

# 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."*