

A WOMAN Taxi Driver

By Myriam Sfeir

She is Virginie Asmar the only female taxi driver among forty men working at Auto Tour, a reputable taxi company. When I first heard about her I was intrigued to find out what compelled her to take up such a male dominated profession. I called Auto Tour and fixed an appointment.

On meeting her, I could see that she was more than ready to answer my queries. She told me that prior to her present job, she had worked as an independent contractor (a tailor) for a factory that manufactures shoes for Bata; however, owing to the company's deteriorating financial situation the management stopped contracting independent tailors. Consequently, Asmar lost her job and remained unemployed for over four years. She explained that there were no jobs available at that time and when talking to her cousin, who is a taxi driver, about her situation she jokingly proposed applying to a taxi company. Contrary to her expectations, her cousin encouraged her and she started seriously contemplating the idea. She called up a colleague of hers who works for Auto Tour and asked for help. He was very supportive and offered to fix an appointment with the manager. Several days later she met with the operations manager, and the owner of the company offered to give her a job on a trial basis. In the meantime, she was required to buy a Mercedes Benz and acquire a public driving license.

When asked how her parents reacted to her choice of profession she explained that at first they thought she was joking, but when they realized that she was serious they did not interfere. According to her, they couldn't complain for it was a respectable job in a reputable Taxi company. Besides, she maintained that they had confidence in her and looked upon her as a tough and responsible person capable of deciding for herself, particularly that she is single and is therefore free to choose a profession.

Asmar asserted that she never experienced any blatant discrimination either on the part of her employers or her colleagues. Yet, she is bothered by Auto Tour's reluctance to send her on night trips. She

holds: "If there is a trip at night they always make sure not to send me. I know that it is not against me personally but because I am a woman. Besides, although it's been approximately three years since I started working at Auto Tour, Mr. Saibeh still worries about me. He often calls, during working hours, to check on me especially when I go on long distance drives." She also admitted that when her colleagues first found out that a woman would be working with them they objected, but the manager explained to them that the decision had been made and that they had no choice but to accept the idea.

Asmar maintained that she works in the area of Jal el-Dib because she lives there and knows it inside out. According to her, this applies to most drivers: "each one of us works within his/her area." In theory, Asmar asserted that she is supposed to work from 5:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. but it is not always the case: "Every morning I receive a call from the office concerning my hours for we drivers go by turns. If, for instance, I fail to report, another driver takes my turn." According to Asmar, being a taxi driver is simpler than sewing shoes. She affirms: "My work is enjoyable yet it is tiring because drivers in Lebanon are undisciplined, and the traffic jams are a problem."

People's reactions varied yet on the whole they were mostly positive. According to Asmar, "most of our clients began eventually to ask for me personally whenever they called for a cab, and many women felt more at ease with me. Among the problems I faced earlier on was that clients who had ordered a taxi failed to recognize that I was their driver. So after several incidents, the operator decided to inform the clients in advance that the driver is a woman. Only a small minority rejected the idea of a woman driver, while many others welcomed it."

Asmar affirms that some men felt uncomfortable in her car because pedestrians made fun of them. Even traffic control policemen harassed her. Asmar recounted several incidents where policemen stopped her to inform her that it was illegal to drive her husband's cab: "Once a policeman advised me to remove the Taxi sign when driving my husband's car. I told him that I was single, and this was my car for I was



a taxi driver, but he thought I was joking. The man received the shock of his life when I showed him my papers.”

In Asmar’s opinion, “more women ought to join this profession by seeking respectable taxi companies. Nowadays some advertisements in newspapers require female taxi drivers, but not all such companies consider the job an honorable one. Some companies employ girls for other purposes. I recently came across an add in the newspaper requesting four women drivers. I called the company out of curiosity, but it turned out that they wanted single women to work at night.”

In order to obtain more information about the circumstances behind Asmar’s employment I met with the company’s operations manager Mr. Faris Saibeh. According to Saibeh, Virginie payed them a visit and expressed interest in working for Auto Tour. So she was asked to fill in an application form: “I studied her application and to be honest at first I was hesitant because of the traditional Lebanese mentality. Yet the decision was mine and in spite of everything I decided to employ her on a trial basis since at Auto Tour all drivers undergo a two month trial period before they are employed. I wanted to give Virginie a chance for she was tough and respectable.”

Saibeh explained the pros and cons of having a female driver among his male dominated team: “ We encountered many problems at first for some people refused to have a woman driver. The reasons varied: some clients had no confidence in her driving, while others were uncomfortable and did not feel at ease perhaps because she threatened their manhood. Besides, there is a prevalent misconception among our local and Arab clients that a woman who drives men around is improper and indecent. All these variables were taken into consideration for our reputation was at stake. At the same time, we received positive feedback too: “Many female clients felt more comfortable with a woman and preferred her to a male taxi driver. Besides a lot of mothers favored having a female drive their children and teenage daughters around especially at night. Virginie attracted a lot of publicity. Once the media found out there was a female taxi driver working at Auto Tour several newspapers, magazines, and T.V. stations wanted to interview her.”

Saibeh admitted that he worries a lot about Virginie: “I frankly do not feel comfortable sending her out at night. I feel responsible for a weaker person who cannot defend herself the way a man does when he is behind the wheel. Although all our drivers who work day shifts are expected to work at night when needed this rule does not apply to Virginie. With Virginie its different, she ought to finish work no later than 5:30 p.m.”

ENDNOTE

1. Asmar has appeared on several local T.V.stations namely ICN, Future Television, Télé Lumière, Tele Liban, etc. and has been interviewed by several Lebanese and Arab magazines and newspapers.

