

# REPORT

## HEALING VERSUS HYPOCRISY:

### *Rehabilitation of Prostitutes in Lebanon*

by Ghena Ismail, Assistant Editor

“Ever since I was a child, I felt I was a stranger in the family. Why, I don’t know. All I know is that I didn’t feel comfortable, and at the age of ten I found myself running away from the house. Unfortunately, though, my parents always managed to find me and bring me back home.” Suspecting that Nada might have slept with somebody, her parents took her to two doctors to check on her virginity. While the first said that Nada wasn’t a virgin, the second affirmed that she was. Apparently, Nada’s virginity mattered a lot to her family, especially to her father, who could not but check on his daughter’s virginity himself. “I told my mother and sisters about my father’s repetitive sexual behavior with me; however, they refused to believe me.” Nada adds, “They never cared about me, anyway.” Nada ran away again at the age of fifteen, but this time she was determined not to go back. She didn’t. Since then, Nada’s life has taken a different course. “It was a mixture of pleasure and misery. I did not work, because I was too lazy. I started sleeping with men, not only for the sake of the money, but also to satisfy my needs. Every woman has needs which ought to be fulfilled, after all.” Today, Nada repents her previous pattern of life, for which she holds her father chiefly responsible. “I gave sincere emotions to people, none of which were appreciated, however. One of the men I loved the most left me just four days after I bought him a car.”

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“I do not want my sister to become like me. I want her to continue her education and become someone of value in the society.” Hanadi’s face lit up as she said, “My sister is doing well in her studies.” Why don’t you want your sister to become like you, Hanadi? What’s wrong with your life? Her reply: “*Min eid la eid*,” i.e., “from one hand to another”. She continued, “Since my father died during my infancy, my mother remarried. My step-father

never allowed me to sleep at home unless I had money, and when I turned nine, he married me off to a very old married man. My husband was no better than my step father, however. Being harsh and abusive, he used to beat me mercilessly and he never cared about me. At the age of thirteen, I ran away from this marital home, only to be kidnapped by some dirty creature who wanted to have sex with me forcefully.” Hanadi explained that this man would not be satisfied by touching her breasts only; he insisted on having full sex with her which was not acceptable to Hanadi. Being fed-up with Hanadi, this dirty old man handed her on to a friend, who handed her in turn to another old man. “This old man was extremely sympathetic and kind, and he did not touch me. He took me to Burj Hammoud, bought me all the toys and clothes I wanted, rented for me a room in a chalet for five days and gave me money. He insisted on taking me back to my parents or husband, but I refused to go back, as I was extremely afraid of my husband. However, he managed to get my address from my girl-friend and took me back to my parents.”

Since then, Hanadi has been involved in prostitution.

Who is responsible for Nada and Hanadi’s lives of prostitution? Is this life necessarily harmful to a person’s self-esteem? Is there any hope for women like Nada and Hanadi to change and start anew? And is their repentance accepted in our society?

According to *Dar el-Amal*, (“House of Hope”), a social service agency, prostitutes are victims of family degeneration, emotional deprivation, and an unfair, exploitative society. Given a second chance, they can change. *Dar el-Amal* has been trying to extend a helping hand to these women since 1970. Prostitutes learn about *Dar el-Amal* from one of three sources: their colleagues who have come earlier to the center, the police, or the

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women's prison in Baabda. Welcoming the prostitutes, listening to their problems, accepting them, understanding their situation, and providing them with good company, *Dar el-Amal* gives prostitutes a second chance, or at least tries to do so. "When a young woman comes to us, we try to give her hope. We show her that we accept her and that we are willing to help her. Most importantly,

we try to give her back her lost sense of dignity."

*Dar el-Amal* tries to carry out its humanitarian mission through a limited team that consists of the director of the center and two social workers. "Unfortunately, we have a limited financial capacity. Besides, voluntary work is not possible nowadays, due to the difficult living conditions. The social workers try to do their best, though, in order to provide the beneficiaries with the help needed. They visit the neighborhoods and bars where prostitutes work in order to have a better understanding of their background." *Dar el-Amal* consults with a psychotherapist, who discusses with the social workers the problems of these young women and tries to guide them on how to help them.

In an attempt to form a clearer idea of the circumstances that may lead a woman to prostitution, we carried out a brief interview with Dr. Maurice Khouri, the psychotherapist consultant for *Dar el-Amal*.

Dr. Khouri states that a common factor among most prostitutes is having an early sexual experience in their lives. "Most prostitutes were either led into early marriages (9-13 years old) as part of a trade deal, or they were subject to sexual abuse by one of their family members. When subject to an exploitative sexual experience, the child feels something; yet he or she is incapable of translating its meaning. The meaning of the incident becomes clear only later. Having had such a disturbing experience without being able to tell someone or being able to understand what had happened leads the child to the "compulsive-repetitive" reaction. Unconsciously, he or she starts to search for this past experience which could have been pleasurable or even painful. The child feels compelled to put him or herself in situations similar to those in which the early incident took place in order to make sense of the

violation they experienced. As a result of this unconscious repetition of past experiences that involved something sexual, prostitution can develop."

