

Mirella Abdel Sater: Human Rights Lawyer

(Born in 1966, in Dora, Beirut; originally from Mazraat al-Shouf; currently living in Beirut; recorded at IWSAW. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)

I'm used to talking about a cause, or defending a case, but talking about myself is embarrassing. (laughs) It feels strange. I often use myself as a medium to communicate ideas to people. I like my life. I believe that my real life began when I started working on human rights issues. It was then I started knowing myself and people. Before that my life was an ordinary one.



I was very much affected by the war. During a war one experiences fear, hunger, and so on. I come from a middle class family, we are neither rich nor poor, but even if you had money during the war, you couldn't go out and buy things. There was no water, we couldn't take a shower, and so on. This was an experience that enables one to appreciate the value of life and feel contentment. When I went to Canada I met a lot of people who were depressed and unsatisfied. I

told them to imagine living with no electricity for a week, without taking a shower, or to be robbed of their freedom of expression, movement, dress, and so on, and imagine how depressing that would be. Maybe by nature I am a happy person. The war affected me tremendously, though I was too young to participate in it. My parents shielded us from the war. I went to school and then to university. I didn't do anything heroic, on the contrary I was terrified of the war and was the first to hide in the shelter when there was shelling. I have nothing more to say about the war except that, like all the Lebanese, it taught me a lot of things.

My life really began after I took my 'license' and started working. I worked in many different fields before I became a lawyer and started working on human rights issues. I worked in a bank and I was not very happy. I used to prefer making coffee to doing paper work. I left the bank to train as a lawyer because I knew that this would suit my personality - I like change and

interaction. I can't live without experiencing new events, I want something to make me soar or make me fall. So I left the bank and started my legal training. At the same time I gave private lessons and freelanced for 'La Revue du Liban' and for 'Magazine'. I did not want to be a full-timer with a magazine because my aim was to become a lawyer. I also taught French in a language center. After I finished my Law degree I knew that I wanted to practise law but in what? Now all my work is focused on human rights issues.

A very important event in my life was meeting two people who influenced my life tremendously, Laure Moghaizel and Tina Naccache. I learned from Laure how to be rigorous - she was very disciplined and serious. Many thought that she was strict with others, but in fact she treated people exactly the way she treated herself. She used to wake up at the same time everyday, go to work at the same time, she followed this pattern till the last day of her life. She never changed, faltered or complained even when she was ill - this is something I learned from her. She taught me discipline, and through her I learned how to be meticulous. She wanted every one around her to be meticulous, if they weren't they used to suffer. I met her during the last two years of her life and she was very, very, very good to me and I learned a lot from her. I believe that this was my good luck. I took on her qualities without feeling the age difference, my lack of experience, or a difference between us in intelligence. I am sure she never realized how much she influenced me, and how much I learned from her. What I managed to acquire was only a tiny part of the qualities she had and these qualities have benefited me a lot.

Laure used to amaze me - she would choose a topic that had nothing to do with human rights and then mold it and research it in a way to fit human rights purposes. Her whole way of thinking and analyzing was amazingly precise. I can't imagine anyone working with Laure and not being touched by her. I used to color my hair before meeting Laure, and whenever we used to sit to discuss work topics - well she never said anything or interfered, but I used to feel uncomfortable, because I knew I did not look my true self. I was worried about what Laure would think. So I re-dyed my hair using a color a bit darker than my natural hair color. After that I felt more natural. Laure wasn't beautiful, but to me she was. I aspired to be authentic like her. She was to me what she was to most Lebanese citizens, a role model. When I joined the Moghaizel law firm I was supposed to work with Dr Fadi Moghaizel [Laure's son], I never dreamt of working with Laure or with the law cases that she handled. My work was mostly to do with firms, and none of my cases had anything to do with human rights. Once, Laure needed someone to go somewhere, I can't remember where, and I immediately offered to go. I couldn't believe my luck - she was like a god to me, I couldn't believe that she was talking to me! Though, in fact, Laure was very modest and natural. I remember that I did what she asked thoroughly and completely and she was pleased. Bit by bit she started sending me places to finish legal papers for her, and I'd finish my work promptly so as to be able to work with her. Yet I never neglected my work

in the office. She often told me that she liked the way I worked, and once she told me that she liked how I presented myself when working on a case. According to her I always got promising results. So whenever she had work she used to send me. At a certain point I wasn't any longer working for the law firm but only worked with Laure on human rights cases.

