

A Council Resisting Violence Against Women

By Myriam Sfeir

We are aware of the difficult tasks awaiting us because we fight for new relations and conceptions which negate the causes of human oppression, whether male or female. We seek a new understanding of human rights. We do not pretend having the solutions but we seek to find the appropriate ones ... We are still at the very outset, and we know that we are facing major obstacles and severe confrontation with the patriarchal societies, who attempt to keep us confined to the traditional role which has been historically designated as being ours since the dawn of time. What prompts us to move ahead with our struggle is the amount of suffering reflected in the looks of those many women, the victims of domestic and other forms of violence, who come to our centers asking for help; those lost and begging faces, searching for solutions which would be miraculous under given social circumstances. (Zoya Rouhana, Arab Public Hearing on Legal Violence and Equality in the Family, p. 90)

Myriam Sfeir: Why was the Council established and when? What are its goals?

Zoya Rouhana: The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women, founded in 1997, was established as a response to the alarming percentage of violent acts inflicted on women. As you know, during the Beijing conference the issue of violence received a great deal of attention and was one of the basic themes discussed. Among the recommendations proposed, in an attempt to break the silence surrounding the issue and to strengthen the role of NGOs in countering violence, was a public hearing on violence against women. At the Beijing conference a universal women's court was held and after that the first Arab hearing was held in Beirut in June 1995 and was called the "Women's Court: The Permanent Arab Court to Resist Violence Against Women." It was attended by 14 different Arab organizations and various Arab women. The court was a symbolic forum and it received a lot of positive feedback. It tackled real life problems that afflict women in their everyday life. In the wake of this unique experience we decided to form the LCRVAW.

The goals of the LCRVAW are similar to that of the Arab court. One of the main objectives of this council is to shed light on the concept of violence against women and bring it to the forefront. The council aims to dispel the stereotype that violence against women is a private matter. Among its other concerns is to raise awareness on the phenomenon of violence, its causes and different manifestations. The council also attempts to exert pressure on Arab governments and NGOs in order to take measures to protect and support women victims of violence. Besides, it offers direct help and support to women subjected to any form of violence. Among the work undertaken is to disseminate information at the local, national and international level, lobby for legal and social reform, and provide free legal aid and counseling to victims of violence and networking with affiliated groups and organizations.

MS: What are the reasons behind violence and why is it a taboo subject?

ZR: The basic reason behind violence, I think, is the unequal distribution of power within the family. Throughout history men strove to dominate women and they succeeded in discriminating against them. Since men are the heads of the household and the patriarchs, they control and dominate women who are usually assigned a lower status. Along with that, the legal system does not protect women. Women are at a disadvantaged position because they have no access to "legal information, aid or protection." Besides, absence of laws and lack of effort on the part of public authorities to enforce existing ones encourages men to perpetrate violence against women. This does not apply to all people but is one of the causes of violence. For all these reasons the council came about.



Despite the fact that some Lebanese women's organizations did broach upon the issue of violence it was still a taboo subject that was not discussed openly. Upon its inception, the Council triggered other organizations to speak out and denounce violence. The media also cooperated in the sense that all media bodies started paying attention to the issue in question. Newspapers and magazines featured articles on



the subject, and talk shows and interviews with specialists were aired on radio and television.

MS: How do you help these women? What alternatives do you give them?

ZR: We were the first to introduce a hotline where battered women can call, talk to someone, and report a complaint. We also opened a counseling and guidance office where women receive legal help. We have a number of lawyers who volunteer their legal services and handle these women's cases free of charge.



Yet I must admit that we are often faced with endless obstacles because there are no laws to protect abused women, and social services are not available. No ministry has taken upon itself the task of combating (fighting) such a problem. In fact domestic violence is not even considered a problem, so how do we expect governmental bodies to offer solutions? Once society begins to acknowledge such problems, change becomes inevitable.

MS: So basically you offer advise, but these women still lack legal protection?

ZR: We realized that without consciousness raising, legal protection, and demanding that laws be changed there are very limited possibilities for help. Many women remain ignorant of their rights. We do not promise change and immediate solutions, all we

do is help them make use of, and benefit from the available services.

A lot of the women who come to us suffer from low self-esteem and low self-worth. Most of them need someone to talk to. Once they open up and recount their story they feel purged and empowered and are able to grasp their current situation. Some women are subjected to all sorts of violations, and they are not even aware of it. What we help them do is resist violence and revolt against the oppressor.

