending. It should not be long before Rabiaa finds out.

Endnotes

* An NGO that provides help for addiction recovery. The interview was given on the condition of anonymity; Rabiaa is not the abused wife's real name.