

## Sylvana Lakkis: NGO Activist



*(Born in 1968, in Jbeil; currently living in Jbeil; recorded in the Beirut office of the Lebanese Sitting Handicapped Association. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)*

**S**ylvana: Please tell me if I start to be boring! My name is Sylvana Lakkis. I was born in 1968, in Jbeil and I'm currently living there. I'm disabled, I had polio as a child. I'm from a family of four girls and one boy. I'm the oldest. My mother doesn't work,

she stays at home. My father helps the Sheikh al-mufti in Jbeil. They call him the 'pen' of the Sheikh.

When I got disabled, as a child, immediately I had to leave home. In those days there weren't so many doctors in Lebanon outside Beirut. They say that in Jbeil there was only one doctor. So they took me to Beirut to see a doctor. It was a shock for my parents when this happened to me, especially that I was their first child. I had to leave home to be treated. They put me in an institution. Two years later I returned home. But when I was four they put me back in the dormitory to start school. I studied at 'The Two Holy Hearts School' in Aley. Luckily it was a mixed school - it had both normal and disabled students. It was difficult in those days to enter an ordinary school, because most ordinary schools didn't accept disabled students. My mother tells me that she tried hard to persuade the school director in Jbeil that she would come during the break to stay with me and help me. He wouldn't agree. He told her that he couldn't admit disabled students into a normal school. This was the reason for a big change in my life, forcing me to live the first phase of it separated from my family. My family were in Jbeil and the school was in Aley. I used to come home at the week-end.

During the secondary school stage, I traveled to Czechoslovakia, and that was a major land-mark in my life. It changed everything. My mother would have preferred to put me in a normal school but she had to take me to Aley because the director in Jbeil wouldn't accept me, and because she was determined I should go to school like other children. This is something for which I'm grateful to her today. If she had given

in to feelings only, it would have been a catastrophe for me. In the second stage I had the opportunity to travel and continue my education abroad. I consider that my real life began at this stage. Before that, until my adolescence, every step of my life was a battle, first to be able to live like other people. Nothing was easy. I was disabled and Lebanon was not prepared for people like me. I couldn't go out to the streets to play with other children. There was a lot of repression during childhood. Though I must say that my family, our neighbors, and the environment in which I was raised were all very kind.

Ever since I was a child, I liked group work. My friends and I tried to do something in spite of all the difficulties. In the second stage I started to face bigger problems. I wanted to have a presence. I didn't want to be marginal, I wanted to overcome the barriers I was meeting. When I went to Czechoslovakia, I discovered that I had rights, and that I could turn my dreams into reality. Here in Lebanon, all I was told was that I had to submit to reality, I had to accept things the way they were. My uncle used to tell me, "Sylvana, your life won't be easy. However you can live. You may not be able to do everything, but you can live." Whenever anyone told me this I grew defiant. No, I want to live just like anyone else. I insisted that my present situation needn't be the final one. In Czechoslovakia I lived on my own. For the first time I felt that I could be independent, that I could get on the bus on my own, that if I wanted to go down stairs there would be stairs or an elevator.

Ghena : In Lebanon you couldn't get on a bus?

Sylvana: No, because buses weren't equipped for the disabled. I don't use the bus, although the new buses in Lebanon bear the disability sign, which should mean they are equipped, though they aren't. Now I have my own car. I finished secondary school in Czechoslovakia and then I got a university degree in translation, and returned to Lebanon in 1976. I came full of confidence that my qualification would help me find work. I had forgotten that things in Lebanon are different. I forgot that there are problems that affect one's daily life. Immediately after I came, I started to look for a job. I was shocked to find that no one would hire me. Had someone normal had my qualifications, he would have been hired immediately. I had studied four languages and I was qualified to work in translation. But I couldn't find work in my field.

The year 1986 was the second important landmark in my life. Travel abroad had made me realize that I had rights, and that I could attain them if I persisted. After return, I took a second decision, that my rights should be pursued along with other people's rights. What I mean by this is that, in the beginning, I saw my problem as a personal one, but then I realized that it affected a large category of people. The moment I knew that there was something called the Association for the Disabled I joined it. I called the Association and told them that I would like to volunteer to work with them. That's where I started. At that point, I had a paid job. I was teaching English - although my domain was translation. I worked with the Association

during the summer vacation. I had intended to go back to teaching again once the summer was over. But I entered the Association and I have stayed with it ever since. Why? Because I knew that everything I felt deprived of and was trying to achieve was a general problem. These problems had to be tackled as a public issue. My welfare should be joined to the welfare of others who have similar problems.

