

# “WE HAVE NOTHING BUT SYMPATHY TO OFFER WOMEN WHO ARE BEING ABUSED”

*Al-Raida Editor Laurie King-Irani conducted this interview with Mrs. Tina Naccache, demographer and women's rights activist, who has been at the forefront of addressing domestic violence in Lebanon.*

**Laurie King-Irani:** You have been involved in and concerned with the problem of domestic violence in Lebanon for the past four years as a volunteer activist. Can you tell us how public attitudes and reactions to this human rights violation have changed during that time period?

**Tina Naccache:** Things have definitely changed! This subject has now come out of the closet and attitudes are gradually changing. People are much more willing to talk about domestic violence and to acknowledge that it does, indeed, exist in our society. But there is still a long way to go. I think that domestic violence has become a bigger issue in Lebanon since the Beijing Conference because violence against women, along with the feminization of poverty, were the two key issues of discussion, focus and debate at Beijing. In the last two years, in the course of my activist work, meetings, and discussions, I have been noticing a very interesting phenomenon: young, intelligent, professional women are very sensitive to the issue of domestic violence. I think that this phenomenon is worthy of serious sociological investigation. Why is it that young women of 25 or 26 years of age, usually unmarried and not yet mothers, are so responsive to this issue? What do they know? What have they seen that could have sensitized them to domestic violence and its pernicious repercussions on individuals and on society? Did they watch their mothers being beaten? Are their newly married girlfriends experiencing abuse?

**LKI:** What is your hypothesis?

**TN:** My hypothesis, which is based on studies done in the United States, is that when there is a discrepancy between the status of a woman in relation to her husband and her status in society, the tendency towards violence in the home increases. I think that our young Lebanese women today feel much more equal to men than did women in my age cohort 25 years ago.

**LKI:** Do you think this is due to the increasing numbers of young women who earn college degrees and go on to join the

work force?

**TN:** Perhaps. But I think it has to do with the different experiences of young boys and girls during the long years of the war. While the conflict was raging, young men were often out on the streets, sometimes in militia organizations, while young girls were confined to the home, where they did not have much to do but read, study, and watch television. The television programs that were so popular here during the war were American comedy and drama series which featured women characters who were very strong, capable, creative and independent. Shows like “L.A. Law” revealed that women were equal (or even superior!) to their male colleagues in many domains. Also, we saw a lot of Western movies and documentaries about social problems, such as child abuse, drugs, and women's issues, including domestic violence. These programs, too, had an impact on young Lebanese female viewers. Television has given our young women another image of what they could do or be, and since men were outside the home so much of the time, they were not affected by this new cultural influence. I have a hypothesis that the idea of gender equality was introduced to young women through this informal educational sector, but it does not seem to have reached too many young men.

So, it is not surprising to find in contemporary Lebanon a marked discrepancy between young men and women. Today, 50 percent of college students in Lebanon are women; in my day, it was only 15 percent. Young women who have gone to university are doing their best to get their own jobs and mold their own lives. When they look at young Lebanese men their age, they often find them lacking. I have heard so many educated young professional women say “we just cannot marry these men; we have nothing in common with them!”.

I think that current media interest in the topic of domestic violence is related to young women's fascination with the subject, because most of the young media professionals who want to do programs on domestic violence are women. As recently noted by the statistical study on the status of the Lebanese woman prepared by the Lebanese National Committee for the Beijing Conference, 82 percent of students pursuing university degrees in media and communication are women. Last March, I appeared on a call-in program on Tele-Liban, the State-owned television station, to discuss the issue of domestic violence. The program was organized, in large part, by a remarkable young woman of 25 who is very interested in the topic of domestic violence.

**LKI:** When you make public presentations about domestic violence in Lebanon, what is your overall aim?

**TN:** I try to sensitize people to the issue. For me, the discussion of domestic violence has nothing to do with feminist theory or ideology, although I am a feminist. It is an issue of basic human decency and justice. When a person is being treated unjustly, we just are not going to stand by silently and let it happen. I start from basic principles: humans just should not hurt and degrade other humans in this way. It is an abuse of trust and power; thus, it is wrong. I believe that if we make domestic violence into a shameful thing, it will diminish and eventually disappear. But if we don't talk about it, we cannot possibly make it shameful. If something is universally known to be shameful, no one will do it or tolerate it. For instance, it is considered shameful to walk around in public naked; it is simply unacceptable. And as you can see, everyone around us in this cafe is wearing clothes. People should have the same attitude about abusing women.