A MACHO HUSBAND

By Myriam Sfeir

“I have lived with my husband for donkey’s years. I cannot stand it but there is nothing I can do about it for I have no money, no one to turn to, and nowhere to go.” These are the words of Umm Adel,¹ a domestic worker who suffered a great deal at the hands of her husband. Umm Adel is originally from Turkey. She was orphaned at an early age and was raised by her paternal uncle who could not afford to send her to school. Her uncle and his wife loved her dearly, so they decided to marry her to their son. Umm Adel was only 13 years old when she married. Her husband treated her very badly, and one year after their marriage he took a second wife. Her in-laws were very upset with their son and pressured him to divorce Umm Adel. When he refused they drove him out of the house. Yet, Umm Adel maintains: “My husband threatened his parents and swore that he would harm them if they interfered in his life. They couldn’t do anything to stop him for he had a mind of his own.”

Upon recalling the harsh and destitute life she has led Umm Adel recounts: “We remained in Turkey for several months, and after that we moved to Lebanon where we rented a tiny flat in a poor neighborhood in Beirut. I am still living in that same flat, along with my youngest son and my husband. The flat, which consists of two rooms and a tiny kitchen, used to be inhabited by 14 people. I wonder how we² managed to live in it.” According to Umm Adel both she and her husband’s second wife had to work in order to make ends meet: “Even though our husband worked at the Port of Beirut, until it was closed down during the war, he never gave us a penny. In fact, he used to take all our savings. All the money he had was spent on indecent women.”

When asked about her relationship with her husband’s second wife Umm Adel asserts: “We are friends, we had to get along for we lived together in the same house for approximately two decades. Yet, we are very different in nature.” Umm Adel admits that, unlike her husband’s second wife, she never rebelled against her husband for she was raised to be submissive, subordinate and to obey the men in her life who always had the upper hand in everything. Umm Adel holds: “My husband’s wife is a tough woman and is no longer scared of our husband. She retaliates whenever he hits her and on several occasions, she along with her daughters, beat him up. Once she was able to move out of the flat, she managed, with the help of her children, to rent a place of her own. I never dared

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contemplate leaving my husband because I did not want to lose my children. I couldn't leave or live without them. Besides, I was all alone in Lebanon with no relatives to go to. Moreover, I knew that there was no way for me to divorce him since he is the man and he, alone, has the right to divorce."

Although Umm Adel has been working for the past 56 years, she has not saved a single penny. She maintains, "My husband used to beat me up and take all my money whenever I refused to give him my savings willingly." Umm Adel recounts, "My husband has not worked for the past 24 years, but he has no worries about money matters since all the financial responsibilities are taken care of by the "two slaves he has married". The only time he ever buys anything for the house is when he wants money from us. Umm Adel admits that her husband looks upon her as his personal maid: "Although we haven't actually spoken in 20 years, he expects me to cook for him. He is usually abusive when the food is not to his taste or when I'm too tired to cook." Umm Adel affirms that her children often interfered and tried to shield her from their father's abuse and violence.

Umm Adel argues that her husband is hated by all his children equally for "he is self-centered and has never shown them any love or affection." She recounts: "My husband succeeded in ruining our lives. He forced two of our sons to marry at the age of 13. The brides he chose for them were Kurdish relatives of his. My sons were miserable for they were still too young. Besides, thanks to him none of my children has received any formal education because he was busy spending our money on his mistresses: "Schools were very expensive³ and I could hardly afford to feed and clothe my children." Umm Adel pauses and broods over the viciousness and insensitivity of her husband: "What sort of man would bring his girl friend, who is as young as his

daughter, home with him and sleep with her on the only bed at home, while his wife and son sleep on the floor?"

Umm Adel's dream is to have a place of her own some day, yet she knows it is practically impossible: "The only reason why I can afford our current rent is that it is an old lease and is relatively cheap. Buying or renting a flat nowadays costs a fortune." Even though Umm Adel has been paying the rent for the past 50 years, the lease papers are in her husband's name so he has all the benefits and privileges. This is one of the reasons why she can't drive him out, coupled with the fact that he is abusive and violent: "I know that he can easily beat me up if I ask him to leave. I often contemplated throwing him into jail, but I worried about how people would judge me. Besides, his revenge after he is released from jail is something I wanted to avoid." Umm Adel recounts that during the war some friends, who witnessed the misery brought about by Abu Adel⁴, advised them to murder him and dispose with the body. Yet, Umm Adel admits: "Even though it could have been an easy task had we pretended he was shot on the street by some sniper, and although the idea was very appealing we couldn't do it."

Umm Adel is now around seventy years old and is still working, thanks to her husband. Although her sons help her out and often give her money, they have families to support. She holds: "All I have is what I earn. I have to work, otherwise I will not be able to pay the bills, buy food, etc." She asserts that she'd rather work than stay at home: "I enjoy my work, it is not tiring for my employers do not pressure me to work. They treat me like a member of their family."

It should be noted that Umm Adel was very scared and worried about being interviewed at first for fear that her husband would find out. When I explained to her that **Al-Raida** is published in English and is not sold locally, she felt relieved and spoke with frankness about her life.

ENDNOTES

1 Umm Adel means the mother of Adel. In the Arab World the parents of male children often adopt their eldest sons' name.

2 Umm Adel, her husband, his co-wife, along with eleven children lived in the house.

3 Being non-Lebanese, they do not qualify to send their children to free public schools.

4 Abou Adel means the father of Adel