In those days, 1986, there was fighting. You know how the situation was. I wanted to go to the South because there was a real need for people to help there. I went to the Association center in Saida and stayed there for four years. There I discovered more of the misery we have in this country, how many problems we have, and how much work is needed. With my colleagues in the Association I started work. We were able to achieve new things, new programs, trying to change the society's concept of the disabled. I started to feel the meaning of our existence, that we are people who are different, and that we are giving all our time for the public good. This made me feel empowered. I had a lot of defiance, yes, but I became more confident, my belief that we could really make a difference became stronger.

In 1989 I entered the Saint Joseph University to become a social animator. This was a new specialization and it was being tested, it was not licensed yet. When we started out on this course we were told that we might not get a degree because the subject wasn't licensed. However, when we realized how important the subjects were, we didn't care about the degree. We were really concerned with developing our work, because when you talk about the social animator you're talking about real work. We took a special course, for maybe three years, this helped me to work better. I made a small contribution in my work along with my colleagues, we established branches in other areas of Lebanon, and we strengthened our work.

Of course if I talk about my personal ambitions – in this country you cannot achieve much but you can try to change things. Unfortunately it needs much time. The problems are so large, and there is such a lot of misery that I feel shy to speak of my personal life. Social discrimination upsets me, though I understand it and believe that I'm above letting it affect me. Discrimination exists everywhere in society, in all classes, and among the intellectuals and officials more than the ordinary people. This discrimination is obvious. I'll give you an example. If I go with a non-disabled person to meet someone, although I'm the director and I have made the appointment, the person I'm visiting automatically speaks to the normal person who is with me, not to me. If I want him to pay attention to me, I have to take the initiative. This is true of every relationship. After evaluating our work, my colleagues and I have

discovered that the disabled woman has a double burden if she wants to fulfill personal dreams. Every one wants to feel loved, likes to feel that he is living. We suffer more than ordinary women because we live in a society that gives the man the role of earning money, and the woman the role of producing children. In our society [gender] roles are rigidly fixed. We disabled women, well, we don't have a physical hindrance, but perhaps we're not as appealing as women who can walk, so people consider that we cannot perform our function. Of course I'm speaking in general terms. Because of this, less attention is paid to us by our families, and by people. Second, even in people of our generation there is discrimination, also within the women's movement. Maybe they aren't aware of it but it exists, you can feel it if you attend conferences or lectures. When any issue is being tackled you find that the problem of the disabled woman either comes at the end of paper, or it doesn't come at all. Most probably it's not there.

Ghena: I'm not sure if I can comment here a bit? Up to now you've been talking about your personal life in general terms. Sylvana: My daily life is entirely within the public sphere. But if I want to talk about myself as a woman, I'd ask why should I work so hard to convince the other person that I'm like him? If I'm applying for a job, if I'm going to a party, if I want to love. Why shouldn't I be accepted like any other woman, as having dreams, as having a family? We struggle to have all these ordinary life experiences. Maybe we'll live them, maybe not. It so happens that I'm satisfied with my life in the public domain. I feel fulfilled here. But still, like everyone else, I aspire to stability, and I should be able to find it. I told you that in the beginning when I searched for work, no one accepted to hire me. I even looked for work at lower levels than I'm qualified for. I remember that I once applied for work at a telephone exchange. They should have been glad to have an employee who speaks several languages, but even there they refused to hire me because of my disability. I went to congratulate the president on Independence Day. He said "God cure you my daughter!". Why should he ask God to cure me? He has a disability too by the way. Really I don't know what to tell you about myself! They say I'm obsessed by work – maybe because I feel that there are so many issues that need to be tackled.

What do I like? I like to travel. I like to get to know ordinary people living in the narrow streets. I feel fulfilled within the group. I hate lies and fear them. They say that one learns from experiences but I haven't learnt. For instance I believe whatever you tell me, although it may not be true. Lies are what I hate most in life. But I have something which I think is a blessing, it's a belief that life continues no matter what happens. Perhaps this is what motivated me to push on despite all the difficulties. My dreams were small in the beginning.