**LKI:** But domestic violence doesn't take place out in public; it almost always occurs behind closed doors, where no one can see it or stop it. Usually, few if any people outside the immediate family know it is going on. The children know, of course, but they are powerless and would never report on their parents. Maybe the neighbors know, and although they may gossip about it regularly, I doubt they would interfere between a husband and wife unless they were related to them. So, how do you propose we bring public attention to this problem and make it unacceptable?

**TN:** If it were unacceptable, then the woman would feel justified in talking about it publicly to her friends and relatives; she would go to her in-laws, her parents, her doctor, her lawyer, and say "he is doing something unacceptable, and neither I nor anyone else should put up with it!"

**LKI:** When you talk with battered women, what reasons do they give for not speaking out and taking action?

**TN:** They don't speak out because they know that it is useless to do so in this society. No one would help; therefore, what is the point of talking about it? And, unfortunately, they are right. As of today, we have nothing to offer to a woman who is being physically or psychologically mistreated, nothing but sympathy.

**LKI:** Are you saying that, even though there are legal principles and guidelines, they aren't being enforced because they do not carry the same weight as tradition, family and culture?

**TN:** The principles exist. That is true. But they are not enforced.

**LKI:** What happened to the plan some activists were formulating last year concerning the establishment of a women's hot-line and a domestic violence shelter?

**TN:** Both of these have yet to be realized, but I would like to add that I, personally, do not believe that a shelter would work here in Lebanon. This is a small and close-knit society. Everyone knows everyone else, and the location of such a shelter would soon be discovered, which would obviate its privacy and security. You would have to move the shelter constantly, and this would not be feasible. Also, if a woman went to a shelter, which is by nature a temporary arrangement, where would she go from there? To her parents? Back to a husband who would probably punish her for going to a shelter? We must remember that Lebanese women, unlike American and European women, don't have the option to live on their own. Also, Lebanese women hesitate to make such a dramatic gesture, since Lebanese Personal Status Laws always award custody of the children to the husband, no matter how abusive he may be.

**LKI:** How did you first become interested in the problem of domestic violence?

**TN:** A little over four years ago, I was attending the birthday party of a young girl, and I overheard one of the women there talking to her friend about her daughter's problems. The daughter was witnessing her mother being beaten regularly by her ex-husband, who would come over and barge into the young woman's home at will, even though they were divorced. Upon hearing this, I became outraged and concerned. I started asking my friends and colleagues — lawyers, political activists, doctors, professors — if there were any organizations in Lebanon offering assistance of any kind to battered women. And of course, I discovered that no services existed. So, I began to wonder if perhaps there simply was not enough domestic violence to warrant the creation of such services. After talking to some doctors and lawyers, however, I soon discovered that this was not so; there is indeed domestic violence in Lebanon.

**LKI:** So, after making these discoveries, you decided to become an activist?

**TN:** Yes, but I never thought that my involvement alone would halt domestic violence or that I would found an association. I only set myself to talk about it, to raise the issue and make people think. And now, it is being talked about openly — in seminars, in salons, in the press, on radio and television — so some progress has been made. The television call-in program I participated in last March proved an important point: It was a live program on a state-owned station, and so many people were calling in that the producers decided to do a second show the following week on the same topic.

I appeared on both programs. On the first program, my co-discussant was a Muslim woman university professor; the second time, it was a Muslim man, a forensic medical specialist. And on neither occasion was there even one phone call from any religious leaders, Muslim or Christian, denouncing our views, or telling us that it is forbidden to discuss such things. Hence, all the claims we were hearing previously, *i.e.*, that the domestic violence issue cannot be raised or pursued because it will anger the Muslims, were just a lot of bunk. If it was so wrong to discuss it publicly and critically, then a state-owned television station would never have permitted one, let alone two, programs on the topic! Not only that, but I also received a lot of verbal and written support from Muslim political and social leaders. We should really conduct a scientific study on this, because here we are, Christians and Muslims, living and working side by side for centuries, and so much of what we “know” about each other is based not on facts, but on stereotypes and prejudices! We assume that our respective religions forbid us from raising so many pressing issues. This is something we really must talk about; if we don’t, we will never move forward as a society.

