

The Unsung Heroines of Lebanon

By Ghena Ismail, Editorial Assistant

During the Lebanese conflict, while men were engaged in war's games and intrigues, the Lebanese woman was proving her abilities and skills in different spheres of life. She was constantly repairing all that the war had blindly and heartlessly damaged. She was determined to find hope in whatever scarce resources she had. Commitment, sacrifice and determination were the themes of the lives of those Lebanese women who were never defeated by the trying conditions of the war. The great experiences of these women were recognized long after the war had ended. They were presented to the public on different television stations through the Lebanese documentary series, *Lubnaaniyyaat* ("Lebanese Women").

In preparation for the Beijing Conference, the Lebanese National Committee decided to make a television program to promote awareness of the situation of women in Lebanon. Partial funding for the documentary was provided by the UNDP. Janane Mallat, in charge of producing local television programs for both LBC and C33, was consulted for suggestions. She proposed producing a documentary to highlight the lives of fourteen Lebanese women who are important, but not necessarily famous. Among those selected were Frocina, Marie Claire, Sana, Sahar, Nadia, Marlene, and Badriyyah.

Frocina is a manicurist who has had to work hard for forty years in order to support her late brother's family. Her work starts daily at 7:00 a.m. and ends at 7:00 p.m. She is now sixty years old, and has succeeded in educating her nieces and nephews in good schools and has provided them with most of their needs through her simple job. When asked about her perception of her own future Frocina immediately replied: "Just as I didn't abandon my nieces and nephews, they wouldn't abandon me." She then added, "Do you think they would?"

Marie Claire Antakly is head of the anesthetization section in *Hôtel Dieu* Hospital. She has been working in this hospital for nearly thirty years, and last year she was elected President of the Lebanese Committee for Anesthetization. Marie, who is known as Mimi, is the first and only woman to have reached such a high position in Lebanon. During the war, it never occurred to Mimi to leave Lebanon as she felt there was an increasing need for her skills. "I don't deny that I felt extremely worried about my children. I even used to send them abroad whenever things got very bad. At

a certain point, their father left with them. However, I never considered leaving with them myself." Apparently, Mimi's sense of duty was greater than any fears or worries.

Sana Taweel works on a committee associated with the Islamic Orphanage. The main aim of this committee is to help war widows support themselves. Widows are trained in sewing, and when each of them have mastered the skill, a lunch is arranged to collect the cost of a sewing machine for her.

Sahar is a 30-year-old woman who was afflicted by polio when she was 4 months old, as she wasn't vaccinated. Fifteen years later, during the war, her hand was injured and had to be amputated. However, Sahar's double physical defect did not stop her. Today, she works in the offices of the Lebanese Committee for Handicapped People. Moreover, she has learned to drive on her own. Sahar reports, "I learned to accept the things which I cannot perform because of my disability with a smile. However, I sadly reject the things which society obstructs me from accomplishing." Apparently, the list of forbidden acts for any girl seems to be endless in our society, so one can imagine the situation facing a disabled girl; probably it is twice as challenging.

Nadia Tawtal is in charge of the Social Reconstruction Center in Burj El-Barajneh. The aim of this center is securing primary needs for people, family planning, and fighting illiteracy among women. In 1975, the war started and people were kidnapped according to their identity cards. However, nothing changed with respect to Nadia, a Maronite, who kept going to Burj El-Barajneh, a Shiite area, every day. Nadia was blamed for her so-called "careless" attitude by most of the people and even by members of the Government itself, but this did not stop her. "Never have I felt that I was a stranger in Burj El-Barajneh. I always believed that when a person performs good deeds, he/she will never be harmed." It's worth mentioning that Nadia did not marry, and hence, many people consider that she has sacrificed her happiness and life for the sake of others. Nadia believes, though, that she has only been fulfilling her duties. She is happy with what she has done and she doesn't view her life as a futile sacrifice.

Marlene is in charge of a nursery. Her deafness and muteness did not stop her from doing what she most enjoys in life, which is taking care of children. She recalls, though, that one of the children's mothers was afraid of placing her

child at her nursery. "She was worried about how I would hear the baby if he cried. So, she started coming to the nursery daily to make sure that her baby was fine. When she saw the way I treated the children and talked to them, she was relieved."

