

## Esther Qamar: Women's Movement Activist

*(Born in 1919, in Argentine; father originally from Bishmizzine, mother Spanish; currently living in Beirut; recorded at home. Language: Arabic, very elegant and correct, no foreign admixture)*

**E**sther: Do you like the Arabic language? We used to take Arabic lessons, me and my father. He was young when he went to Argentine and married an Argentinian lady. For this reason I adored the Arabic language and I learned it even before my father; he became envious of me and learned it after me. We came here to Lebanon, for six months just to look around the country, and show my mother Lebanon because she was originally from Spain, from a good family. During the Spanish war she fled with her family to Buenos Aires. We were born there. However, as we say, things happen beyond our will, my father died in an accident and my mother remained here a stranger in this country. I went to the American School in Tripoli, because my father was originally from Bishmizzine in Koura. I went into boarding school. The other children used to laugh at me because I spoke formal Arabic; but my teacher, Mr Jeha, used to tell me, "You are speaking correct Arabic, they are jealous of you, don't change!" He used to encourage me; it was only later that I learned colloquial Arabic.



*Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi*

When I finished school, I moved to Beirut, I wanted to go to university, I remember they wouldn't accept me at university before I reached eighteen. Because I was very bright and had a good memory I finished school early. Then Mrs. Maddock, the school administrator, came with me and tried to convince the administration that I was an unusually bright student and shouldn't be held back. They agreed that I should study science and mathematics at the American School, and enter the university at seventeen.

At that time, I met the person who later became my husband, he was our neighbor, and our ways used to cross on the street. I told him I couldn't get married, I was like the man of the house, I need to carry on my education. The Americans had promised me that once I finished they would send me to Columbia University, and teach me at their expense. He said, "Isn't it better to have a man in your family?" We were two sisters and one brother, but we didn't have any uncles on either side. He promised to support me and encourage me all through my

education, anywhere I go, whatever level I might reach, he said he would stay beside me. So we agreed. And that is what actually happened, he was a really good man. I finished my education, and I mastered Arabic literature. I adored Arabic literature, I studied all the diwans of the major writers, my hobby was to widen my knowledge of the language. I knew four languages: Arabic, Spanish, English - I learned it at school - and I also knew French because my husband worked at the 'Haut Commissariat.' These four languages helped me a lot, you know they're the most spoken languages worldwide.

From the time I was a child, I noticed that women in Lebanon were not treated as they should be, so I wanted to work in the social domain. We established Mar Elias Orphanage, each lady was to adopt a girl; they were mainly orphans and girls from broken families. We established it in 1949, I was then still young and enthusiastic. Women as you know spoke mainly French then. I was appointed secretary, and I wanted all the records to be written in Arabic. So these women relied on me to keep the records, and from that time I have been the secretary of the board, and shall remain so as long as the president is still alive. Many vice presidents came and died, and others followed them. Later we changed the name of the orphanage for the sake of the morale of the girls. I noticed that the word 'orphan' is a shame or a stigma, though some of the girls were wonderful, they learned a vocation, most of them got married. When we wanted to change the name of the orphanage, many women objected, they said no one would give money anymore. You know we used to collect money through lotteries, the cards ranged from LL1 to LL50. We also used to organize dances at the Saint Georges Hotel. I used to threaten them that if they didn't change the name I would resign. I said, "You want people to give you money out of sympathy? I will force people to give us money, I'll tell them that one day the poor will rebel and take all your money." They finally agreed with me and the name was changed to the School of Mar Elias Bateena. We asked for a license to give these girls elementary education, and we established a school. Now it's a very important school that graduates students who go directly to university. One day the bishop donated five thousand meters of land to build on. We took a loan from the bank and the president, Mme Hortense Tamer, organized many fund-raising bazaars. No one refused to help us; today we are proud of this school.

In 1952, I was elected secretary-general of the Lebanese Red Cross, the Furn al-Shebbak branch. In 1975, the World Year for Women, my organization delegated me to the Lebanese Women's Council because of my work with the orphanage, and my knowledge of four languages. The convention was supposed to be held in Mexico city, there were delegations from about sixty participating countries headed by presidents or prime ministers. I remember Jihan al-Sadat headed the Egyptian delegation. We worked together; she showed affection for the Lebanese. I appeared there, they asked me to talk about Lebanese youth and Lebanese women. I spoke in Spanish of course, and I appeared two or three times on TV. I appeared mainly because of my knowledge of the Spanish language. We