*"They treat  
you here  
like a  
bag of  
potatoes"*

For example, I dreamt of driving a car. My father didn't want to get me a car because he didn't believe that I could drive, he was afraid that I might have an accident and be killed. But I insisted, I worked, and then I bought myself a car. Later my dream was not to depend on my parents. I wanted to work and be independent. This also was realized. Now my advice is listened to at home. It satisfies me to feel that I'm capable of being depended on by my family. What more can I tell you?

Ghena: So far you have talked about things in a general context.

Sylvana: I told you about suffering in childhood because I couldn't play. During adolescence I had to fight to have social relationships. That meant a lot of suffering. One spends a lot of time simply sitting and thinking about oneself, about his problems, and boredom. Everything seemed closed in one's face. The parents were not aware. No guidance. My parents didn't bring me a wheel chair, they brought me a children's carriage. They didn't know that with the aid of a simple wooden device I could be helped to move from the chair to the bed. We did not know then, when I was a child, that the car could be modified for the disabled. Simple things were complicated. You were deprived of your daily needs. What can I tell you? That if you wanted to go to the bathroom you'd have a problem? You want to go on your own, without being helped. That was a problem for me before we discovered a special apparatus, my parents and I. Joining the Association helped in many ways. In the past, when I saw a high wash basin, I didn't know that if it was constructed in a different way I could wash dishes. Today we know. At the Association we tell whoever comes to us, how we can help him or her fix their home so that they can live an easy life. It never occurred to me that if my bed was lower than the chair the bed could be made higher. Do you understand? The more independent you became in your daily life, the more relaxed and confident you feel. In the past fear always accompanied me. What did the future hold for me? If my parents died, what would I do? This is the worst feeling you can have. Now this has changed, but only after you have given a lifetime's effort. We are deprived of living normal lives unless we fight for happiness. The most difficult stage is when a girl is an adolescent, when she has the need to love and attract the attention of men. These weren't easy stages. But I -- these were the major landmarks in my life -- my childhood, my travel, my return, joining the Association, going to the South.

We in Lebanon are slaves of appearances. In our society, one can be on the verge of death but feel shy to express himself. They taught us that this is shameful, just as they teach a girl that when she wears a skirt she should sit in a very uncomfortable manner so as not to show her legs. Or they say this kind of game is for boys, not for girls. Now I tell myself

that if I could live again, I should live more aggressively, more confidently, and not wait for others to approach me, but take the initiative myself. Here I'm addressing girls specifically because they may pass through the stages that I passed through. It's all a matter of how much people know. I was saying that Lebanon is a country of appearances, and this creates many boundaries. Some people feel shy to walk with a disabled person. We may meet the disabled at home, but we don't want to walk with them on the streets. They deal with the disabled as objects of sympathy. This is something I reject totally. That's why I like to talk about the ugliest things that happen, because now I'm liberated from them, and I don't want others to go through what I went through. Really if you look at the Association, you see men and women living a good life. This shows the distance we have traveled in seventeen years. Some of the discrimination has diminished.

Another point which I would like to talk about also isn't related to me alone. This is that we are setting an example to others who are working in the public domain. We are proving to others that if one strives and insists on reaching certain goals, they can be reached.

Ghena: This is part of the stage you're living in now?

Sylvana: Yes. This stage is very important, and I see that we have a bigger role than we ever had before. There is a real need for our action because 7% of the Lebanese population is disabled, and we have to take care of this 7%. I don't consider that we are responsible for the problems of the 7%, no, we are responsible for addressing the problems of the 90% who do not understand the problems of disability. (pause)

Ghena: So far everything you have mentioned is related to disability. Is it alright to ask you, can you recall anything of your life that's not connected to disability?

Sylvana: I can't, I can't, my disability is imprinted clearly on my life, it has daily consequences.

Ghena: You felt that disability was the problem, or how Lebanese society views it was the problem?

Sylvana: No, society makes it a problem. I'll give you an example. Sometimes during my work I traveled on my own. I participated in the Beijing Conference for Women and in many other events. I went around the world and worked, but nowhere did I feel that my disability was a problem. People outside treat you like a human being. One's competence

and willingness to participate are what matter. There is real integration and a more natural life. The moment I stepped back into the Lebanese airport my suffering resumed. They treat you here like a bag of potatoes. So, as I told you, we're concerned with the problem of the 90% percent of the population who don't understand disability. Disability is not a

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health problem. It is a social problem, a problem that accompanies us throughout our lives.