Yet I should make it clear that my interest in human rights work was not triggered by Laure Moghaizel. Though she sacrificed her whole life for the sake of human rights, yet she didn't preach human rights day in day out. No, I met a person called Tina Naccache, who I believe embodies human rights. When she talks to someone she does it from a human rights perspective. If she wants to move this chair, get dressed in the morning, put on make-up, cut her hair, she thinks of it from a human rights perspective. Before I worked with Laure, while I was with the Moghaizel law firm, I had begun working with foreign domestic workers and their mistreatment, and was helping them in prison. I used to feel that my legal work was dry, I never enjoyed it. To me lawyers are supposed to lead a life of action, just like films where they take on challenging cases and defend the innocent! I accepted a case where a Filipino domestic worker was falsely accused, and I helped her out, and she was found innocent. After that I decided not to work with firms although it's more profitable, less time-consuming, and easier. I left the Moghaizel law firm because I wanted to deal with criminal cases, and with the penal system. I've worked a lot in commercial law and I still sometimes accept cases of that sort, but I wouldn't want to spend my life working on such cases. I'd rather accept criminal cases. Those two people, Laure and Tina, influenced my life very, very, very much. (laughs)

At the beginning you asked me about my religion and had it not been that this is a life story, I would have refused to answer. I hate, I really hate such questions because they remind me of the war. When one used to say I am Christian or Muslim during the war, 'Christian' and 'Muslim' had nothing to do with religion or faith, it was more like a classification. This categorizes people, and once that happens people become separated from each other. Not to mention that it makes certain people come closer and it repels others. Also, to be honest, religion is against women, there is no religion, no matter how much it claims that it gives rights to women - and I know that when you publish this a lot of people will feel offended -- yet I believe that, deep down, everybody, the Pope and the Imams included, will admit, if they are honest, that women are unjustly treated. Hopefully when they elect a female Pope (laughs), may be -- I believe in God, our existence has no meaning unless there is a God. We came here on a mission and I am sure there is a God, but I can't explain why. I am a very scientific person, and yet what I'm saying is not scientific at all. I feel it just like I feel love or friendship, I feel that God is here and when I need Him (or Her), I pray to God,

and since I was brought up as a Christian I pray as Christians do, 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' - this is the only way in which I can talk to God. I haven't invented my own prayers yet. (laughs) I can't say that I believe in any religion - I don't - they are too many, and there is the endless question which is the most legitimate. Last but not least, I do believe that religions look down on women and discriminate against them. I usually don't claim to be Christian, it's just written on my identity card.

Let's see what pushed me into defending women's rights. First, Lebanese society is very unfair towards women. It's not just our society, in fact all societies -- even those that claim that they are the most progressive -- treat women unjustly. Why should we only talk about the big problems - marriage, beating, infidelity, divorce, adultery? Small things are damaging too. Walking on a road men often verbally harass women, and I believe that this is psychological abuse. Maybe I'm overdoing it, but such an action affects me and bothers me. No matter what a woman is or does she is basically viewed as a female and any one can -- These small details are enough to make me want to defend women's rights.

*"I want
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I changed schools several times because of the war. We are three children, I have a sister and brother, as well as my mother and father. We are a calm family, my father is a teacher, he writes books, he is a historian. My mother studied business but she spent most of her time with her children, taking care of us. We are very ordinary people. We have some artistic talents, my sister sings opera although she studied advertising, and she has a really nice voice. She inherited this talent from my mother who also has a nice voice, though she never sang in public. My sister took courses in the Conservatoire de Paris and currently she lives in France. My brother has a degree in arts and works in an advertising agency. We do not have problems in my family, we are very calm people. My childhood was a very ordinary one, like every Lebanese girl's childhood. My parents were a bit strict, yet they made sure to give us all a proper education. They are not the type of parents who believe that a women's lot is to get married - of course they would love to see me get married, but they never drummed the idea of marriage into my head. On the contrary, they are proud that I'm successful in my work, and in what I do. Yet there were always limits to our outings, we had a 'curfew', we had to be home by a certain hour. I believe that my childhood was a very ordinary and peaceful one. My parents were very good to us, we never felt isolated from them, they didn't put pressure on us to work and earn our living - on the contrary. I still live with my parents, and they never make me worry. I'd like to be independent, and cover my own needs - without necessarily getting married - yet on the other hand living at home gives me a lot of advantages. It enables me to be free and help people. But I don't really like the term to 'help' people, because the more

one works in the field of human rights the more one feels she needs the people she is helping. It makes you feel you have worth, you are doing something good that gives others happiness. When there aren't people to help, you start to look for them. It's mistaken to say I'm sacrificing a lot to help others, I'm sacrificing my life for human rights. I disagree. The person working in human rights is far happier than the person in need of help. You reach a stage where you need these people more than they need you.

