

“The World is in Need of Women’s Qualities and Skills”

An Interview with Mona Khauli Conducted by Laurie King-Irani



Mona Khauli is the National Director of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Lebanon. The YWCA, which has been active in Lebanon since 1900, currently operates eight regional centers in the country. Among the YWCA’s most important efforts in Lebanon is its Leadership Training Program for Women. The following interview with Mrs. Khawli was conducted in her office in Beirut on November 2, 1995.

Laurie King-Irani: Could you describe your overall life situation before the war?

Mona Khauli: Before the war began, I was a very happy housewife! I was also very involved with volunteer work; I grew up in a volunteer family — my mother was one of the founders of the YWCA in Lebanon — so we grew up with the spirit of volunteerism. Also I had majored in psychology in college, so naturally, I enjoyed working with people. During my single years, I worked with youth, but after marriage, I concentrated on sexual counseling for youth, which was *avant garde* for that time, but I saw a need for this [type of counseling]; it was lacking, not many people could go into this area and the young adults felt comfortable with me, so I started giving my time to the YWCA in that field, providing counseling in the schools, in the business girls’ clubs and among young adults between the ages of 25 and 40. I also worked with children, mainly physically handicapped children, in the field of developing clubs and then matching clubs between handicapped and non-handicapped children in order to develop the spirit of vol-

unteerism between the community’s children and those children who were facing physical difficulties. And, of course, I was giving time to the YWCA through my volunteer service on the Beirut Board and with the vocational school. I was very happy because I could choose my time; I was committed, but I had more time for my family, and basically, I am a family person. I like to give my children time, I like to cook, to clean, all these things that most career women think are secondary or demeaning, but this gives me relaxation from all of the mental work and the social work. So my time was full, and I never felt that I was not working; I was always doing something and staying busy.

In 1977, at the outset of the war, the job that I am now occupying, that of the National Executive Director of all of the YWCA branches in Lebanon, was just then being relinquished by the person who had been in this job for 50 years. She was retiring and had not trained a younger person. At the same time, many qualified young people were leaving Lebanon because of the political situation, so they convinced me to take a staff position and train a younger person to take over. So that was my plan: to train this person for two years. Unfortunately, we never knew when the war was going to end, or how bad things were going to get, so that initial two year position has now stretched to eighteen! I succeeded in training five or six different persons, who have all since emigrated and left the country, either because they did not want to live with such fear and risk, or because they wanted to pursue higher degrees. Some never came back, and if they did return with a doctoral degree, they weren’t very satisfied with a job here because the salaries we offer are not what they can earn elsewhere. Many young professional women are giving us their time and their expertise free of charge as volunteers, and this gives us the responsibility of giving them leadership training, channeling their time and coordinating their efforts. We now have 800 volunteers: 600 adults and 200 youths spread throughout the country, working with the eight centers. Our job now is to coordinate this large network, and to respond to requests for new centers. We have two more requests for new centers, in the Mountain and in the Jounieh area, because women who are not involved in a paying job, and who worked in the past, feel a need to get involved, to serve, and to do something to develop themselves and their society. So that is our focus, to help these women to help others.

LKI: How did the war, and all the phenomena surrounding it, change the expectations you had for your life and for your children’s lives?

MK: I can say that, in the seventeen years of war, we stopped only about three times to consider the question of whether or

