

Special Features

SITT ANISSA RAWDAH NAJJAR

FOUNDER OF THE VILLAGE WELFARE SOCIETY

By Myriam Sfeir

“You have pioneered in a most fundamental movement, persevered in nourishing its growth with dedicated purpose and sacrifice, inspite of many difficulties, and you have triumphed. You deserve the best reward Lebanon can offer - the recognition that you have made a major contribution to the revival of its village culture, without which there will be no Lebanon.” (Afif Tannous)

“Prior to popular and widespread interest in development, the Village Welfare Society, since its inception in 1951, adopted rural advancement as its main goal ... (Maitre Laure Moughaizel)

For the past 46 years Sitt Anissa Najjar has been actively involved in improving the living conditions of rural women through the Village Welfare Society (VWS), a non governmental, non profit, and non secular organization she founded along with her colleague and friend Evelyne Bustrus. It started off as a commission under the umbrella of the Lebanese Women's Council and in 1953 the society acquired a permit and became an association.

The idea behind this project came about following several discussions, between Najjar and Bustrus, on rural women's issues, their rights, education as well as their role in rural life. The aim behind the Village Welfare Society was combating illiteracy and eradicating ignorance through “enlightening the mind.” It sought to make use of the rural women's potentials in order to avoid rural socio-economic crisis and prevent rural exodus to the cities. Moreover, it called for the preservation of culture and the formation of a rural civilization that is distinct from the city civilization and able to face up to it.

After much investigation and deliberation it became apparent that illiteracy, ignorance, lack of sufficient income, deficiency in governmental curricula, boredom, etc. retard the realization of such a goal. In order to achieve the desired

objective, Najjar along with a group of women members started organizing workshops for rural women in three Lebanese districts namely the North, al-Shouf, and al-Metn. The training sessions included topics such as home management, child care, nutrition, rural industries, and hygiene. Women were also trained in income generating activities like sewing, weaving, household crafts, pottery, etc. and the goods produced were sold to interested buyers. The results, according to Najjar, were very promising:

“When the women participants began earning their income, they became more confident and developed a sense of leadership and equality.” Although most of the women who joined were illiterate, they devised their own techniques in order to understand the sewing lessons. Najjar explained: “The women were taught how to write the numbers and instead of inscribing the items such as the collar, the waist, etc., they drew them.”

The training sessions also contributed to a change in mentality on the part of the men. Given that the consent of the men' villagers was needed, Najjar along with her colleagues set out to gain their approval and support. After explaining to the men the

purpose of the project, the latter were convinced that education would result in better family relations and a more equitable distribution of household and parental responsibilities. Najjar asserted, “the men were so pleased to the point that they urged their women to attend our workshops. They also bragged to other men about the products made by their women.”

With time, the work of the VWS expanded and through their activities they succeeded in reaching out to women in 22 villages in Lebanon. To insure the continuity of the work, Najjar and her colleagues decided to approach the younger generation by opening three schools for them in Al-Shouf² and the South.³ These schools offer, along with the governmental Brevet certificate, a distinct certificate called the Rural Brevet. The latter, devised by Najjar, incorporated various subjects in order to fill the gap resulting from the



shortcomings of the governmental educational system. According to Najjar, "although the curriculum adopted in public schools teaches one to read and write, it fails to create any incentive for further educational pursuits and neglects women's familial obligations and responsibilities."

The Rural Brevet, which aims towards the "literacy of the mind," introduces young female students to several subjects. Besides courses in health,⁴ nutrition,⁵ first-aid, child care, budgeting, home economics, home management, psychology, politics,⁶ literature,⁷ religion,⁸ agriculture,⁹ women's rights,¹⁰ girls are taught to be money earners and share in household expenditures. Moreover, they are instructed in household crafts such as jam making, canning, farming, pottery, sewing, and other money making activities.¹¹ Furthermore, girls are trained, through the women's agricultural extension program, in poultry raising, bee keeping, basket-making, silkworm raising, and silk weaving. Other school courses are also offered such as theater and music. The topics tackled in the Rural Brevet provide women with education which gives them initiative and improves their living conditions. Najjar asserts: "After acquiring the Rural Brevet, a woman matures and becomes a conscientious citizen and an emancipated individual enjoying a developed personality."