I changed schools several times when I was young, it didn't upset me because I love change. In spite of this, my friends have remained the same. I was a student at Champville, Sagesse-Ashrafieh, Sagesse al-Hadath, and Saint Coeur. I also changed universities, I was first enrolled in the Université Saint Joseph (USJ), and studied there for two years, then I continued my 'license' at La Sagesse university. After graduating in law, I did my legal training at Mr Marcel Ja'ara's office. I recall that the days when I was doing my training were very enjoyable. My professor was very capable and he taught me a lot, but at the same time he wasn't strict. The schedule wasn't strict, and the atmosphere was cheerful and yet serious. I was very happy while doing my training.

Since I started working on human rights issues I've changed a lot and people around me no longer understand me. I used to question this change and wonder why have I changed, and why people are unable to understand me anymore. Then you find people who resemble you in their way of thinking, and you start enjoying being with them. For instance, if I condemn a certain situation, those people understand, they have experienced problems and you share a way of thinking. Human rights work is a whole, Myriam, you can't go to work and then come back home and beat your maid. You can't put up with your husband mistreating you and at the same time attempt to help a woman whose husband is abusing her psychologically. Maybe most people are schizophrenic, I don't know, I can't any longer tolerate this duality of thinking something, working on something else, and leading a life that is not congruent with my thoughts.

Imagine, yesterday I was on the way to a dinner. In front of me there was a Rolls Royce, and I was about to go crazy because some people in Lebanon are hunting for food in garbage cans. I started thinking why doesn't this man sell his car? The following day I read in the newspaper that a German sold his Rolls Royce to help people in Sudan, he distributed the money to the starving in Sudan. People with me couldn't understand why I was so upset about the Rolls Royce issue. According to them I was exaggerating, I was upset because the money used to buy the car and pay for its driver - - it's a shame to have such a difference in the world. The others with me couldn't understand why I was so upset. Honestly this really torments me. Maybe the best thing to do is sit at home and refrain from communicating with anyone. (laughs)

"All my emotions are channeled towards human rights and women's rights"

You asked me about my emotional life, had you not asked I would have talked for two days without mentioning it. Of course, I am like everyone else, I have loved, I love and I will always love. I don't know what people will say (laughs), but this is not the important thing in my life. All my emotions are channeled towards human rights and women's rights. Everything revolves around them. Of course my parents (sighs) would like to see me married. But I, after I came back from Canada, the latest idea that appeals to me, I haven't told anyone about it, it will appear in *Al-Raida* first (laughs), I feel like going to Africa to investigate how people are living there. I can imagine spending the next ten years of my life in Africa. Some people might be sorry for me, "Poor thing, she is thirty two years old and soon she won't be able to get married, look what she's talking about!" If my mother finds out she'll go crazy. When I came back to Lebanon an aunt said, "Mirella, it's time for you to think of yourself" For her thinking of myself meant getting married, and she believed that sacrificing my life for human rights gives me nothing. But she is wrong, it's for me. I think that if I get married I won't be doing myself a favor, it will benefit my husband, children, and society. It would be the biggest sacrifice.

When I went to Canada, I met African women from Congo and Mali, and the best friend I had in the session was from Congo Kinshasa, Marie. I'd give anything to go to Congo and visit Marie. There was also a woman from Burundi who told me that there is an embargo there. I'd like to see how it is when a country is under embargo. I'd like to go and see the Tutsi and Hutu tribes in Rwanda. I discovered that there are countries different from Lebanon, Europe and the Arab countries. I've discovered Africa! Of course I've read about it, but I now feel like - - some people would pity me for sacrificing ten years of my life, throwing them away to go to a place which people run away from. That's my dream now.

You want me tell you about my emotional life? So if I am to tell you now, I know that I might change, only crazy people don't ever change their minds. If you ask me how I foresee my life, I imagine it to be in constant change, full of traveling and struggling for human rights. Struggle is a big and pretentious word - "*Ya latif*, an 'activist'!" But I can't imagine having a stable life, for to me stability is a 'default'. I mean getting married and having kids. Of course I'd love to have children, especially a daughter so that I could teach her my ideas. But I know this is egotistical. My only consolation for not having children is my belief that children should not be molded into what we want them to be. Children don't necessarily turn out the way one wants them. It's better not to have children. Why should I dream of having children, and then they maybe turn out to love accumulating money? So the concept of children, family,

and husband currently doesn't interest me. Of course I'd be kidding myself if I denied that I wouldn't want to have someone next to me, and we both love each other, and then of course we'd have children. Yet, this institution, marriage, at the moment it gives me goose pimples (laughs). Of course when I reach eighty I'll regret it, for in Africa there are no pensions, but this is how I'm thinking now.