not we should leave. Very early in the war, when my parents were still living, I went to my father who was Professor of Physics at AUB (and who really had a tough time acquiring his university education, because he was from a poor family and he had to walk to the campus at the beginning of each semester from his village in the Koura district with his mattress on his back!). He was a man who really valued his education and the fact that he was able to give each of us the chance to get a good university education in spite of all those hardships. When I felt that the war was heating up, I went to him for advice. "Baba," I said, "what do you think? Should we pack up and leave?" You have to realize that the shelling of Beirut was really intense at that time, 1977-78. It was very frightening; we had close hits in the building where we live, near the American University Hospital, which was the real target of the shells. And he said to me, "I have lived through two world wars which were much worse than this. The famine and starvation we experienced during World War I was much worse, compared to what you have seen so far. So I advise you to stay here, to hold your ground, because this will pass. But don't disrupt your life and the lives of your children by uprooting them and dropping them into a new community and a new culture, because you'll never know what that will do to them. It's much more stable to stay here with the security that they have within their society and their family." So that was our decision: to stay in Lebanon. My husband and I had a very good understanding about this. We prayed a lot about it. I must say that I have the privilege of faith, a very strong, living faith in God. So we prayed together and asked for a number of signs that would help us to make a decision. One [sign] was for a stable job that would give us a living, and a second was a ministry that the Lord would use us for, and the third was our decision that as long as my parents lived, I wouldn't leave, and if the war got really bad, he would take the children away and I would stay, and that we would never blame each other for any decision taken by either of us. If something were to happen, I would never say to him "It was all your fault!" or vice versa, because we realized that there was no way to make a perfect, stable, mature decision in such circumstances. On another occasion, when we were visiting in the US with friends, people there started pleading with us, "don't take your children back there! Don't let them risk the chance of living through that war!" We looked around and saw what was happening to their family life there, in America: the break-up of families and divorces — even in very conservative Christian families in the Baptist south — the alienation, the drugs, free sex, permissiveness — all of that really shocked us, so after seeing this, we gave up on the idea of leaving [Lebanon], and we came back here. We felt we had to choose between two kinds of death: the physical or the cultural. Here, if it's God's will that one of our children should die of a bullet, it is in God's hands, not in ours. We will all die anyway, physically. In the West, it would be a slow, tortuous cultural death. We would see our children drifting away from us, we would start making all kinds of allowances, and there is no way of

bringing them back. So we decided to take our chances with physical death. Two of our children went overseas when they were older, after their values were developed and they were more mature, so they were safe from some of the more dangerous cultural aspects of the West.

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LKI: How did the experience of the war affect you as a person and as a professional, both positively and negatively?

MK: I can say that it was mainly positive, because it gave me more determination, it made me more tenacious, more committed to stick it out and make the best of a bad situation. And apparently, this is the natural outcome of investing in a bad situation. The more you give to it, the more you think: "Now, I'm going to pack up and leave?! No way! I am going to sit right here and see the fruits of my labors, my family's and my community's labors!" So, it made us very obstinate. At the same time, I also became very hopeful, because the war made me see the basic goodness of people on an everyday basis, such as the people who give us services, like the vegetable peddler and the butcher and the man who sells us bread. I also saw the goodness when people from lower and middle income families, who had just been stripped of everything because of the war, showed up here in Beirut looking for shelter and jobs, and I was also in touch with the more affluent members of society, who were active in volunteer work, so I saw how warm and sensitive people were to each other, how empathetic, how generous. People did not lose their sensitivity. War usually makes people more apathetic, but here, they became more empathetic. They never gave up, or said "khalas ! (enough!) — I've given enough of my time and money; I won't give anymore!". I also saw that, in spite of the length and destructiveness of the war, with so many armed militias roaming the streets, so little inter-personal aggression took place. A person like me, a Christian living in West Beirut and walking back and forth across the city every

day to my office, should have been mugged at least twenty times! It never happened, though. There was something about these Lebanese fighters, they knew us and we knew them. They had respect for women and girls. It's not like what happened later in the war in some of the suburbs (of Beirut), where foreign mercenary fighters were involved. They were strangers among us, and they really were ruthless to women and children. But if you want to talk about the small, daily wars and battles that were going on all the time inside the city, none of the crimes that happen during peace time in the West ever took place here in our neighborhood, because of the young men's respect for a woman; she is like a sister or a mother to them, so they won't touch her. I could shout at and scold the young militia fighters in our neighborhood — *'wa lou! `aib ash-shoum alaikum, ya shabab!* Shame on you boys! you've been shooting all night! Won't you finally give us some peace now and let your neighbors sleep?" — and they wouldn't talk back to me.

