

Diana Moukalled Recounts

By Myriam Sfeir

Once every month Diana Moukalled appears on Future TV in a new episode of her program **Bil'ayn al Mujarradeh** (Through the Naked Eye). In each episode she embarks on a new journey to a different country and reports from there on the prevalent situation. I met Diana Moukalled at the Institute for Women's Studies, and we managed to have a quiet conversation something that would have proven very difficult had we chosen Future TV.

Diana was born in Saudi Arabia and lived there until 1986 the year her parents decided to return to Lebanon. She admits that at first she felt alien in the country: "I didn't know much about Lebanon for I had only visited the country twice when very young. Even though I am Lebanese by origin I was not familiar with the customs, traditions and environment."

Having studied at the Lebanese University and majored in Media Studies and Journalism, she maintains: "I didn't plan or dream of becoming a journalist. Throughout the four years I spent at the university the idea of media and

journalism was not yet clear. As time passed by and after putting my profession into practice I began to like it." Moukalled admits that working at Future TV, especially the first three years, made her understand the real meaning of media and journalism.

Moukalled maintains that she was always fascinated by the documentaries prepared by foreign channels such as BBC, CNN and the Discovery Channel. "We Arabs are still amateurs when it comes to documentaries; we concentrate on interviews and talk shows." Documentaries are important, Moukalled asserts, that is why after working for several years in television she decided to prepare a program of her own: "I drafted a proposal and presented it to the administration of Future Television. The proposal received a great deal of enthusiasm." Moukalled explained that she chooses her topics and tries to tackle the issue at hand from different angles in order to include the human element in it. She maintains: "On the surface my program is political yet it includes lived experiences. I love the camera and I believe that it is a means to dis-



Diana Moukalled at work

cover the world. Whenever I am witnessing something I feel an urge to film it. If I have no camera with me or camera man I get very agitated. "

Moukalled admits that when she first started working she was preoccupied with her appearance and obsessed with the way she appeared on television, a phenomenon common among most Lebanese female journalists. However, Moukalled asserts that things have changed since then. She maintains: "Do not underestimate the power of mass media in indoctrinating a certain image of women. Journalists are so preoccupied with the way they look that they dress and act in an inappropriate manner. They wear very sexy and dressy clothes and put on too much make-up. Besides, they are too friendly with politicians and flirt openly with them, and sometimes their relationship goes beyond friendship. Moreover, it is well-known that some newspapers hire beautiful women to draw information out of the politicians."

Moukalled was brought up in a very liberal environment where she was encouraged to pursue her education.

Moukalled's parents are very supportive and proud of what she does. Yet that does not mean that they do not worry about her. She admits: "My parents are my number one fans and critics. Even though they are proud of what I have accomplished, they still worry about me because I work late, travel regularly, sometimes to dangerous places, and take risks, etc."

Her first journey was to Iraq and Kurdistan. The two episodes were very successful, but they

needed some improvement. Moukalled asserts: "We had an agonizing experience in Iraq. We were able to film, by the second, a girl catching her last breath. It was a devastating and shattering sight. I stood there knowing that this girl was dying. I saw her parents standing next to her unable to do anything. I wanted to catch it on camera so that everyone would see what is going on. I knew that this shot would help the Iraqi cause."

Moukalled traveled to Jordan to cover the issue of crimes of honor. Given that the percentage of honor crimes is very high in Jordan, she wanted to learn more about the dynamics of such a crime namely the perpetrator, the reasons behind his actions, the instigators and the killer's feelings after he kills his sister/mother/relative? etc.

Moukalled admits that she tried to detach herself from the subject at hand in order to remain objective. She explains: "My role is to project reality and not judge." She met a lot of people, including young university students who strongly believe that women should die when they deviate from the norm namely upon losing their virginity.