**LKI:** Where do you see the domestic violence debate heading in Lebanon?

**TN:** Unfortunately, I am not very optimistic. Not much is being done at the grass-roots level. It seems that we are still at the stage of verbal formulations. We have no comprehensive studies on the subject, and all of the proposals that have been put forth by different organizations all emphasize the question of statistics. This shows a total misunderstanding — even an ignorance — of what statistics are and how they should be used. It shows, too, a lack of careful thought about this problem. If we are to change people’s behavior, we must first change their attitudes, not measure how many times “x” number of men hit “y” number of women in a given period of time.

**LKI:** But changing people’s cognitive, affective and behavioral processes is a very tall order. How do you suggest that we go about changing people’s attitudes?

**TN:** First (and here, I will show you what I mean by a correct use of statistics), we need to begin by studying people’s actual attitudes and experiences, rather than going on mere hearsay evidence about how Lebanese people view the phenomenon of domestic violence. Academics should be studying the attitudes of people methodologically and quantitatively. It is as simple as the principles underlying modern marketing techniques. Let’s say a company wants to introduce a new chocolate bar into the Lebanese market. The first thing they do is to commission researchers to find out which brands of chocolate are popular in Lebanon and why. Once they begin to understand people’s motivations, they know how to

go about altering them. This enables them to change people’s thinking, tastes, and ultimately, their purchasing behaviors. We are looking for the wrong kinds of statistics if we are trying to get an exact number of Lebanese women who have been beaten. Because of social pressures and cultural traditions, not many women are ready to come out and say they have been abused. But statistical information on attitudes, beliefs, and orientations — men’s as well as women’s — is not difficult to collect. Why do we need to know the exact, precise number of battered women anyway? To build a shelter? Instead, let’s start by getting the views and attitudes of students at all of the universities and colleges in Lebanon. This wouldn’t be very difficult, nor would it be expensive. Why should we wait until we have a huge sum of money to do a national survey ascertaining the extent of domestic violence? We don’t even have a regular census survey in Lebanon! Some have suggested that we simply collect statistics on domestic violence from social workers, but this implies that domestic violence exists only among those classes of people served by social workers, *i.e.*, the poor and disadvantaged, and from my experience, domestic violence can be found in all socio-economic classes!

One of the key reasons we are not moving forward in halting domestic violence is that the women who have been beaten are not coming forward and organizing to stop the abuse. If anyone wants to come forward, take up the issue, and make it theirs, they must be aware that such a commitment requires humility and dedication. These are both very difficult to maintain over time. Our culture encourages dedication, but it does not encourage humility. This, I think, is at the heart of the different ways of handling domestic violence in Lebanon and in the West. The people talking about domestic violence in Lebanon today, myself included, are not speaking from their guts; we haven’t personally experienced beating. In the United States and Europe, on the other hand, the first domestic violence support groups and shelters were founded by battered women themselves. It was not an issue brought out of the shadows by activists and academics, but rather, by the women who had actually suffered. In Lebanon, we know there are many women suffering, but they cannot come out and talk about it or share their stories with other battered women because there is simply no public forum that is open to them. The women who speak for other women in Lebanon are usually educated, elite women with titles, degrees and credentials. You always see rich, educated women talking about poor, unschooled women. Why? We don’t have a place where a regular working woman can go to speak with other women about her life in her own daily language. I wanted to try to be their voice, but I cannot. We, the educated women, can become their voice only if we are very humble, only if we are always conscious that we are talking about a serious issue that is a matter of life and death for many women and their children. We must never lecture to them. We have a duty to

do our research and listen carefully to these women.