LKI: So you actually had some authority and control over the situation, in spite of the danger and chaos?

MK: Exactly, because it is in our religion (both Muslim and Christian), and a part of our family upbringing, and this gave me hope: In the worst situation, you could talk to an armed militia man who was in your area, like a mother to a son.

LKI: But do you think the same would have been true had you been a young single woman, rather than a married woman with nearly grown children?

MK: Yes. After so many years of war, I can say that 80 percent of what we saw, in both East and West Beirut, was the basic goodness of people: the sensitivity, the cooperation, the sharing — even the sharing of a single, last loaf of bread. Once during the war, we went to visit a relative, who is a nun in London. There was a general strike at the time, and consequently, a bread shortage. So the nuns were baking bread and sharing it with their congregations and the people there started asking us, after two or three days of the strike, 'How did you survive in Lebanon with not only a shortage of bread, but also the water shortage, electricity shortage, no garbage pick-up, etc., How did you manage?' And we told them simply, 'We shared. Friends and family members shared'. And their response was 'If a war like this happened in London, everyone would have died of hunger, because here, after just three days of a bread shortage, no one is sharing except these nuns!'

Of course, my experience of the war was not entirely positive! There was a lot of fear, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of anger and disappointment with the local and world leadership, but never with the people. The leaders are only ten percent of the population, but unfortunately, they are the ones who have the power.

In the post-war period, I am still seeing the good in people, but

if people are not giving as much now as before, it is because they are tired. We are drained physically, financially and emotionally. We carried a very big load during the war, as women and as Lebanese citizens. Each one of us was fulfilling at least five jobs instead of just one. I can give myself as an example: my husband was working and living in East Beirut much of the time, so I was in full charge of the house, which meant I had to do all of the chores at home — not just housecleaning — but running the electrical generator, getting the fuel, taking care of bills and finances, plus the additional daily burden of pumping up water and carrying it up several flights of stairs. Also, I was taking care of the pets and looking after the gardens of several people who had fled. Another job was maintaining my YWCA duties, and in an emergency situation, it got worse! We were the only people working full-time and delivering services; businesses and government offices were obliged to be closed because of the fighting, so many people were out of work, but we in the NGO sector went fully "into the marketplace" — our workload increased by at least 200 percent, especially because of all of the displaced people in need of our services. Later, when my son left Beirut, I had to take over all the tasks that he had been doing: helping and visiting the parents of his friends, taking them bread, fuel and water. There were so many aging mothers in the neighborhood who were more or less alone, because their children were all outside, so we neighbors had to bear their burden on a social level, a financial level and a personal level. Also, all contact and communication was by foot, since the phones and postal service weren't working. I must say, I was physically more fit in those days! Moreover, I took charge of a small weather station after my father died, *Marsad Nikula Shaheen*, which he had set up when AUB closed down their observatory. This voluntary service, of recording rainfall and daily weather conditions, was the only source of reference concerning the weather in Lebanon during the war.

But now, we are tired. We are aging; we need a younger leadership to take over, to come back home to Lebanon and to take the burden from us. The younger generation is still abroad, more or less; there is a big generation gap in the leadership ranks. So many years of war have frayed our nerves and taxed our health, yet we are still carrying the load, which hasn't been taken over by anyone else. You just have to let some things in your life go. In my case, it was my social life. I just say 'no' to superfluous and leisurely activities, because I have to focus on those who are ailing, lonely or dying.

LKI: Do you think that women reacted differently than men to the war experience? Did women handle the war any better or worse than men, in your opinion?

MK: I think that there were men and women who handled the war badly, and men and women who handled it well. Women tend to be more emotional and sensitive than men, and that makes them more apprehensive and concerned about the safety