

WORKSHOP ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

By Ghena Ismail

In cooperation with UNIFEM, the National Committee for Lebanese Women's Issues implemented nine workshops targeted at defining the national strategy and the future work agenda for the Lebanese woman. These workshops, which were held in the Center for Continuous Care on June 26 and 27, covered a wide variety of topics such as women and the law, media, environment, economics, health, Israeli occupation and imprisonment, violence, education, and the decision-making process.

Every workshop was convened in a separate room. The resource person for the violence workshop was Dr. Nazek Yared, a novelist and Arabic professor at Lebanese American University. The moderator was Mariam Sleem, a psychology professor at the Lebanese University and the reporter was Ghena Ismail, IWSAW staffer and Al-Raida Assistant Editor.

The objective of the workshop was formulating plausible solutions and tangible actions to respond to the existing problem of violence. The discussion was primarily based on a paper submitted by Dr. Yared, focusing specifically on the work agenda.

A comment was made on the various forms of violence against women. The commentator explained that violence against women is not committed only by strangers. He noted the presence of other forms of violence, such as violence inflicted by the husband and by other women as well. While everybody seemed to agree on the presence of various forms of violence, there was not as much agreement on the exact definition of violence. One of the participants inquired as to what types of actions constitute violence. He raised the following question, "Is the father who slightly hits his son or daughter, in order to reprimand him or her, considered violent?" The audience seemed reluctant to respond. It appeared to me in the beginning as if they did not know the exact answer. Later on, however, while a number of the women participants were preparing the final paper to be submitted to the national committee, the answer came out: Even such slight hitting is a form of violence that necessitates a response.

It is worth noting that the title of the workshop was critiqued by one of the participants, who stated that "domestic violence" would be a better term. She argued that since violence may afflict all members of the society, it should not be associated with a certain gender. Most of the participants, however, disagreed with her; they based their disagreement on the fact that "women are the primary victims of violence."

Because women are primary victims of violence, and since violence will persist regardless of all the measures that may be taken to fight it, the idea of founding shelters was discussed. One of the participants expressed her fear, though, saying that the shelter can have harmful effects in the long run. She observed that "in the United States, for example, any woman who enters a shelter is then subject to worse forms of violence once she leaves the shelter and returns home." The reply to her

warning was that once a shelter is founded, a follow-up committee should be formed to stay in continuous contact with the victim. The topic of shelters aroused the most debate.

Eventually, the workshop yielded the following resolutions and suggestions:

1. Unite the efforts of the various NGOs concerned with the problem and divide the work among them in accordance with the national strategy.
2. Conduct statistical studies in Lebanon about violence and the attitudes of people towards it.
3. Change woman's traditional image in school text books, and incorporate subjects related to the problem of violence within the educational curricula.
4. Monitor the messages transmitted by the media, change woman's traditional image in it, and produce quick, engaging public service announcements that condemn violence.
5. Give licenses to the institutes that fight violence against women.
6. Amend laws and watch over their application.
7. Import experts on violence from the West to train social workers, police forces, psychologists, doctors, lawyers, judges, educators and parents.
8. Attempt to find a voluntary team of social workers, lawyers and psychologists who are willing to help the NGOs in this domain.
9. Teach the women means of self-defense and self-respect.
10. Found centers for receiving complaints, guiding victims of violence and supporting them, and spreading the word about these centers.
11. Encourage the women to study the science of religion, so that they can reinterpret religion in an objective manner.

Following the discussion, the participants were expected to complete a form in which they had to clearly specify the measures that need to be taken, the obstacles that may arise, the expected results, and the institutes or organizations to be involved, and finally, the financial and human capacities required to implement the program.

Overall, the workshop was successful. The participants succeeded in formulating a realistic work agenda. Yet, I have to say that at certain points the participants were not able to communicate or discuss their ideas very clearly. This may be attributed to the fact that violence against women is a "new" topic in our society. Of course, when I say "new", I do not mean so in terms of practice, but rather in terms of public discussion. Up until very recently, this type of violence was a "taboo" that no one dared talk about in Lebanon! Women who were subject to violence felt too embarrassed to talk about their situation. Today, after the topic emerged in public, many battered women feel more encouraged to share their experiences with others. In this workshop, for instance, among the participants was a thirty-four year old woman who has recently separated from her husband after seventeen years of physical and psychological abuse.