

## RECOGNIZING AND CONFRONTING POVERTY IN ALL ITS FORMS

A brand new, silvery-gray Range Rover idles in Beirut's afternoon traffic jam. Its driver, an impeccably coiffed and elegantly dressed middle-aged woman, is having an animated conversation with a friend on her cellular phone, her hands, sparkling with diamond rings and golden bracelets, flash in the afternoon sunlight as she talks. From the curb, a young girl no more than eight years old, her eyes dull, her hair matted, her faded dress fraying at the edges, shyly moves towards the Range Rover. The glamorous woman shifts her position in an effort to ignore the street girl begging at her window. But as soon as the child taps on her window and lifts up a dirty cardboard box of cookies wrapped in cellophane, the woman loses her poise, rolls down the window, and shouts decidedly unlady-like obscenities at the child. A moment after retreating to the curb, the girl approaches another car, only to be coolly ignored by the driver.

In contemporary Lebanon, this daily, indeed, hourly, scene speaks volumes about the socio-economic situation of the country after sixteen years of war and seven years of a difficult post-war reconstruction period. As the articles in the File Section of this issue of *Al-Raida* attest, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing rapidly in Lebanon and other Arab countries. Although this trend has detrimental effects on society as a whole, it is women and children who suffer most from increasing levels of poverty and all the ills that accompany a profound lack of basic resources: disease, illiteracy, infant mortality, crime, and mental illness. In 1995, the Platform for Action issued at the conclusion of the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing cited the world-wide feminization of poverty as a looming problem requiring immediate attention and amelioration. So far, the response of most governments, including those of the Arab world, has been silence.

This lack of adequate attention to poverty in general and its gender implications in particular points to another form of poverty, just as insidious though not as apparent as the paucity of resources afflicting increasing numbers of people around the globe: the moral and intellectual poverty of so many of the world's leaders in this crucial period of history. In a turbulent era demanding vision, empathy, courage, creativity and justice in order to meet the momentous challenges of environmental degradation, arms control, over-population, education, reconciliation, and redistribution of wealth, most of the world's decision-makers instead conduct themselves like spoiled, greedy and selfish children fighting over toys and turf. Although economic poverty may destroy the lives of many individuals (primarily women and their dependent children) in various countries in the short term, the moral and intellectual poverty of world leaders may well lead to the demise of the entire human race, men and women alike, in the long term.

As we ponder the troubling phenomenon of poverty on the local, regional, and international levels, we should consider

poverty in all of its manifestations economic, social, political, moral, intellectual, and spiritual. Poverty is a multi-faceted and pressing issue that requires intense engagement, honest reflection, and continuous self-criticism from all of us if its evils are to be surmounted. Although it may seem strange to read this statement in a venerable feminist publication, we must also view poverty as primarily a human issue, not specifically a gender issue. Although women are grossly over-represented in the ranks of the world's impoverished, displaced, oppressed and abused while greatly under-represented in the ranks of the wealthy, the powerful, and the makers of decisions, poverty's effects poison the lives of all humans: men, women and children. Sexual discrimination undoubtedly plays a significant role in the feminization of poverty, particularly in the developing world, but we must not let strictly feminist interpretations of this phenomenon blind us to the unjust and unfair structures of power that exclude and marginalize women as well as men from participating in the decision-making processes which will influence their lives in the coming century. As various forms of power become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few, men and women in the developing world are being divested of more and more resources, not all of them material. Confronting and overcoming this pernicious trend will require that men and women join forces to secure their social, political, and economic rights in a concerted and collaborative manner.

It is fitting to conclude this editorial with the observation that Lebanon, and indeed the entire international human rights community, was recently impoverished by the loss of Attorney Laure Moughaizel, a woman who did so much in her sixty-nine years of life to counteract the moral and intellectual poverty that leads to abuses of human rights. Although a feminist, Laure realized that inequality, poverty, oppression, and injustice are human issues, not just women's issues. In these pages last year she commented "Women's rights are inevitably part of human rights...I simply cannot imagine humanity divided into two sections: one for women and the other for men". Laure's wealth of vision, intellect, and humanity shines through in the following remembrance by Wissam Abou Harfouche, a friend and colleague: "Never was woman's equality to man Laure's ultimate goal. What will it benefit a working woman if she is equal to a man whose wage is too low to secure a respectable living?" Laure Moughaizel enriched Lebanese society and the lives of all who came in contact with her in ways too numerous to mention. She leaves us with a precious legacy: the example she set by showing grace under pressure and dignity amidst tragedy, and most importantly her unquenchable courage, shown again and again in her willingness to speak truth to power.

Laurie King-Irani  
University of Balamand