Ghena: Before we stop I'd like to ask you if you feel like referring to a particular stage in your life?

Sylvana: I'd like to talk about my vision of the country. I wish there would be a serious stand in Lebanon so that first, all the organizations and associations, and second, all the people notice that we are losing our country, Lebanon. Why? Because everyone of us is working on solving a problem without tackling the root causes. I think that the root of our problems lies in the fact that we lack real citizenship. Because of this, any public issue seems irrelevant to the average person. If you talk about women's issues, you notice that only women, and only particular women, attend the meetings. Men don't attend, ordinary women don't attend. They consider this to be an issue that is separate from their daily lives. If you talk about the municipal elections, it's the same people, others don't feel concerned. If you talk about unemployment - or any other issue - it's the same. In our opinion, our main necessity is that we should admit our mistakes and try to work together on building our country - all of us, including the marginalized groups. And we should admit that sectarianism is a big problem. You may ask how is this related to disability? I tell them -

Ghena: What else would you like to tell me?

Sylvana: What can I say? Concerning hobbies, I like drawing a lot. I felt I could express myself through drawing. I like cloudy weather, I don't like heat. Since I was young, I tried to read books that were a bit difficult for me. I was always searching for myself. Who am I? I felt that by chance I might find an answer. I felt very optimistic when I saw the postman, though not because I was waiting for a letter from someone. I had many friends. I felt that there were small things that did not seem important to others but that were important to me. I liked to hear about people who sacrificed themselves for the sake of others. Really! Maybe that's why I feel fulfilled in this place. Since I was young I was very influenced by my mother. We saw her knitting wool jerseys. We asked her, who are they for? She told us, for the children in the neighborhood. In those days, in the 1970s, Palestinians were in the South. She made me curious to know who these people were. Perhaps that is why I chose later to go to the South. When I went there I didn't go only to work in the Association but also to help people. I have a passion to work through a group for people. This is the most fulfilling action for me. (pause) Friends -- I have friends who have been my friends for ten years. This is something I'm proud of. It isn't easy to sustain a friendship for such a long time. (pause) I've lived through many social changes.

Here we're going back to disability, but there are beautiful things that I lived through, especially in the days of emergency, when there was bombardment, especially the last

*"My daily life is entirely within the public sphere"*

time, in 1996. I was pleased to see people's surprise that a group of disabled were coming to help people who are not disabled. I was observing this direct transformation in people's attitude towards us. Before this, people thought we couldn't help others, that we only needed to be helped. But I'm in a constant state of anger. I'm always angry about the things people take for granted, angry because people don't educate themselves. We Lebanese have passed through many difficult circumstances but every time a deputy comes and showers us with slogans that he never fulfills, we elect him again. I am really angry with people because we could liberate ourselves from our problems. I don't allow myself to forget my anger, because it's this - anger - that pushed me to overcome these ugly things. I am talking here as a citizen. As a citizen I also participated, I attempted to revive public frameworks, not by joining specific organizations, but by participating in campaigns such as the one for participation in the municipal elections. Whenever there's a campaign related to a public issue, I join it.

Ghena: Would you like to tell us a little more about your jobs?

Sylvana: In the beginning, with the help of a thousand waastas, I was able to teach English. Of course employment is a general problem, I'm not the only one who faced it. When I first came to the Association I began on a voluntary basis. Now I'm paid. Then I worked in an institution called 'The Human Call', and I worked for Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation as a translator. I worked there for a while. Then I started to translate on an individual basis, I translated studies as a freelancer. Then I was invited to take up an administrative job in the Association. Now I have many job offers, it's much easier for me to find a job, first because I've accumulated a long experience. Also I have experience in more than one field, now I'm rejecting offers. But I have spent most of my time in the Association. I have been an employee here since 1990 and from then I couldn't engage in other voluntary work. I have to give all my time to the Association. I train others. I have contributed to establishing other branches in the South, Saida, Nabatieh, four centers in the Bekaa, and in Jbeil. I'm in charge of our Jbeil center as well.

Ghena: Do you want to tell us a bit about the work in these branches?

Sylvana: We are a movement of demands. All our work is related to the rights of disabled people. All of our work is with people. We work on changing wrong social concepts, we work on helping the disabled to become independent.

Ghena: So you work with the disabled and the rest of the society as well?

