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### POLEMICS ON ABORTION: *A Pro-Choice Point of View*

On January 25th of this year, abortion was the topic of the popular Lebanese talk show, *Al-Shaer Yahki* ("The Wise One Speaks"). As usual, this pioneering program was offering a daring topic for public discussion and debate. The guests invited to discuss the various perspectives on abortion — moral, legal, psychological and medical — included religious authorities, lawyers, doctors and psychologists.

Given a unique opportunity to discuss thoroughly such an important issue, not one of the guests advanced a fresh point of view, reflecting the stultifying atmosphere of public debate in post-war Lebanon. A Catholic priest, reiterating the church's position, was adamant in his rejection of abortion under any circumstances. The program's host invented the most contorted scenarios involving the hypothetical situation of a young woman who is raped, pregnant, poor, and ill — but to no avail. The Church's teaching is clear: No abortion at *any* price, even if it would save the life of the mother. The priest's response to the needs of such an unfortunate young woman indicated a postponement of resolution into the distant future: "the church," he said, "will educate society in order to prevent such incidents from happening in the future." As if women were naive enough to believe the promises of an institution which has been unable to reform society for two millennia!

The lawyers and doctors were almost as cautious. All felt compelled to state their personal position on abortion, especially the women among them. Each stated clearly that they are unequivocally against abortion. The foremost lawyer for women's rights in Lebanon declared "I am, of course, against abortion," and one usually iconoclastic and outspoken gynecologist stated that, as a Catholic, she is against abortion, but then she dared to divulge the one and only exception: therapeutic abortion.

None of those present distinguished between their personal preferences and convictions and the possibility that women have the right to a different personal preference. Women's reproductive rights held a primary place of importance on the agenda of the International Women's Conference in Beijing less than six months ago, a conference to which Lebanon sent a large delegation. Nevertheless, in the course of the talk show, the issue of women's reproductive rights was silently excluded from the discussion.

Thus, what had been advertised as a controversial issue, having at least two different points of view, never matured into a genuine controversy. Everyone was on the

same side. It is unclear whether the program organizers failed to invite pro-choice people or whether the guests indulged in voluntary self-censorship. Regardless of decision-makers' opinions, the truth is that thousands of women in Lebanon are undergoing abortions each year. It is high time for all those concerned to urge the law to catch up with this reality. Abortions are taking place in Lebanon every day. At the earliest stages of pregnancy, they are performed under the guise of a minor operation termed dilation and curettage ("D and C"). Women who can afford to do so undergo this operation in Lebanon, which reflects society's hypocrisy. People are clamoring for the opposite of what they condone. The Lebanese Parliament and the public at large should address the topic of abortion in a mature way because many women who cannot afford a D and C procedure, or who decide to terminate an unwanted pregnancy at a slightly later stage (up to twelve weeks), are at risk of having unsafe abortions, especially when performed in unsupervised and unsanitary conditions.

There is no justification whatsoever for unsafe abortions. Similarly, there is no reason why unwanted infants should be abandoned in Lebanon's garbage dumps or at the doors of orphanages throughout the country. It is a woman's choice, and hers alone: she should be able to make this crucial decision without fear, confusion, or coercion. No matter what she chooses, it will be she, more than the father of the child, who will carry the weight of responsibility for the rest of her life.

At the beginning of the aforementioned talk show program, a report was aired which related the sad story of Ikram, the mother of two children with thalassemia and a third child with Down's syndrome. Having become pregnant once again, Ikram petitioned the Islamic legal court for special permission to have an abortion. She never received that permission. Ikram's plight illustrates the complete disregard on behalf of Lebanon's religious institutions and state authorities for women's and children's rights. In the conflict between self-righteousness and the hard facts of life, I for one, know where I stand.

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*(Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Al-Raida, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, or the Lebanese American University. We invite contributions of opinions and rebuttals from our readers.)*