were able to transmit all our messages to the president. I remember the president of the Israeli delegation was there and when she started to talk we agreed to leave the hall. It was a shock for everyone. I persuaded my Spanish-speaking friends also to leave with us. There was the presidential delegation and other NGO delegations. I was with the presidential delegation. Later in the seventies I was elected to the Executive Committee for the National Association for the Preservation of the Environment headed by Sonia Franjeh. We were three ladies - Lady Cochrane, Salwa al-Said and me. In 1979, it was the World Year for Children. I was in Beit Meri then, we had escaped from Beirut because our house had been bombed. We wanted to do something for children. We established the Civil Association for the Protection of the Child in Lebanon. The president was Rose Marie Ellen Seikaly, as usual I was the secretary. I wanted everything to be written in Arabic, all the files. From 1979 till 1992, I remained in this post. Here too the Maronite bishops gave us two thousand meters to build an institution. It was originally for the mildly mentally handicapped, we used to teach them. Then we established a technical school for them as well as a small factory. We made an agreement with a certain supermarket for the children to fill bags of sugar, tea and coffee for a certain wage. Till today this Association is still working, but on a smaller scale.

When I entered the Women's Council, I remained as secretary from 1975 until 1992. You know the Women's Council includes all women's activities and groups in Lebanon; cultural, social, everything, even academic. The president then was Najla Saab. When she died Emilie Fares Ibrahim took her position; but during the war she got sick and went to Paris. The vice president was Oussaima Diab, she was threatened by a Palestinian group and resigned. I was the only one left. I was living in Furn al-Shebbak, in East Beirut, and the Council's office was in Zarif, in West Beirut. I used to go there under heavy shelling, I didn't want the Council to lose anything of its presence and role. The Lebanese Women's Council was an active member in the General Union of Arab Women, and a member of the International Women's Council. We had correspondence from everywhere that needed following up. Twice I was almost killed, but God saved me. In 1992, I handed all the records of the Council, along with the correspondence, I sent everything - all the files, well-organized - to the president in Paris, in the hands of a priest. Eventually she came back, and 'took all the glory' as we say, because she remained the president. She was followed by Aman Kabbara Shaarani. Linda Matar followed Aman, she never left Beirut, she knew how hard I worked and suffered for the sake of the Council. She used to say, "Esther, the Women's Council stood on your shoulders, and we appreciate you a lot." Then I discovered that people forget. I got

sick in 1992 and had two serious operations, and needed treatment, so I had to stay away from the scene for a short period. They made me an advisor to the Women's Council.

I forgot to tell you that in 1969 I was awarded the Work Medal. Few are awarded this badge of honor other than syndicate members. Charles Helou was president of the republic then and the prime minister was Abdallah al-Yafi. There was a nice celebration held at the Mar Elias school. In the 1970s I was also a member of the YWCA, I was the president of the Committee of Social Affairs. Here also I translated the records into Arabic; we worked hard. Here is a list of all the associations I joined and worked with (hands list).

Twice I appeared on TV and talked about the activities of the Women's Council and the conferences I'd attended. I headed a delegation to a conference in Mexico, I headed the presidential delegation to Baghdad, to a conference on the creation of women cadres. Saddam Hussein was very hospitable and helpful during the Civil War, he donated LL50,000 for the orphanage. At the orphanage there was no segregation at all, neither on a religious nor on a sectarian basis. We were very grateful for his donation.

When I had babies I used to read while breast feeding them, some people used to say I was crazy. At school, the others would play while I would go and read in the library. I used to go to the library of the American University of Beirut. Reading

was my passion. This is my life. For the time being I still attend major meetings. What else would you like to know?

Dania: Tell me more about your memories.

Esther: I traveled to a lot of countries during my work with the women's movement. I traveled to Moscow, we attended many meetings. I remember the program in Russia was set to spend a week in Armenia. I

objected, saying that we know a lot of Armenians in Lebanon, we preferred to learn something new about other people, it would be better to go to Leningrad. So they changed the plan and we went to Leningrad. Truly, what we saw in Russia was unbelievable, people were very hospitable and polite. Because I was in the presidential delegation, they asked me to give a lecture. In the Women's Council there are a lot of political party members, and of course everyone representing a party wants to speak on behalf of her party. But I wanted to represent the Lebanese, not parties. Some women wanted to talk about the Palestinian cause, but I told them that though I pity the Palestinian nation, yet they were responsible for our plight in



Lebanon. We did a lot to help them, but we cannot allow them to use our country as a substitute for Palestine, and establish a state within a state. I told them we shouldn't talk about the Palestinian cause, and this did not please many.