The most basic problem that faces us is that of the personal status codes. As you know we have 18 different sects in Lebanon and each sect has its own laws. What all these sects

have in common is their biased perception of women. All sects believe that a woman under all circumstance ought to obey and follow her husband. We at the LCRVAW refuse this subordinate position. We are working on changing the laws pertaining to divorce, custody, guardianship, and compensation. We believe that:

- women should have the same right to divorce her husband
- custody age should be 15
- a viable home should be provided for women and her children if dispute is to take place

We chose these laws because they discriminate against women and force them to stay in abusive relationships. Most women refrain from taking legal actions and asking for divorce for fear of losing their children. Most abused women are abandoned by their parents because the latter, either for societal or economic reasons, fail to take these women in. As far as alimony is concerned even when a woman is entitled to a sum it is usually a small amount. Moreover, most men evade paying these women their entitlements and come up with all sorts of excuses.

What we the LCRVAW are asking for is the creation of a governmental fund. These women will receive their settlements from the fund and the latter in turn will reclaim (recover) the money from the husbands. In doing so we protect the woman and her children. We are also calling for quick measures and immediate action as well as the lowering of legal fees. A lot of cases take for ever to be resolved (many years) and cost a lot of money.

MS: What are your future plans?

ZR: We are hoping to establish a shelter for women victims of violence, however, it is a difficult endeavor because we still have no governmental recognition and we lack the permit needed to become an NGO. When we first submitted our request for a license the government was hesitant to accept our request; however, we are told that our license request is being studied. We are not well favored because we are accused of corruption and breaking down the family.

Last year we organized an awareness campaign in schools. We held workshops on violence against women in 45 private schools. Around 1150 secondary students attended these sessions. We received positive feedback from both schools and students. Many students later volunteered their services and currently help us at the LCRVAW. Working with secondary students is very important because they are the future generation.

Our long term plan is to fight all sorts of violations because as you know there are different kinds of violations other than battery that take place. For instance, sexual harassment is of interest to us yet we rarely receive cases of the sort. Incest is also on our agenda but it will have to wait for next year. Until now we have helped more than 300 women, and we are hoping to do more in the coming future.




Suad's Case

Suad, who suffered at the hands of her husband, is a woman in her forties. She has been married to a soldier for the past 27 years. Since the first days of her marriage, she was frequently beaten by her husband. Even though Suad was hospitalized several times owing to the severe beatings inflicted on her by her husband, none of her 9 brothers and sisters helped her. On the contrary, her mother and father were satisfied with the advice to be patient and stay with her husband. During one of her stays in the hospital she found out from her 15 year-old daughter that the father (Suad's husband) had molested and sexually abused her. Suad was hysterical, and immediately after her release from the hospital; she visited a religious figure in her village and told him what had happened. When her husband had found out he went crazy and beat her up. She later reported what had happened to the police who put her husband in jail for 15 days. Upon his release, her husband battered her so badly that she was hospitalized for a long period of time

Suad hesitated to go back to her house and visited her parents to ask their permission to live with them. They refused to take her in, and Suad had to go back to her husband's house for she had nowhere to go. The beating resumed and became more intense, but Suad's only worry was her daughter. In order to protect her abused daughter, she married her off to a relative, left home with the rest of her children and slept on the streets for three whole days. She was desperate, so she tried talking to her husband's brother who advised her to go back home. She knew that she had to go back; she had no money to feed her children. Once back, her husband tied her up in chains and beat her with the help of his parents.

When she could no longer take it, Suad left again but this time without her children. She complained to the military court about her husband's behavior and went to Beirut where she lived with her brother. She found a job in a clothes factory. Yet, this did not last long; she received a letter from her children telling her that her husband was sexually abusing her second daughter aged 15. Suad went crazy and took the letter and presented it to the military court and filed for a divorce. She was not able to obtain a divorce yet the military court sentenced him to 18 months in prison. Besides, he lost his pension because of his immoral behavior.

Suad has not been able to divorce her husband because divorce procedures take a lot of time, and she can't afford to pay for all the legal expenses. Lebanese law is on the man's side since we have no civil law, all divorce cases are referred to religious courts. Muslim women can't divorce their husbands except if they have asked for the right to divorce, and Christian women find it very difficult to divorce. Because of him she lost several of her jobs, since he used to make an appearance at work, beat her up and make a scene. Suad and her children have suffered a lot at the hands of her husband. She still awaits in fear her future and that of her children.



*All battered women who need help or just someone
to talk to can now call the Hot Line
[03 - 829809] of the Lebanese Council to Resist
Violence Against Women.*