Sylvana: Yes, and with the government too. We work with the disabled by finding out where they are, and visiting them. If they need rehabilitation we give them the opportunity to learn

a job. If they need work we look for jobs for them. We guide them. The disabled may not know that they can change things in their life. We help them discover that if they make some changes in their home, they can get around without anyone's help. This is the first help. Through the disabled person's interaction with us and our programs, they start gradually to develop. We always aim at encouraging the disabled to become an active member of the Association, and work on helping other disabled people. We tell the parents that the disabled has energy. There are parents who over-worry about their disabled children. They help them too much. If one wants a drink of water, the parents bring it. Here is our role, to correct these wrong ideas. We have to persuade parents that though they are close to the disabled today, this won't last. This is very basic in our work. The second thing in our work is raising demands. We have been demanding for a long time that there should be an association for every kind of disability in Lebanon, and that these associations should be connected to, or represented by, a ministerial department. We are also calling to have building regulations so that no building license should be given unless criteria related to disability are included. This is an issue that needs a lot of work and pressure. First, to train the groups, second to mobilize them, third to stay ready for any development. For instance, next week we're going to walk through Beirut city, we will distribute brochures about our rights and needs. Then we will join in a concert with the popular singer Sami Hawwat, in 'Ain al-Mrayseh, and we will distribute the brochures during the concert, and talk to people. We'll try to be present in all the key places in the city. The event is supposed to be covered by the media. The laws we are demanding are being rejected. Some while ago we heard that our draft was included on the work agenda of the Government, but the Ministers refused to discuss it.

Ghena: What was the law?

Sylvana: It is related to integrating the disabled in society, for instance having a quota system in employment. This law is based upon the International Convention for the Disabled. It is the result of many experiences. They [the Government] are refusing to discuss this law, they say it's suitable for Sweden but not for us. Hariri said this. And Hrawi said that this is not the time for the disabled. So we need to exert more pressure. Now I'm asking all the branches to carry out campaigns. To put up posters and slogans until our demands are met. If we have to camp in front of the president's palace, we will. We will pursue our demands to the very end. By the way, we had a role in helping the Palestinian disabled in Lebanon to form their Association. In the beginning we allowed them to use our center. Now they have their own.

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

## End Notes

1. She is referring to the Israeli attack of 1996 against South Lebanon, in particular the Qaana Massacre.

## Marie: Homeless, a Beggar

*(Born in 1924, in Aley; currently living in Beirut; recorded on the street. Language: colloquial Arabic tinged with a mountain accent.)*

**M**y father died when I was ten years old. My mother asked me, "Do you want to stay in Aley?" - at her aunt's place. I said, "Alright." I stayed in Aley. What I begged was taken by my mother's aunt. She was the hotel's owner. People used to give me money. She would come to my room and take it all. I left Aley. I went and worked. I was still a girl. I worked for an Englishman. He was a laundry man, he ironed clothes. I received tips. He gave me LL 45 per month. I worked there for a while. I was fifteen. Then I came to Beirut to see my aunt, my mother's sister. I was walking and I said to myself, "I'll sleep in this hotel, and tomorrow I'll visit my aunt. It isn't dark yet." I entered the hotel - it was called the Nazl Bhandoun - I found a man eating nuts and drinking alcohol. He told me there was no room in the hotel (pause). He said, "I'll take you to sleep at my aunt's". I said, "Alright". I went and slept at his aunt's home for two nights.

Ghena: Where was your mother then?

Marie: She was at home. I went to Zahleh with this man. I slept for two nights at his aunt's home. I liked Zahleh, so I invited my aunt's husband to attend our wedding. We got married and went to a hotel. Yes, he wanted to marry me. We went to a hotel in Beirut and got married. We went to Bhandoun and stayed at his parents' home. He didn't have a house of his own. We ate and drank at his parents' home. Later he rented a home for me. I got pregnant and had a boy, Fuad. He [husband] starved me and tortured me. He gambled and didn't give me money. So I stayed with him for three years and then I divorced him. I left the boy with his grandmother, and left. (pause)

Then I went to work as a maid, but I left. I found another man to marry. I married him and regretted it very much. Why did I marry him! He imprisoned me at home. He didn't allow me to go out. He pulled my hair, he didn't allow me to go to the shops.