Prostitution is necessarily the result of a bad experience. It is not a simple choice of profession, Dr. Khouri asserts. "No prostitute is proud or happy about what she does. Even if the prostitute claims that she has chosen this profession, and even if her background and family life appear to be normal, digging deep inside her life, you are bound to discover something which is improper."

Many people in our society think differently, though.

"Immorality runs in their blood, and trying to change them is hopeless." "They are lazy people who chose an easy way out for living," "They are dirty creatures, unworthy of respect," "I despise them, and have no sympathy whatsoever for them," "If they're in need of money, why don't they scrub the floor. Isn't it better for them than this cheap profession?" These were some of the reactions I got when asking people about how they viewed prostitutes. However, not all the reactions were so negative. Many people showed some awareness of the circumstances that might have led a woman into prostitution. A number of the young women enthusiastically said that they had no problem in socializing with prostitutes. "If it wasn't for my parents, I would have interacted with them," one of the young women said.

Although the majority of the people I spoke with seemed to sympathize with the prostitutes, most of them did not completely excuse them for their choice of profession. "Obviously, the poor woman was faced with very difficult circumstances, but probably she wasn't strong enough to handle them," or, "Circumstances must have driven her into this life, but probably she lacked the wisdom to deal with them in the right way."

Dr. Khouri says that instead of judging prostitutes, it would be a good idea to help them. "If given the proper help, a prostitute can change." However, he points out that the help a prostitute needs is not just psychological. Besides the emotional problems a prostitute may have, there are other external problems, mainly financial, which make it difficult for her to quit this profession. A

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prostitute needs a skill or a craft through which she can support herself.

Does *Dar el-Amal*, the only center in Lebanon that is concerned with the rehabilitation of prostitutes, provide its beneficiaries with such skills?

"We teach the women how to read and write. Also, we teach them sewing and we pay them a little sum of money for every piece of

work they finish." This, of course, does not solve the financial problem, especially since *Dar el-Amal* fails to provide these poor women with any shelter to which they could return at night. The director sadly reports that the center opens from 8:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. After that, the girl often goes back to her customary life. Most of these young women have no home, and the pimps are always ready to provide them with a quick and easy solution. In fact, some of these pimps, who are of course aware of the influence they have over these women, even come to *Dar el-Amal* in order to take the young women with them, hence placing the woman in a severe dilemma! "We give the woman the moral support she needs to fight the temptation. However, I have to say that sometimes we fail to protect the beneficiary from going back to her degrading life, since we have no practical economic alternative to offer."

The lack of proper financial support, in addition to the fact that we live in a society that does not acknowledge the right or the ability of an individual to change, apparently makes the job of the social workers at *Dar el-Amal* very hard.

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What can the solution be? Should we give in to the fact that there will always be prostitutes and thus accept legalizing the business of prostitution as the best solution, or should we fight this industry based on women's exploitation and humiliation? As a psychotherapist, Dr. Khouri cannot claim that he has a well-rounded solution to the problem. However, he thinks that try-

ing to stop the industry of prostitution is not realistic. "Many people strongly believe that the presence of prostitutes is important. Legalizing the industry, along with having centers like *Dar el-Amal* which help women who want to be helped is the most realistic solution."

But it is this very approach that many feminist groups concerned with the problem of prostitution are totally

against. In a remarkable speech given in the Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship Conference in Brighton, U.K. on November 10-15, Ms. Janice Raymond\* asserted that professionalizing prostitution does not dignify prostitutes, but rather, dignifies the sex industry and the pimps who want to become ordinary businessmen. "It is the exchange of money that transforms sexual harassment into a trade." Interestingly enough, though, the Beijing Platform for Action that emerged from the 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference, which is a strong document in its condemnation of violence against women, exempts prostitution *per se* from the category of human rights violations and instead condemns only "forced prostitution."

Why this mounting tendency in international policies and legislation towards omitting prostitution from the category of violence against women? Why this insistence on making prostitution a "free zone?" Why are these distinctions and others confusing and misleading, and what impact are they having on international policy and legislation? These are all questions that inevitably come to one's mind while thinking about the problem. Ms. Janice Raymond concluded her speech by saying that if prostitution is factored into national accounting systems, governments will be relieved of their responsibilities to give more economic opportunities to women.

Should the ultimate goal be the relief of the governments from their responsibilities towards their citizens, or the relief of the prostitutes from a life of continued humiliation and slavery that is usually imposed on them by circumstances? The answer to this question probably provides the key to any future solutions.

\* A Professor of Medical Ethics and Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

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