

Sara's Husband

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I can never forget a tragic incident that occurred when I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I was paying a visit to my aunt when Sara (my aunt's niece), looking pale and anxious, burst in to tell my aunt that her husband who had been released from prison had been threatening to kill her. She said that he kept asking about how she managed to look after the family in his absence and where she got the money from. Strangely enough, my aunt was neither moved by Sara's tears nor by her plea for help. Instead, she flew at her and said: "This is your husband and your duty is to put up with him." The following day Sarah was brutally murdered with a kitchen knife in the presence of her four children who were threatened with the same knife should any one of them dare to open his mouth. Having heard the news, I, a girl of fourteen, felt abused and outraged. The image of my aunt collapsed there and then, and I felt a surge of anger and frustration take hold of me. The "angel in the house" was suddenly transformed into a monster who, in my eyes, was no less guilty than Sara's own husband. As far as my aunt was concerned, marriage was a timeless, unbreakable bond, and no amount of abuse would ever justify a wife's leaving her husband since her duty was to bow to the inevitable and submit to him even at the cost of her own life. Since the murder was considered an "honor crime", the husband was scot-free six months later, and Sarah was forgotten. Even now, after thirty years or so, honor crimes continue to plague our society and give men both the power and the license to do as they please. The society is on the man's side to the extent that he who murders a wife, sister or daughter is often justified for defending the family's honor and purging the community from vice and shame. The life of a woman is simply worthless when the supposed honor of the man and family are involved.

For many years, such crimes went unreported, but today there is a real chance for change. Regardless of obstacles, one cannot overlook the growing importance of the media as a political, economic and social force. Not only have the papers reflected honor crimes, but in many cases, they have influenced the direction society is taking by breaking the walls of silence surrounding physical and sexual abuse and making it a public issue. In many instances, the press have played a major role in challenging the general complacency about our moral values and about the sacred family by breaking the silence on domestic violence and launching awareness campaigns that would help to alleviate women's suffering. Among the major contributions of the press in Lebanon, is the extensive coverage of a conference that was held in Beirut in March 1998 in which women from the Arab and Islamic world recounted their harrowing stories and their suffering at the hands of men. One unforgettable story is the ordeal of a Kurdish woman married to an Iraqi who related how two of her husband's brothers who hated her "held me while a third used a knife to slice my nose off" (*The Daily Star*, March 16, 1998).

In addition to news related to domestic violence, the press have highlighted news of pioneer women who have made contributions to society such as Municipality Member, Roula Ajouz, Beirut Municipality council member; May Kahale, President Haraoui's female press attache; Nimaat Kanaan, Director General of the Ministry of Social Affairs; Nayla Tajer, the first to head the North Lebanon Order of Dentists; and Reem Haddad from the *Daily Star* and Huda Kassatly from the now defunct *L'Orient Express*. The press have also introduced the public to women working in male-dominated environments who have managed to break cultural taboos such as Virginie Asmar, a taxi driver; Marcelle Mheneh, director of car repairs; and Nidal Aad, a carpenter. The press have also highlighted the problems these women encounter in a conservative, oriental society. When she was elected Municipality Member, Roula Ajouz, tells us that rumors related to her private life began to circulate: "Some claimed I had an illegitimate child." (*The Daily Star*, November 21, 1998). While May Kahale maintains in a Conference on women's role in public life that when "I started my job at the presidential palace I often heard people asking if there was a lack of men in the country for the president to have appointed a female as his press secretary" (*The Daily Star*, November 27, 1997). Many of these women agree that a woman has to work twice as hard as a man to prove that she deserves the job. Men are allowed to make mistakes, but when a woman commits an error they blame it on her sex. Another piece of news covered by the press is the telephone hotline of the Lebanon Family Planning Association that helps thousands of women cope with family and sexual problems and provides expert advice whenever needed.



Scot-Free

In addition to coverage of news, the press have provided information about the laws and other official procedures, and have published statistics provided by the police as well as results of studies on domestic abuse and the physical and psychological effects on women and children. For instance, **Al-Nahar** (September 30, 1997) "breaks the wall of silence" regarding incestuous relations within the family and publishes a sample chart of cases of incest and adultery (1994, 1995) provided by the police. At the same time, the paper gives a list of legal sanctions that could be taken against perpetrators of such crimes. The papers also report details that may help other potential victims avoid attacks or encourage them to resort to legal action against the abuser. One could say that in some cases, the press - together with Women and Human Rights Organizations - have succeeded in pressuring the government to amend laws and pass new ones that give women human dignity and justice as well as visibility and prominence. In other words, one could go as far as to say that the mass media have not only managed to be a mirror, but in many instances, a major force behind change.

In addition to objective reportage, the press have gone as far as adopting and appropriating particular issues such as the one related to housemaids in Lebanon, be they foreign or native. Reem Haddad is a reporter for **The Daily Star** who has pursued the case of Sri Lanki maids in Lebanon and has recently received an award from the Sri Lanki government for her diligence and care. **Mulhaq Al-Nahar** (June 21, 1997) had a lengthy report on the state of Sri Lankan housekeepers in Lebanon. One example is the reaction of the parents of a young man who was accused by the housemaid of attempting to rape her. His parents dismissed the complaint as ridiculous since "it is impossible that he should do that with a Sri lanki." This extensive coverage in the press has succeeded in putting pressure on the government not only to make sure that the law is implemented, but also to amend other laws related to foreign laborers in Lebanon.

In fact, the media stirred public outrage regarding child labor in Lebanon following the ordeal of a ten-year old housemaid. MP Nayla Mouawad, head of Parliament's Children's Rights Committee, called on the government to pass a law banning employment of children under fourteen. The Lebanese Women's Council outlined recommendations to protect juveniles, and the Lebanese Union for the Protection of the Child urged the government to provide free education for all children and to raise public awareness through the media.

Despite the contribution of the press in raising awareness and pressuring the government to take action, one notes the disproportionate treatment of issues related to women in comparison with other topics. If there is a clear majority of women on Lebanese televisions where emphasis is placed on beauty and appearance, it is a completely different situation in the written media where men dominate the scene. This was a major topic of the Regional Conference on Gender and Communication organized by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World in association with the World Association for Christian Communication in November 1999. One speaker, May Elian, a reporter with **Nahar Al-Shabab**, was quoted as saying that "editors, political and economic writers are usually men, whereas women are given the "softer," less serious, fields of culture, society and environment'" (**The Daily Star**, November 13, 1999).

No wonder the press have not given women's problems the consideration they deserve. Although victims may be in the spotlight for some time, the reasons leading to their victimization are not covered since the press is monopolized by men, and accordingly, politics remains the major subject of coverage and interest. Therefore, the present definition of news should be expanded to include more coverage of women's social, political, and intellectual activities locally, nationally and internationally. Women's problems as well as contributions should not be used as fillers in certain sections or back pages of a newspaper or magazine, and the media should make special, sustained efforts to seek out and promote news related to women. What is required is not one article on women's problems once in a blue moon, but rather a continuous interest in women's issues and general awareness campaigns that would promote women's contributions at all levels.