Moukalled admits that she had some difficulty convincing a man who had savagely slaughtered his sister to appear on camera. "I will never forget the absurd justifications he gave me for killing her." Yet, she managed to meet others who were willing to talk: "I met a man, sentenced to 6 years imprisonment, who slaughtered his sister after she was raped by their other brother. According to my interviewee it was all her fault because she seduced their brother. In such societies the blame always lies on women. I also met a family whose daughter was murdered because she lost her virginity. The mother is living in such contradiction: she is brainwashed to believe that her daughter got what she deserved yet at the same time she is grieving the loss of a child (saddened by the death of her daughter). She cried throughout our talk. One of the younger sisters confessed that she wished they had not killed her sister yet when she said that, she lowered her voice. She was scared of expressing her opinions even when not surrounded by her parents."

Moukalled asserts that the issue is very complicated and the aggressors are numerous. There is a very powerful conditioning process going on in Jordan.

"I was very upset when I heard that two women were killed one week after the episode was screened. Even though I never expected an immediate change yet I felt as if my efforts were futile and felt very sad." Moukalled continues: "I feel sorry for those people because they live in such contradiction. I found out from one of the women I met that she started hating her baby girl after her neighbors began accusing her of infidelity and insinuating that her daughter didn't resemble her husband. Her hate developed to a point where she decided to get rid of the daughter. She put the baby in the oven and asked her other daughter to light it. The sister, upon hearing cries, told her mother that there was someone crying in the oven and so the mother broke down and rushed to remove her baby daughter from the oven." Moukalled admits that she can understand why the mother did what she did. She affirms: "I am not justifying her actions but one has to put oneself in this woman's shoes." Moukalled recounts that some families contribute (donate) money and others collect money from one another to buy a gun. It is a system and has nothing to do with one person. Although the law is instrumental in putting an end to such a harmful practice, it is not enough."

Moukalled also visited Algeria to cover the conflict between the Islamists and the government. She wanted to find out who the victims were in such a crisis? Moukalled

Documenting the horrors and recounting the atrocities people were and still are subjected to underline the real crisis.



A Funeral in Algeria
Source: Index on Censorship, 3/1997
Credit: Abbas Magnum

narrates the stories of two women, a widow who was raped by the Islamists because her brother is a police man and a journalist who received death threats because of her writings. She also recounts the ordeals of the families she met whose loved ones were slaughtered in the many massacres: "Documenting the horrors and recounting the atrocities people were and still are subjected to underline the real crisis. The picture becomes clear when one witnesses the sorrows and fears of people. I recall very vividly the terrified look of a young girl who mistakenly thought that the camera was a shot gun. She began crying thinking that we had come to kill her."

Her trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan was unique and enlightening. The purpose was to learn more about Taliban, their philosophy, and plan of action, and to investigate the living conditions of the Afghans in Pakistan: "I was neither very comfortable nor very free in Afghanistan. Most of the men I talked to refused to be filmed because they believe it is haram (a shame). I met several women and only a few accepted to be interviewed. I met a woman who was turned into a prostitute by Taliban. They raped her and forced her to work as a prostitute. She had her whole face covered throughout the interview." According to Moukalled it is very hard to make sense of a movement like Taliban. On the one hand, it calls for the chastity and purity of women, and

on the other hand it engages in rape and encourages prostitution."

When asked which episode she likes the most her answer was "all episodes are dear to my heart, and each journey had something special about it. Moukalled maintains: "I met very interesting women in most countries that I visited. I was very impressed by Iranian women who are very active and militant. Even though they are forced to abide by the dress code, they are able to make use of the negative barriers to bring about something positive. Perhaps this dedication stems from the strict circumstances they are living under. I met an Iranian athlete who fought hard to be able to cover male sports events. She is the only female journalist to do so and is highly respected in Iran." Kuwaiti women are not that devoted to their cause, despite the fact that they are calling for political rights. Even in countries where women are granted the right to vote they tend to vote for the candidates chosen by the family. Most Kuwaiti women belong to the privileged class. Given that their material needs are satisfied, they are under the impression that they are liberated. Many Lebanese women are no different; they claim to be modern when in fact they are leading a shallow life. They are neither interested in what is going on around them. Women should be more serious when they demand for their rights. They are neither conscious of the advantages nor are they utilizing them."