**LKI:** But if these women are unable to save themselves from their situation, who has the duty to rescue them?

**TN:** Let me tell you about a woman who, three years ago, was slapped and shoved hard in the bathroom while she was pregnant. Then, last Spring, she was so badly beaten that the muscles of her back were torn, and on top of this, her husband had threatened her with a gun that he keeps in the house. When I was appearing on the television call-in program last March, she was watching the program, and so was he. The man apparently felt threatened that I would say his name on television, since I mentioned a little about the case, without giving any names, of course. The woman later reported to me that the husband was extremely angry and had threatened to kill not only her, but me, too, if she dared to open her mouth again about the abuse to which he was subjecting her. As soon as I heard this, I was very afraid for her safety. I contacted the head of the Lebanese Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights, Ras Beirut MP Beshara Merhej, and told him about the problem and the gun. I asked him if I could go to the police station and make a complaint or give them some warning. Merhej, though sympathetic, said, "be careful, Tina! The way the laws are written, *he* could sue *you* for slander!"

Ultimately, the crisis was defused, not through the intervention of the police, the courts, or social workers, but rather, through the wisdom of an older woman related to the family who exerted social and moral pressures to get this man to turn over the gun to her. So, in this case, we were fortunate: kinship and community networks proved more effective than the law in getting the gun out of his hands. However, the battered woman is still living under the same roof with this man and their children. I am worried, because he has not changed his attitudes and behaviors, and although he no longer has that gun, there are always knives. I am also afraid for the woman's reaction, of what she might do the next time in her own self-defense. After he tore her back muscles, she told me that, for the first time, she realized that he could actually incapacitate or kill her, and thus limit or destroy her abilities to care for the children properly. I believe that the next time he attacks her she will defend herself, and she may end up really hurting him, or even murdering him. If that were to happen, she would go directly to jail and possibly face the death penalty. There is no precedent in Lebanon for a court excusing a wife for murdering an abusive husband.

**LKI:** Don't you think that one of the obstacles to changing mentalities and practices here in Lebanon is that the group is more important than the individual? The needs of the family take precedence over the needs of the individual, whether man or woman, so how can we convince people to give more weight to the anguish of one individual and ignore the con-

cerns of the family group? The community is strong here, and that is very good in some respects, as we saw in the example you just gave of the older woman who took the gun away from the abusive husband, but the negative aspect is that the family will hide or dismiss the suffering of one individual member in order to protect the honor or the integrity of the group. How can we work within this cultural and social reality to address the issue of domestic violence?

**TN:** We cannot start by making the individual supreme in this society. This will not happen, neither today nor tomorrow. So let's start by working with what we have: the family network. Let's use what exists and what works; let's change the attitudes among family members and get them to realize that domestic violence is very dangerous because it hurts not only the individual woman, but also the group: it hurts the children. If the group is not interested in the wife, then what is the group interested in? The offspring! So, let them interfere in the interests of the children. Let us see how we can best do this in our socio-cultural context. If we were to sit down and consider this carefully, we would have to involve the family, religious leaders, lawyers, judges, the police, doctors, *etc.* I am not optimistic for the woman who is already married ten or twelve years and who has a few children; she cannot change her economic situation. We cannot offer her much, except a listening ear and an affirmation of her feelings, and the reassurance that what she is experiencing is wrong and unjust, and not her fault. But what we can do, what we must do, is reach those people who are not yet married — men and women. Let's teach these people about domestic violence. We worked on a small flier about the myth of domestic violence, showing that it affects all social classes and confessional faiths, and we distributed this in the context of informal workshops we held in various people's homes. It was very useful; it made people review their attitudes and beliefs critically in group discussions. But we still don't have the solution for domestic violence in Lebanon. I think we need to sit and think and discuss some more before we start acting. We need to have an indigenous approach that works for us; we can't simply import Western methods of treating domestic violence. I feel that Lebanese academics have an important role to play here, but as of today, I do not see them taking action. Anyone and everyone, regardless of their background and specialization, should come together and actively search for solutions to this dangerous and insidious abuse of women's human rights.

I am pessimistic, though, because the long years of the war have diminished the capability of the Lebanese to solve their problems in a methodological and rational manner. Logical argumentation is overshadowed by a clash of egos, as each person tries harder not to lose face than to actually address and solve the problem. So, we must honestly confront our own faults before we address the faults of our society.