Badriyya is a brave woman who volunteered to talk about her experience with the AIDS virus on television in order to make people aware of the circumstances surrounding this disease. Badriyya, who contracted the disease from her late husband, made it clear to people that AIDS cannot be transmitted except through sexual relationships, blood transfusion (if the blood is infected) and from the mother to her fetus. However, many people (like the owner of Badriyya's house) do not understand this fact. Badriyya sadly reports, "My landlord would not accept the rent. He simply wanted me out of the house." Badriyya adds that despite the financial help she is receiving, her life is still tough.

All of these dynamic Lebanese women are but a representative sample of a much larger group of women who fought their way through the endless hardships of war bravely and proudly. These women offered much to their immediate communities and hence to Lebanese society. They were never discouraged by the difficulties or obstacles imposed on them by life and history. Considering the sacrifices these willful women made, the hardships they overcame and the minimal support they received, can anyone not acknowledge their importance, and hence, can anyone not appreciate the significance of a sensitive and inspiring documentary like *Lubnaaniyyaat*?

Strangely enough, however, *Lubnaaniyyaat* did not succeed as it was expected to. According to Janane Mallat, Director of the documentary series, this was due to two reasons: The first concerns how the stories of these women were presented. One story was presented each day. "Perhaps, three or four stories should have been grouped and presented on the same day," Ms. Mallat observed. Secondly, the structure of our society, which is highly heterogeneous, means that media audiences are varied and hard to please. "It is not easy to move a society that is made up of people from different backgrounds, beliefs and environments," Ms. Mallat adds. "It is certainly not easy to move a society in which people's rights are not respected, and in which women's rights are considered to be 'second class'."

However, the documentary, according to Mrs. Mallat, retained its value for the following reasons: First, it was spiritually rewarding to the women participants. Someone like Frocina, who has rarely heard a word of thanks in her entire life, must have been greatly touched upon being stopped by admiring people on the street. Secondly, the tes-

timonies of the women can be used as catalysts for stimulating discussions and debates in workshops. *Lubnaaniyyaat* is important for yet two more reasons: First; it is a reminder to the Government of the state's obligations towards citizens like Frocina and Badriyya. Why should the future of a committed and generous person like Frocina be dependent upon the sympathy and circumstances of her nieces and nephews, and why should a woman like Badriyya, who contracted AIDS because of her husband's irresponsible sexual behavior, be left to face her terrible fate on her own without any help from the Government? (It is expected that by the year 2000, 7000 people will be suffering from AIDS in Lebanon, and the Government has not yet developed any effective, comprehensive strategy to help these people.)

Second, *Lubnaaniyyaat* is an important source of empowerment and hence human development. When the viewer meets defiant and willful women like Frocina, Sahar or Marlene who were never discouraged by their difficult physical or financial circumstances, he or she learns to become more appreciative of his or her individual powers. Do we need a better example than Marlene's to know how much a strong will can accomplish? Although lacking two important media for communication - hearing and speech - Marlene possessed a medium which was even more important: the medium of her heart. Hence, she was able to prove to society that a physical handicap is not a good criterion by which to evaluate someone. Moreover, when the viewer meets Sana, Nadia, and Mimi, he or she learns a different lesson, one about being committed to society. You will often find women who have struggled to protect their families; seldom will you find women or men who committed themselves to the welfare of the wider society, especially during the war when all values were being questioned and destroyed. However, the dedicated women portrayed in *Lubnaaniyyaat* definitely did take care of their society. Finally, by seeing a woman like Badriyya, one learns the value of sharing one's experiences with others, because then one will be giving people something concrete to consider. Isn't this what we need to empower ourselves, to examine our social concepts, themes and codes in light of our own tangible experiences?

Finally, we hope to see more programs like *Lubnaaniyyaat*. However, as I mentioned in the introduction, *Lubnaaniyyaat* was presented in preparation for the Beijing Conference following a request made by the National Committee's Director, Lebanese First Lady Mona Al-Hrawi. Hence, there was a political will to produce it. Had the force of that will not been exerted, we would not have had the chance to share with these women their great experiences. Would we?