After that he told me to give him money and he'll divorce me. I told my sister's husband he wanted money, "Give him money so that he'll set me free." He told me, "I'm afraid of him." He [husband] traded in weapons. That was his work. I stayed with him for seven years and gave birth to four children, a boy and three girls. He beat me and beat me without my doing anything, with the stick, with the belt. My hands were bleeding, my back was red like blood. "Save me from him!" Nobody listened. "Save me! Save me!" Nobody listened. Then I prayed against him. He came in the evening and I was at our neighbor's place. The girl was sick, we wanted to take her to the doctor. He told me that I had stepped on her stomach. Think of that! So he

Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi



slapped me twice on the face and went and slept in another room. He had cows, I slept next to the cows' room. I started praying and asking God that he would get into trouble and end up in prison. His brother came and woke me. He said, "It's eight o'clock and you're still sleeping! Get up and see what has happened to Elias. He has killed someone and they have put him in jail." I liked that (laughs). I laughed because God had answered my prayer. He was drunk, got into a

quarrel and shot someone. The man was in a coma for three days. I was laughing (laughs). He said, "What! You're laughing instead of crying?" I laughed because my prayers were heard by God. I left. We sent his father to the prison. He brought from him [husband] a paper divorcing me.

My second daughter's husband was killed by a shell. She went to the monastery and served there. Beyond Jounieh. She has two daughters. Another of my daughters lives in Sin al-Fil, she has three children. She used to visit me, but she doesn't any longer. She gave me her phone number but I lost it.

Ghena: When you divorced the second husband you took the children?

Marie: I left them with their grandmother on their father's side.

Ghena: You didn't want to take them?

Marie: I went to look for work.

Ghena: You told me you had three daughters. One is in the monastery, one in Sin al-Fil, and one in Jbeil. What about the boys?

Marie: One boy.

Ghena: You said you had a boy from the first husband and a boy from the second husband.

Marie: Yes.

Ghena: Where are they?

Marie: The boy is in Jounieh in the civil service.

Ghena: The second boy?

Marie: I went around and had fun. I wandered.

Ghena: The other boy from the first husband, where is he?

Marie: I lost the first one. I saw him once in al-Burj. His wife (pause), he got married (pause), his wife told me, "This is your son." I said, "What? Show me his identity card." I didn't believe her. She showed me his I.D. It was true. He was my son. He didn't say, "Mother, come and stay at my place" or anything. He didn't say anything. I kissed him and left (pause). Now I've lost sight of him.

Ghena: So you left your second husband after he went to prison,

and you went to look for work?

Marie: Yes. He's married now. He came out of the prison and got married. He stayed in Jbeil.

Ghena: What happened then?

Marie: I went and begged, I begged on the streets. Once my husband stepped on a fork, and it cut off three of his toes and after a while they had to cut all of his leg off. Now he uses a stick to walk with. He has only one leg because he tortured me. He beat me even when I did nothing. I told him I wanted LLI to repair something. He beat me. Whenever I asked him for anything he'd beat me. See what God did to him! They amputated his leg. I didn't feel sorry for him. Do you think what he did was little! He hung me from the balcony and I was screaming (pause). He made a tent for me and imprisoned me in it. A tent on the roof. I couldn't go downstairs. Once I went downstairs to talk to his mother. He saw me and beat me - why had I left the tent? Oh God, how he tortured me. He was a terrible tyrant. Haram, once he beat his mother with his slippers. He beat his mother on her head.

Ghena: How did you live after leaving this husband?

Marie: I wandered around in the afternoon in this area.

Ghena: Wandered around! I know that you used to work, you didn't beg.

Marie: Yes, I loved like that, I went with men, for pleasure.

Ghena: Not for money?

Marie: No, for pleasure. And sometimes for money. The policemen used to catch me and put me in prison. Once they put me in for three months. Then I got out of jail and wandered around again. Then they caught Marie again.

Ghena: Marie, how did you decide to start sleeping with men?

Marie: After I divorced my husband. The first husband and the second one. I got upset. I found out that these men were no good. They didn't feed me or provide for me or anything. (pause)

Ghena: Was it easy for you to start this work?

Marie: Yes, easy, natural. (laughs) The story is finished.

Ghena: No, it's not finished.

Marie: Yes, I went with people and I was imprisoned. I got out of jail. I went with people again. I was imprisoned again. They kept imprisoning me.

Ghena: What did you feel?