Currently I'm in the stage where I want to change the world, but I'm starting to feel despair because the world is not going to change. I am bothered by the fact that I work, work, work, and the situation stays the same, or maybe it becomes worse. Maybe, with the work I'm doing, I'm contributing to the worsening of the world! Often I feel despair, and I say no, I'll go and work, accumulate money - but then I won't know what to do with the money. And then I go on and say no, no, this was just a phase, I want to go back and sacrifice. Then I say God, what has gotten into me, why should I torture myself and go and search for the most unfortunate woman in the worst prison in Lebanon? But then I realize that I was much happier when I was going to the prison to help her, and even if she made me laugh for five minutes I felt that I had achieved something. What about your life? (we laugh together)

I'm not a romantic person, not at all, but I love looking at the sea, and I love traveling. Every country I visit last I find to be the most beautiful. Now if you asked me, I'll tell you Canada is the nicest; before I used to think it was Greece. What else do I like? Although as a lawyer one has to talk a lot, I'd rather listen. I'll tell you about my 'defaults', like those singers who, when they are asked about their faults, claim that they are too kind-hearted (laughs). I'm a bit stubborn and inflexible. If someone tells me something is so, I'm usually not convinced. I register it in my mind and I continue working my way till I reach a point where it's clear whether I'm right or wrong. If I'm wrong I tell that person that he was right. I don't believe easily, maybe these people aren't correct, even if they are people who are very close to me. I have a problem with trust (laughs). For instance, recently I gave Tina a paper I had written, and asked her to correct it. She told me not to put 'domestic worker', but to change it to 'worker at home'. I said yes. But then I thought why? 'Domestic' means something to do with the house, it has a positive meaning not a negative one, so why? When I went to Canada I discovered that there's a trend nowadays not to use the word 'domestic' because it's considered insulting. Tina was right, and I had to change the whole report I was writing on domestic workers. When I gave the talk, I spent the whole time scanning the text to spot these words and change them. Yet up to now I'm still not very convinced that 'domestic' is wrong. See how

stubborn I am! (laughs).

Myriam: How has living in Lebanon been?

Mirella: Look, I belong to the school of thought that says Lebanon is the Lebanese and the Lebanese are Lebanon. I am Lebanon. I don't go around asking what has Lebanon given me? I'm part of this, even only to a small degree, destroying or spoiling something. I have some weird theories (laughs). I believe a little in reincarnation, maybe I was born in Lebanon because there is something I have to do here, or it's a punishment, or because I have a role to play. Sometimes I feel that my living in Lebanon oppressed me and it has oppressed every one born here - of course not as much as the oppression in Colombia. But I feel it's not a 'cadeau' to be born in Lebanon.

You know earlier on, before traveling, I was a bit confused. I didn't know where I stand, especially in Lebanon where we all have an identity crisis -- am I Christian, am I or am I not part of this Arab world? Or I am Muslim, and I believe in -- People in Lebanon will always have an identity crisis and I believe Christians experience it more. If I go to France, immediately they tell me that I am an Arab coming from an Arab country. With my features and my face I am the typical Arab woman (laughs). So will I tell them no, I'm from Ashrafieh? (laughs) When one gets in contact with others who are also different [from Europeans], you start liking yourself. For instance towards the end of my visit to Canada I met people from Pakistan and Africa. Mistakenly, they thought I was from Pakistan or from the Arab world. A nice feeling came over me, a feeling of belonging. The choice of Canadian food is limited, they don't have so many dishes. So you feel proud that we have hummus and tabouleh, and a big variety of mezzeh, and we have the main dishes and the sweets. You start thinking to yourself, we have had so many civilizations that passed through our land, and you become happy because we are an ancient race and we have our own civilization.

Now I am more proud after Zidane won the cup (laughs), I started boasting to people and telling them, "See what we Arabs are capable of!" The people that surrounded me, my friends, used to consider themselves Phoenicians. What do they mean, Phoenician? I don't understand. All my friends are Muslims and Shi'ites, and I'm scared of saying something inappropriate, a remnant of my previous environment. There is nothing wrong with feeling Arab, on the contrary it's a reason to be proud that he or she belongs to something. Maybe currently the wheel is not turning in our favor, but there will come a time when it will. Now it has started with Zidane! (laughs) In Canada everyone put out the Moroccan flag, and everyone thought that Morocco won the world cup, not France. So now I'm proud of my dark skin, the blackness of my hair, and my Arab features.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

"I'm proud of my dark skin, the blackness of my hair, and my Arab features"