Wherever we used to go, we stood out as Lebanese. I remember an incident in Mexico City, we were at a restaurant, me and the vice president of the Women's Council. Two other persons were speaking Spanish among themselves, one a Colombian, the other from Uruguay. So one told the other, "They (we) seem to be speaking Arabic," and the other replied, "Arab women wear veils." I spoke to them in Spanish saying that we are Lebanese, and the woman with me is a Muslim studying at the university along with men. I said that we were both Lebanese, and not all Lebanese are veiled. Some Arab countries require women to wear veils, but not all Arab countries. So the man apologized and thanked me. When I talked about the Lebanese people, they asked me why haven't Lebanese women reached high positions yet? Is it because they lack self-confidence? I told them that, in my opinion, Lebanese women voluntarily abstain from high positions. If they were ever offered a high position, they would prefer to give it to their father, husband, brother or son, and would think last of themselves. Lebanese women are capable of reaching high positions but it is they who keep themselves at the end. Once Emily Fares Ibrahim ran for the elections but few voted for her. This was the case with Laure Tabet also, she was the first president of the Women's Council. I remember a certain Mr Naim who told me that there is no use in gathering votes for women, because women themselves don't vote for a woman. He added that the best thing to do was to convince women themselves to elect other women. Let women act as citizens with duties and rights, and not expect anything from men.

In addition, at the Council there were many regional meetings. We went to Damascus several times and visited people's homes. We were invited by the Minister of Culture - she was a woman - we also visited the Golan Heights and were shown the destruction caused by the Israelis. I asked how could this happen, since Syria is a strong country with a strong army. They said that there had been many betrayals. We visited the city of Kneitra, where everything was destroyed - there was only one house left, the mayor's home, even the grass was burnt to prevent reconstruction. Anyway, they did not do less in Lebanon.

In the Civil Association for the Protection of the Child in Lebanon, we celebrate the anniversary of the Association every year, always under the auspices of the first lady, Mona al-Hrawi. She never misses an occasion. We also have a bakery there, we do cake sales and bazaars where we exhibit the work of children. Every member is responsible for a stand. Raising funds was through our efforts and our activities. Other world organizations also helped us in fund raising, especially the World Vision Organization. What else would you like to know?

Dania: I would like to know more about yourself, about the

major episodes in your life.

Esther: Fine, I told you I attended several conferences, I was also a member of the Women's League; most of the members were ambassadors' wives. Once the wife of the German ambassador proposed to found the Gourmet Club. Each one of us would bring the best recipes of her country. Whenever we were invited to an embassy, say the Greek Embassy, they would show us films about the country, and then they would distribute recipes of their food. We actually published a cookbook and sold it for LL50. This was at the Women's League. In the Women's Council today, they do fund-raising lunches. I attended one of them. What was good about the Women's Council was the fact that it brought together women from different sects, parties and beliefs, and there was agreement among ourselves. During the war, there were members of different parties - Phalangistes, socialists, communists - but when they met in the Council they would act as members of the same party. They all respected each other. I liked this about the Women's Council, I am sure it does not happen in other organizations. In other organizations, members are hand-picked. Thank God, when I was with the Council, I worked hard and filled my post. Now, God be with them, I hope they're working on the improvement of women's conditions, on their achieving high positions and participation in decision-making, on becoming deputies - elected not appointed - and becoming members of Municipal Councils. Once in the Women's Council we held a panel discussion on women and law. It was very successful. Speakers representing different countries discussed the laws of their countries regarding women. When we published the book of the conference, many lawyers read it and were impressed. Ask me more questions!

Dania: Tell me more about your memories.

Esther: I was engaged in a lot of social activities. My husband used to encourage me in everything I did. He used to tell me that good work always lasts. I also used to work as a coordinator at the Ministry of Economy. I always enjoyed social work. I was once asked on a television program how I was able to manage my activities in the social domain along with my family responsibilities. I said that all it needs is organization. Social work does not demand a lot of effort; it is better to spend time on social work rather than on playing bridge. We used to sew clothes before the feasts and donate them to needy families. Truly, women used to sympathize with unfortunate families. They used to work hard and send donations. I remember a story when the school was still an orphanage, one of the orphans, Marie, who was beautiful, met a rich man and married him. Each feast, she used to send boxes of sweets to the orphanage. Once, I and my daughter were visiting a friend who had a new born baby. As we were sitting, Marie came in and introduced herself to me. I heard people around me whispering about her. So I said, "Let me introduce you to the people in the room." I told them, "You see this lady, even after she became rich and reached a high position in our society, she never stopped thinking of the orphans." Everyone admired her. It was after that incident that I decided to change

the name from orphanage to school. It was a daring step, people seldom give money except for orphans. But people should help others to stand on their feet. I don't believe in pity.

Dania: Do you feel that your life would have been different had you lived elsewhere?

Esther: I would never live anywhere else because I adore Lebanon. When other people fled, I stayed here. I was very attached to the Arabic language, and I was also attached to Lebanon because of what my father had told me about the country. And I saw the capacities and elegance of the Lebanese people. For example my father was a member of the most important clubs. I was always very proud of my Lebanese identity, and I excelled in the Arabic language. Once the Argentinian ambassador called me "la mauvaise Argentinienne". I didn't want to have Argentinian nationality, my Lebanese nationality is enough.

I've had this tendency since I was a child, to help others, always underprivileged people. Back at school, we once visited a prison, and I told one of the prisoners about doing good, and about the love of God. He said, "I'm a killer, aren't you afraid of me?" I replied, "No, in every one of us there is a part of God. There's something good in each of us. If you return to yourself and try to change yourself, God will forgive you." I was pleased with this experience, this is what I enjoy in life. Now, though I am sick and no longer young, I still have a good memory, and my hearing is pretty good, I still feel I can carry out my duties and services. I am pleased that though my hands shake when I eat, they never shake when I write. God gives me this power. I can't serve people physically anymore but I can still serve mentally. (pause)

Dania: When were you born?

Esther: You'll be amazed, I was born in 1919. I was nursed by a woman called Julia, she was an (American) Indian. She had only one son, he was hunted down by the government and later he was shot. I will never forget the sorrow and pain Julia endured, the silent and deep pain.

Dania: How do you evaluate Lebanon as a place for women to live in?

Esther: In my opinion, it is better than any other country. First, the girl can do whatever she pleases, her parents do not exert pressure on her. Some parents may do so, they may be hard on their daughters. But we still have the family. I remember once it was my birthday, we invited all the family, my four children and my grandchildren. There was someone there from Stockholm, a Swede. He sat in a corner and cried. When I asked him why he was crying, he said he would give ten years of his life for such a gathering. In Sweden, youngsters do not appreciate the family. In Canada or the USA, the girl leaves home at seventeen. I don't like this way of living. You will say I have an old-fashioned mentality, but this is why I like Lebanon. I like Lebanon because a person can live with honor and self-respect, especially in villages, because there they still have the Lebanese ideas of honor. In other Arab countries the

woman is unprivileged, she is often forced to do things against her will. Women here are more appreciated than men and I respect Lebanese women because they impose themselves without being aggressive. In the Women's Council, we insist that the woman's family, children and husband have priority over her duties at the Council. When she finds that her children don't need her anymore, she is welcome at the Council. This is very important. I remember once when we were going to Baghdad. There was Shi'ite woman whose husband was a bit closed-minded, he didn't want his wife to travel to Baghdad with us. She asked the president of the Council to change her husband's mind. When the president talked to him, he said that they had eight children, and that they need their mother more than the Council does. Then the president herself stopped the woman from going, telling her that we didn't want the Council to be a reason for problems within families.

In my case, it was my husband who supported me most, he never held back from giving me money for membership fees or donations, though we were not very rich. We lived a happy life. He used to tell me, "Listen, Esther, we should educate our children and let them reach high levels of education, we want them to be independent" - one of my sons is a lawyer, another is an engineer - "other than this we do not want to save our money, we want to spend it." We should not worry about the future, God has already designed it. For example, we used to spend the summer in Dhour al-Shweir. Sometimes he used to come home and invite me to spend the week end in Ehden. He used to love life and enjoy it. Even when our children were grown up, he preferred to go alone with me to dances and parties. He used to tell me that tomorrow our children will have their own lives. He was a poet, he always used to leave poems on the door for me to read. We lived a very happy life, but unfortunately he died early from a heart attack. Then I continued life alone. Thank God the organizations I was a member of helped me a lot in overcoming my sadness. He died in three days. I remember I became very depressed, I sat in my room all day and pictured him in front of me. I recall that three women from the Women's League visited me, among them the wife of the Indian ambassador. She came into my room, which I refused to leave, and told me that they needed me, they wanted to take a picture for the Gourmet Club at the Center. I replied I couldn't. After they insisted a lot, I agreed to go with her on condition that we come back immediately. We started walking, and she stopped at each store looking in the window. When we reached the Center, I started crying, I wept loudly, and the women there soothed my pain. Going out with them helped me a lot, it proved to me that I could still be useful, that there is meaning in life, and that life is beyond my room. What else can I tell you? Of course, you are interested in the improvement of women's condition. This can happen on one condition, we do not imitate the West, and don't pursue unimportant pleasures which only bring regret.

Recorded and translated by Dania Sinno