The VWS nowadays faces heavier responsibilities and problems brought about by lack of funds, the ill effects of the war, and the scarcity of women and men willing to do voluntary work. Najjar holds that the Village Welfare Society started off with 60 members, but the number shrank during the war years, and nowadays, the society includes 25 members only: "Owing to the war and confessionism, I lost many very active and dynamic members. Some members fled to the Eastern suburbs of Beirut and others were forced to give up their work because they were threatened by political parties representing their sects. Given that I was the president of the VWS and belonging to the Druze sect, some of the members of the VWS were accused of collaborating with the Druzes. In fact the VWS is a secular association and we worked for our country Lebanon and never for our sects."

Najjar is currently preparing a booklet entitled "Literacy of the Mind" in which she describes the Rural Brevet offered at the Village Welfare Society and the courses it requires. The booklet contains instructions to teachers and

social workers on how to improve the situation of rural women, help them engage in rural life, train them in income generating activities, prevent rural migration etc. The booklet also includes various articles on literature, history, theater, etc. written by prominent academicians in these respective fields. It also contains some cooking recipes as well as instructions on how to use pesticides and fertilizers. "Hopefully, this booklet will help incorporate these subjects into the Lebanese curricula and will serve as the building block for devising a college certificate specialized in social work for rural women."

IDENTIFICATION CARD

Anissa Najjar was born in Beirut, Lebanon and brought up in a highly patriotic and secular environment. She attended the Ahlia Girls Schools until she received her Brevet certificate. She joined Beirut College for Women (BCW) for two years until she acquired her high school degree and graduated from the American University of Beirut (AUB) with a B.A in Group Seven, a major which included courses in Sociology, Political Science, Education, Economics, and Arabic. She also holds a minor in pre-medics. She participated in AUB's Village Welfare projects and edited the magazine Al-'urwah Al-Wuthqah at AUB. She traveled to Iraq and worked there for 5 years as principal of two schools namely Madrasat Karkouk Al-Mutawasitah and Madrasat Thanawiat Al-Mousil. She served in Dar Al-Mualimat in Iraq. She presided the Lebanese Women's Federation later known as the Lebanese Women's Council and served as its secretary for several years. She founded the Village Welfare Society and has devoted 45 years of her life to it.

End notes:

- 1 The father or spouse of the women participants.
- 2 In the Shouf district the VWS built an elementary school in Knaisseh and an intermediate school in Dairkousheh.
- 3 The school in the South is in Maarakah, Tyre.
- 4 Students are taught about their bodies and the transformations that occur from puberty to old age.
- 5 Students learn to detect the cheap nutritious goods, the ingredients that make up their daily food intake, and the importance of consuming fats, proteins, and carbohydrates, etc.
- 6 The history of the Arabs, the Palestinian cause, Arab nationalism, etc. are topics studied in this course.
- 7 The aim behind this course is to try to erase the inferiority complex rural women suffer from by acquainting them with prominent women in history and literature and the roles they played in society.
- 8 The different religions prevalent are introduced and students engage in discussions concerning the significance of religion, the rights of women in religion (Islam, Christianity, and Druzism), etc. Such a course renders students less confessionist and more open minded.
- 9 Students are taught how to make use of accumulated waste and transform them into fertilizers, and how and when to use pesticides and fertilizers.
- 10 This course provides women with knowledge of parliamentary rules, inheritance laws and civics in order to join public life. The women students also receive Robert's Rules of Orders, on how one forms an association and participates in municipal life.
- 11 Elementary courses for beginners.