

“Seventy-Five Percent of Any Society Comes from Women and Her Efforts”

An Interview with Rabab As-Sadr Charafeddine Conducted by Adele Khudr

Rabab As-Sadr Charafeddine, who is well-known in Lebanon as “*Sitt Rabab*”, was born in the city of Qum in northwestern Iran, a famous pilgrimage site for Shi’ite Muslims. The daughter of a Lebanese father and an Iranian mother, *Sitt Rabab* first came to Lebanon in 1962 at the age of 15. At age 16 she was married to Hussein Charafeddine, an educator and scholar, and had four sons.

Sitt Rabab’s involvement in social and developmental work began soon after she arrived in Lebanon and got married. Her initiation into this domain came through the efforts of her brother, Imam Musa Sadr, the President of the Higher Islamic Shi’ite Council, who was a pillar of his community and a respected social leader until he disappeared mysteriously while on a trip to Libya in 1978. In the 1960s and 1970s, Imam Sadr had undertaken systematic studies of the social, economic and educational conditions of Lebanon, and was very concerned about social and developmental issues for Lebanon’s poorer classes. *Sitt Rabab* did not want to spend her life attending social gatherings and making visits, nor did she want to lead the life of an ordinary housewife. Thus, she was given the responsibility early on for planning and managing a variety of women’s programs and activities through the auspices of the Imam As-Sadr institutions. *Sitt Rabab* therefore considers that her involvement in social work was not a reaction to the Lebanese civil war that erupted in 1975, nor an outcome of the war’s aftermath. Rather, it was a consciously planned intervention in social and development work born of a serious needs assessment undertaken by Imam As-Sadr under normal conditions of livelihood in pre-war Lebanon.

Nevertheless, the Lebanese civil war certainly increased and intensified *Sitt Rabab*’s work and led her into new and different directions. *Sitt Rabab* believes that when the Lebanese war began, nobody really knew how it would unfold. The stronger ones always assumed that they would be the winners. However, the war served to disrupt the social structure and thereby upset the traditional equilibrium in Lebanon. Because of her belief in the need to raise women’s awareness about the war, *Sitt Rabab* stayed in Lebanon throughout the entire war. She

often had to move from one area to another, seeking shelter and security for herself and her family, exactly like all other displaced Lebanese families. Her two main “stations” were Beirut and South Lebanon.

Under the guidance and the directives of Imam As-Sadr, *Sitt Rabab* tried to raise the awareness of Lebanese women, be they mothers, wives, or sisters, to prevent and forbid their sons, husbands and brothers from getting involved in the fighting. Her role, as she defines it, has been one of guidance, offering directives and providing services.

Throughout the years of hostilities, *Sitt Rabab* never stopped moving among the different Lebanese regions, irrespective of political or confessional background. She was not halted by shelling, kidnapping or threats. When asked whether this was possible because she was a woman, *Sitt Rabab* replied that this was not the only reason; it was also due to the fact that women, according to *Sitt Rabab*, are more persevering than men. They have more patience; their selfishness is less. If a woman confronts failure, she does not fall into despair; she simply waits for a while, and then gets on with her work again. This patience and perseverance have helped *Sitt Rabab* play the role of a coordinator, not only among confessionally-based groups, but also within her own community.

Sitt Rabab feels that the Lebanese woman played a very important role during the war. She had to bear all the consequences of the war on her shoulders. Indeed, she had to cope with many more problems than most men. Men used to leave their houses without knowing if or when they would ever return. Women, on the other hand, were the ones to unite and nurture the family. They were the ones responsible for providing the necessities of life; such as water, food, fuel and a sense of normality and stability. Nevertheless, *Sitt Rabab* feels that women could have been even more active during the war. Specifically, women should have taken a firmer stand and prevented their men from getting involved in the fighting. *Sitt Rabab* adds that women were prevented from playing this role because they had more important preoccupations to attend to, namely, the many endless daily tasks of survival.

When asked if women's relatively limited role stemmed from a lack of awareness on their behalf, Sitt Rabab answered that, in Eastern societies, women have not been brought up or trained to play an active role. According to her, we cannot blame only men for this matter. Women begin in our society in weak positions, and men simply take advantage of this. Women, in their turn, do nothing to complain about this state of affairs. The mere acceptance of such conditions has prevented women from further advancement. Sitt Rabab asserts that "rights are not given to us; they are to be taken by us. It is only by practicing your rights that you acquire them. No one will just give women their rights; as long as a human being is productive, he or she can express his or her opinion. No matter what the status of a woman may be — veiled or unveiled, married or single — she can play her role and take her rights."

Yet, Sitt Rabab expressed concern about some developments associated with the changing role of women. Her chief concern is that women may become too harsh and too "manly". According to Sitt Rabab, "a woman should never drop her role as a mother. First, she has to take care of her children, and during the rest of her time, she can get involved in work outside her home. Seventy-five percent of what a child becomes is a result of what his or her mother teaches him or her. Only twenty-five percent comes from the father. Accordingly, 75 percent of any society comes essentially from women and their efforts." Sitt Rabab reiterates that a woman is a very strong creature and not a weak one. Any woman who has to put up with a man having a difficult character is a strong person, because not all individuals can cope with such conditions. Commenting on the relations between a difficult husband and a patient wife, Sitt Rabab said: "it may be very easy to dispute and argue with her husband, but it is much braver and stronger to bear him silently. Eventually, her example will lead to a positive change in his character".

Sitt Rabab believes that Lebanese society has changed as a result of the war. Among these changes, one in particular impacts upon the role of women: Women have become much more educated, more involved in political life (even if this initiation into politics arose more from family links than personal efforts), and more involved in social work. Concerning the latter point, Sitt Rabab adds that a significant part of women's involvement in social work arises from political reasons, rather than from professional interest. This often leads to wasteful duplication of efforts,

non-specialization, and, in some cases, fraud in management of NGOs. A stronger role should be envisaged for the Lebanese Government to coordinate the efforts and the foci of these NGOs. To support her argument related to the prevailing non-coordination of work among NGOs, Sitt Rabab cites the preparations that took place for the Beijing Conference, which she considered to be a failure.

Another important change in post-war Lebanese society is the growing need for social and psychological counseling services. Although our society is a traditional one in which the individual does not disclose his or her problems and feelings to a stranger (such as a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist or social worker), Sitt Rabab feels that there is room for change. She cites many examples of situations in which she had to play the role of a counselor. According to Sitt Rabab, all of these changes are part of the normal change that takes place over time in any society.

Sitt Rabab strongly urges the Lebanese Government to move in the direction of economic autonomy for women, especially housewives. She argues that "there are so many women who have experiences that should be taught and shared with others; we have to learn how to benefit from their experience. This diffusion of knowledge is part of the change process in any society."

If Sitt Rabab were given the opportunity to speak with women in other societies currently experiencing conditions of war, the first thing she would tell them is to benefit from the Lebanese lesson. They should strive to play a more assertive role in their family and community and forbid their husbands, brothers and sons from participating in the fighting. Women have an important power instrument that they are not using. Moreover, this more active role for women cannot be "parachuted" in from outside; rather, it has to emanate from within their own society.

Sitt Rabab hopes that women will gradually realize their innate strengths and capabilities. A great future awaits women in the next twenty to thirty years. Women, however, should never forget that they have traits which are very different from those of men. She strongly urges women to preserve their femininity, which, according to Sitt Rabab, is not a matter of beauty or seductiveness, but rather, a matter of strength of character, ethical behavior and awareness. If women lose this, they will be committing a big mistake.