Marie: What did I feel? (laughs)



Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi

Ghena: Yes, were you content or did you regret anything?

Marie: No, I didn't regret, I was content.

Ghena: Are you content now?

Marie: Now I suffer from diabetes. I have to keep buying medicines. I was unhappy only when I went to prison.

Ghena: Men treated you well?

Marie: Yes, in the past I wasn't fat and ugly like now. Now I'm old. I used to be beautiful as a young woman. I put make-up on my cheeks and lips. I put make-up on, yes. Once I went out with a shoe-maker. I told him, "Give me LL5." He gave me. We went in a taxi. Oh, I wish it had been a taxi, it was only a 'service'. We walked for an hour. We reached the place and found two men sitting outside. He opened his bedroom and told me, "Go inside." I went in. Oh God, what he did! As soon as he got on me, the neighbors came. "Open the door!" - they were cursing him - "Open the door!" Two men came inside. They hit me on the head and they hit him on the head. I left him to be beaten and ran away. I saw a married couple on the road. The man told me, "Come and sleep at our place." His wife got mad. She pulled my hair. She was jealous. I told her, "I don't know your husband." A man passed by wearing pajamas. He defended me. He saved me from her hands. Then I left. (pause)

Ghena: That is your life story?

Marie: That's it.

Ghena: I want to know your whole life story.

Marie: I told you my life story.

Ghena: Can a life be told in ten minutes?

Marie: Yes, it can. I got married, I was divorced, I had children, and I did that, as I told you.

Ghena: Who is the person you love most, your mother, your children, one of the men you met?

Marie: I loved a man, but he went to Jordan. I was young then.

Ghena: Why didn't you marry one of the men you loved?

Marie: Like that.

Ghena: Why?

Marie: No one married me.

Ghena: Why?

Marie: They took three bones from here and put them here. That's enough.

Ghena: No one loved you?

Marie: No one loved me. What could I do? There were many women in the Burj, many like me. Men felt satisfied.

Ghena: None of these men got married?

Marie: They didn't marry me. What could I do?

Ghena: Didn't you want to get married?

Marie: Yes, but they didn't want to marry me.

Ghena: Why not?

Marie: They want to marry girls. I'm a woman.

Ghena: Marie, this can't be all your story. Can you tell me it again?

Marie: (Angrily) I married the first man - I met him in the, Nazl



Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi

Bhamdoun. "Will you marry me?" I asked him. He said, "Yes". We went to Zahleh and got married, and went to a hotel, a different hotel, Khadawiyet al-Kubra. I was still a girl. He slept with me and I became a woman. He took me to his parents' place in Bhamdoun. We spent one night in the hotel and then went to Bhamdoun. He worked whitewashing houses and also worked in manual labor. I lived with him for three years. Then I

divorced him and left the boy [her son] with his grandmother. I left. Then I met another man. "Will you marry me? Will you marry me?" He kept on asking. I told him I had money. But all I had was LL10,000. When we got married he hit me on the mouth. I was bleeding. He wanted me to bring him money. I brought him money. He bought cows, three cows. Everyday he beat me up. Every week he used to beat me. I kept asking for a divorce. He wouldn't divorce me. I stayed with him for seven or eight years. I had four children. I asked God to harm him, he was imprisoned. I got divorced while he was imprisoned.

Once I went and found a man. His friend was sitting next to him in the car ...

*[Marie tells stories of several encounters with men. We decided not to publish them because other speakers whose words appear here might feel abused.]*

Ghena: Marie, isn't there anything in your life but your stories with men?

Marie: No, that's it. A woman is born, she gets married and has children.

Ghena: What about your children and mother?

Marie: What can I say about my mother? (laughs). I once hit her with a stone.

Ghena: You hit your mother - why?

Marie: I was upset with her. (pause)

Ghena: Marie, I need to ask you one more thing. If you had lived somewhere other than Lebanon do you feel your life would have been different?

Marie: Live outside Lebanon?

Ghena: Would you have liked to live somewhere other than Lebanon?

Marie: I would have liked, but I couldn't. My children didn't help me. They didn't give me money to travel. You need money to travel. My niece and her husband went to America.

Ghena: Are you trying to remember something to tell me?

Marie: I'm trying to remember a story but there aren't any more stories. (pause) Don't you want to bring photographers so that they'll give me money? They took a photo of my stick once.

Come back in a few days, come back!

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail