

“And then I threw the vase at him and ran away...”

Harassment, Honour, Gossip, and the Reputation of Young Women in Jordan¹

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Salwa², who studies languages at the university, wanted to earn some extra money during the semester break. A friend had given her the address of an office that was looking for a part-time secretary. Although she first had some doubts, she eventually applied for the job (with the approval of her parents) because she desperately needed the money. The office was conveniently located in a huge office building between her home and the university, so that she could easily go there by bus, and go to the library after work.

After the first days of work, she appeared to be quite pleased telling me that work was “all right”. The only aspect that puzzled her was that the office was extremely small and run by only one man and another secretary. She had never done secretarial work before and was busy getting used to it, but as it did not seem to be very challenging, work soon became rather boring. This, however, did not bother her, as she was more interested in the money she would earn.

We did not meet for a few days, but when I saw her next, something had very obviously perturbed her. The usually very chatty Salwa hardly spoke a word. After having asked her at least three times what was wrong, she finally settled down to tell me her story:

Two days ago in the office, the manager asked me to run the office by myself, as he was apparently not happy with the work the other secretary was doing. I was very confused and did not know what to do. I had never run an office before. I didn't feel comfortable with that thought, especially that I can't go on working during term-time. But I thought, he's the manager, and he knows what he's doing. So I said nothing. Then, this other secretary was dismissed and I found myself alone in the office with the manager. He followed me everywhere and came really close to me. And then he said that if I wanted to go on working for him I should sleep with him. I was shocked, and of course said no, but when I wanted to leave he grabbed my arm. Somehow, I managed to free myself from that grip and got hold of

a china vase that stood on one of the chest of drawers. And then I threw the vase at him and ran away...

Salwa is one of the young women, amongst whom I was doing research in Jordan from 1997 to 1999. Like most of the other women I interviewed and whose life I was largely sharing during those two years, Salwa is educated and comes from a middle-class background. By the time she told me about this experience, we had become close friends and had started sharing intimate details of our lives. Also, by that time, I had heard and read a lot about the notorious “crimes of honour”, where more than twenty women yearly are murdered for allegedly sullyng their families' “honour”. For some time I had already been thinking about possible links between these killings, the notion of “honour”, sexual harassment of young women on a daily basis, and the destructive power of gossip.

But before I enter this debate, let me relate the rest of Salwa's story. After the incident, she went straight back home and told her parents about it, who, instead of consoling and supporting her – as I would have expected – scolded her for her behaviour. Like her, they were shocked by what had happened. Yet, her parents accused her of being, at least in part, responsible for what had happened. Of course, they forbid her from working, in this office, or anywhere else until she completed her studies. Salwa herself grappled with the consequences of this incident for months to come - she lost weight, complained about nightmares, headaches, and nausea, and

felt considerably less self-confident, and even talked of suicide. Maybe more than the incident itself, it was her parents' allegations and distrust that gave her such a hard time. She continued to pose a series of questions: "Why is it me to whom this thing happened? Where did I go wrong? Am I really the one to blame? What could I have done differently? How could God let this happen? Why did He want to punish me?"

At that time, I could not offer her an answer, but I did try to console her and tell her not to take these events too personally. Thinking about it now, I seem to be able to see some kind of link between this incident and other forms of harassment of young women in Jordan: the discourse about "honour", the fear of tarring one's reputation, and the detrimental power of gossip. Of course, these problems are multifaceted and complex and need to be considered at various levels: violence against and the murder of women, (sexual) harassment of women in Jordan at the workplace, the home, and in public places, the rhetoric about such phenomena, and gossip as a force that can destroy reputations and entire lives.

So-called "honour-killings" in Jordan and elsewhere are an atrocious, albeit a much debated phenomenon that attracts much attention. Since much has already been written about them³, even in this very journal⁴, I will not reiterate the facts and fiction about those heinous crimes here. Suffice it to say that the majority of Jordanians – thanks to prolific reporting internally and by an international community – are well aware of such incidents and speculate about their reasons and consequences. What shall be of interest here, is the apparent conviction of the murderers that the women they kill (usually relatives) have, in one way or another, shown "immodest" behaviour towards men – "immodesty" being interpreted as anything from committing adultery to talking to a male non-relative, or the suspicion thereof. Even though the victims do not generally share the same class background, these crimes appear to be less prevalent in the middle and upper classes of Jordanian society and mainly concern young, unmarried women.⁵

There are various ways of looking at these killings. There is that of violence against women in general, which is likewise subject to an increasing public debate in Jordan as the number and intensity of incidents seems to be growing.⁶ I have witnessed various cases, in which young women (most of them were not married) have been the victims of beatings by their fathers and brothers, sometimes their husbands. Some have interpreted such "honour killings" in economic terms,⁷ but can also be viewed against the backdrop of the notion of "honour" that is prevalent in Jordanian society. This highly complex construct has kept social scientists busy for decades. It has been claimed that

notions of "honour" were (and are) a crucial force in Mediterranean societies, one upon which lives depend, and one that is placed squarely on the shoulders of mainly women, who through their (sexual) behaviour can destroy the "honour" of their male relatives and, thus, their families.⁸ The abstractness of these ideas and the distance from everyday life experiences especially in the cases of women have been criticised by anthropologists, who have shown that notions of "shame" are much more relevant to daily lives of women (and men) and that they are a lot more flexible than previous theorising about fixed and abstract ideas of "honour" might suggest.⁹ In everyday discourse, they argue, the Arabic 'aib (shame) is considerably more prevalent than sharaf (honour), and the "code of honour", if it exists, changes over time and space, just as its translations into practice differ from one place to another.

Here, I would like to have a closer look at the junction of ideas of "shame", harassment of women in various places, and the discourse about such incidents. I hope to show that these different strands meet, where power relationships and hierarchies in a patriarchal social system are negotiated. In order to do so, let me first say a few words about some of the incidents of harassment of women in Jordan that I came across while I was staying there. I have already mentioned Salwa's experiences at work. Her case was the only "serious" incident in a work place that I have heard of during my stay in Jordan, yet this does not mean that they do not occur more frequently – it is more likely that my choice of target group (young women, often students) did not bring me into contact with more such cases. In contrast to domestic violence and "crimes of honour", harassment in the work place and in public places is generally not perpetrated by family members, but by non-relatives. Most of the young women I interviewed have personally experienced harassment in public, but since they are intimidated by the admonitions concerning their reputation, they often do not dare to publicise these incidents, let alone confront the perpetrators. This caution with regard to voicing protest and talking about it might be due to the widespread notion that it is generally women who are to blame for those incidents as they are said to provoke men in one way or another, which, again, triggers an assault, just as they are seen as the responsible party in a situation that causes an "honour killing".

Mariam, for instance, used to be harassed by a man every time she walked through a certain street on her way home from university. The young woman told her parents about it. Instead of comforting and supporting her, her father started shouting at her, telling her that it was basically her fault: "It's probably the way you dress that instigates such behaviour", he told his daughter.

Mariam later told me that “it doesn’t really matter what you wear, or if you’re walking alone or with a group of friends. Nothing will stop them harassing you!”. She felt that Amman’s streets have become something of a hazardous territory for women, and that “harassment of women in public places is becoming something very common, something that is not condemned by most people”. Just as the perpetrators in “crimes of honour” have to serve only minimal prison sentences, men’s misbehaviour, i.e. assaults and harassment of women in public, is generally tolerated by many people. In both cases, aggressors are usually proud of what they do, and the victims feel guilty thinking they are the ones that have instigated such harassment.

Examples abound. Nisreen was sitting next to her brother on a bus. Suddenly she started feeling someone pinching her from behind. The young woman was puzzled about what to do. She could not confront the man since her brother was sitting next to her (and would have been forced to confront him) and she did not want to tell her brother what was happening in order not to cause an uproar. She did not say anything for a while but kept moving closer to her brother hoping that the man behind would stop. He did not, and her brother began suspecting that something was going on. He asked Nisreen if anything was wrong, but she kept saying no. Eventually, the young woman’s brother looked behind him and gave the rude man a threatening stare. The rest of the journey home went peacefully.

But this is not the only side of the coin. More young women are becoming aware that what happens to them does not have to be endured in silence. They often get the advice to confront the harassers audibly, and generally the people around them come to their defence. Basima told me how she was walking through downtown Amman with her ten-year-old cousin. Suddenly, a young man approached them and threw some dirty words at the young woman. Basima was furious and embarrassed, but at the same time, thought that she ought to do something about such rude behaviour. She stopped the man and confronted him with what he had just said. People who started crowding up to see what was happening began shouting at the young man wondering if he would like it if someone said the same thing to one of his sisters or his mother. The aggressor was speechless and turned away, embarrassed.

I observed another young woman riding on a minibus, which was half-empty. She sat alone, a man sitting behind her. Suddenly she turned around and shouted that he should never do that again, that he should never ever dare to touch her, followed by a tirade of curses and a final “Got me!?” Embarrassed he tried to make excuses, explaining that he only wanted to push the

curtain aside, but by then the other passengers had turned around with looks clearly showing their dismay. The young woman turned back again and could terminate her journey in peace. The perpetrator, however, had lost “face” in this situation.

I have experienced similar situations several times myself, even though this would fall into a slightly different category, as I was usually recognised as “Western”¹⁰, and therefore it was assumed that other norms and values apply to me. On a Wednesday afternoon, on my way back home from university, I was stopped by a flasher, whom I decided to ignore. He, however, grabbed my arm, and, when I started screaming, threw me to the ground and tried to strangle me. Somehow I managed to struggle myself free, got up, and ran away. While running I noticed a man not far from where it had happened, who must have heard my screaming, but did not interfere. When I told an acquaintance, and elderly Jordanian, about it, he was outraged, and immediately went to the next police station, and reported the incident. In his and many other people’s view, this was a clear transgression of several limits – the offender not only transgressed Jordanian law, he also committed a gross offence against societal notions of behaviour in public, of “honourable” masculine behaviour, of conduct vis-à-vis women, and of the treatment of foreigners.

A similar incident (several years earlier in Syria) when one of a group of adolescents lifted the skirt of my friend who was climbing some stairs in front of him, led to comparable reactions. Upon hearing of the incident, our host pursued the offenders and informed the police. As we had to bear witness in the police station, these young men were violently punished for exactly the reasons mentioned above – transgression of Syrian law, of the code of public conduct with regard to other persons in general, and women and foreigners in particular – and the police officers were on our side.

As I have mentioned earlier, these cases differ from those in which Jordanian women are the victims of harassment, and might more appropriately be seen in terms of an “orientalism in reverse”¹¹ or a neo-colonial context¹². Yet, they show that women of all sorts of backgrounds are being harassed in public spaces and that these incidents are rather common. Another Jordanian friend of mine, wearing shar’iy dress, i.e. scarf and overcoat, reported how a man followed her, whistling and making comments, on her way from the bus stop to her home.

As such incidents become woven into a fabric of stories about the dangers for young women looming in public places, in the dark, or walking alone; they help to create a feeling of guilt among young women, as they are often portrayed, as in the case of Salwa or

Mariam, as having provoked men's harassment. Yet, there are also stories about women's protest against such shameful behaviour, and the refusal to take on responsibility for what happened. Just as the debate about domestic violence and "honour killings" is gaining momentum, it is becoming more customary to "speak up" in a situation of harassment. Even though this form of harassment is presumably a fairly recent phenomenon – in the past, women were less "visible" in urban public spaces –, it can be resolved according to the same "code of honour" that many perpetrators of harassment and violence claim for themselves. The feeling of public shame the bystanders experience if they do not scold the harasser can help young women not to "fall from grace", or to be "shamed".

As I have mentioned earlier, being the victim of harassment can mean considerable shame for young women, if they are considered at least in part guilty of provoking the offender. And according to the discourse and rhetoric of harassment, crimes, honour, and reputation, "shame" can lead to serious consequences for young women – anything from not finding a marriage partner, to death.¹³ "Shame" is therefore closely related to the victim's reputation, and even more directly to gossip (Arab. *kalam al-nas*) which is usually directed towards a particular individual, whose good reputation is then at stake. The narrative about harassment helps to enforce proper, not-shameful, behaviour among young women, as they are made aware of the potential consequences. Gossip can fulfill a similar warning function (for those, who are not directly involved), yet it has considerable destructive power for those concerned.

Even though, as I have mentioned earlier, stories about "crimes of honour" are quite experience-distant for the young women I met, and frequently evoke disgust among the listeners, they constitute part of a harassment-discourse which is upheld by nearly everyone, but particularly young women themselves and older women. I cannot count the instances when I was warned or heard other young women warn each other, or mothers admonishing their daughters about what might happen if they do not stick to certain rules. These rules included much more than mere security concerns, as Jordan remains, compared to many other countries, a fairly safe place. There were references to "attempted rapes" on a university campus that is locked at night and heavily guarded, i.e. to be wary of the dangers of walking alone, regardless where, and to go straight back home after work, and never be out after sunset.

While I was writing this paper, I read an article by Ann Stoler (2001), who, in a colonial Asian context, shows that controlling women in a patriarchal society constitutes a main element of maintaining the status quo. According to her, an outside threat to the colonial

social order in Southeast Asia, such as changing migration patterns, changing political or economic circumstances, or uprisings, resulted not only in increased allegations of rape and assault of "white" women by "native" men and their subsequent imprisonment and punishment, but also in stricter control and policing of these "white" women by the colonial authorities. The point here as well as in the case of the significance of the harassment-discourse for young middle-class Jordanian women is that it is not necessarily only actual incidents of harassment and violence that have an impact on their lives, but also, and maybe even more so, the body of narratives about them. They seem to be used to restore or re-create a social order that privileges men and puts young women into their "right" place. Whether this happens in response to an outside threat or perceived danger to the status quo remains debatable. It has been argued by Jordanians and Europeans alike that an increasingly felt influence of "Western" political, financial, military, social, and economic power is perceived as a threat to the social order and to "authentic" norms and values. This would subsequently lead to a return "to the roots", an augmented conservatism, and stricter control over women (especially the young), who are often thought to be the bearers of "tradition".

I do not have sufficient proof for this line of reasoning, since I have not spoken to men who harass or become violent against women. To me, it seems to be conceivable though. If arguments about "traditional, authentic values" receive renewed currency, then it might also be imagined that murders for whatever reason become sanctioned if they are claimed to be committed in the name of "honour", and that this can lend larger self-esteem to the perpetrators. Another view is that harassment of young women in public spaces is mainly an issue of social class and an outcome of rural-urban migration – men from rural areas, who have only recently moved to the cities see, in contrast to the village environment they came from, large numbers of women in the streets and feel "they are theirs, they just have to pick them like fruit from a tree".¹⁴

Speculation aside, the young women I met in Jordan are afraid of violence and fear harassment. Nearly all of them say they dread violence in general. Half of them are terrified by violence in the family, while the other half fear to become victims of theft and treachery. Not surprisingly, they also complain about depression, nervousness, tension and strains, and many have lost hope concerning the future. Half of the women suffer from frequent headaches, while the other half feel anxious and have constant worries.

By emphasising the significance of the rhetoric of harassment (as opposed to actual incidents), I do not

intend to minimise the problem – harassment in general and sexual harassment in particular are serious predicaments in the lives of young women in Jordan (as they are elsewhere on this planet). Likewise, it is not my aim to suggest that these young women, by actively participating in and maintaining this body of narratives, are themselves to blame for being victimised. The fact that they increasingly “speak up” and protest against harassment shows that they refuse to be viewed as “victims” in the first place. Perhaps the reluctance to talk about such incidents, as in Salwa’s case, is one strategy not to contribute to this rhetoric of harassment and violence against women, albeit a self-detrimental one. It cannot be denied, however, that this fabric of stories that is constantly re-woven as well as actual incidents of

adult harassment help to bolster patriarchal hierarchies in society.

One way of coping with such incidents and the rhetoric about them would be for young women not to go out into public spaces and, therefore, to subject themselves to familial (mainly male) control within the household. That this is not a viable option is obvious. Another way of tackling such incidents, a strategy that seems to be increasingly adopted by many young women, is to stigmatised such behaviour of men and to include it into the code of “honour” or rather that of “shame”. If male harassment is considered “shameful” and by wider sections of the society, then this could be a solution to the problem. Continued public debate about such issues seems to be a first step in this direction.

End Notes

1. A much shorter version of this paper was published in ISIM Newsletter, February 2001.
2. I am using pseudonyms throughout this paper in order to protect the women I have interviewed.
3. UNICEF, (1997). “The Situation of Jordanian Children and Women - A Rights-Based Analysis”. Amman. Middle East, (1999) no.295, November, p.45ff.
4. Faqir, Fadia (2001) ‘Intrafamily femicide in defence of honour: the case of Jordan’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol.22, no.1, pp.65-82.
5. Nasser, Lamis, Bashir Belbeisi, and Diana Atiyat, (1999), ‘Violence against women in Jordan: Demographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators’, *The Human Forum for Women’s Rights*, Jordan Press Foundation.
6. Abu-Odeh, Lama, (1996), ‘Crimes of honour and the construction of gender in Arab societies’, in: Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and literary perspectives*, Reading: Ithaca Press.
7. News reports in *The Jordan Times*, *The Star*, *Al-‘Arab al-Yawm*
8. See also: www.amanjordan.org, the website of the Arab Centre for Resources and Information on Violence against Women (al-markaz al-‘arabiy lil-masadir wal-ma’lumat hawla al-‘unf didd al-mar’a)
9. Hussein, Rana, (2001/2), “Imprisonment to Protect Women Against ‘Crimes of Honor’: A Dual Violation of Civil Rights”, *Al-Raida*, vol. XIX, issue 95-96, Fall/Winter, pp.40/1.
10. UNICEF (1997); Kwar, Mary (1997), “Gender, Employment and the Life Course: The Case of Working Daughters in Amman, Jordan”. Unpublished PhD-thesis, London, p.180.
11. According to the study of UNICEF (1997:79), in the period between 1989 and 1990, 4694 cases of domestic violence against women were officially reported, increasing to 4962 cases in 1991-1992; between 1990 and 1995, an average of 34 rapes per year had been reported as well as 413 cases of sexual assault, equalling 11% of the entire crime rate in Jordan. This increase denotes, of course, a growing number of reports, and says little about the actual number of inci-

12. These cases only present a fraction of the actual number of mistreatments, since women tend to go to the police or a doctor only as a last resort in the worst of cases.
13. A Jordanian (male) friend of mine claimed that women are in fact an economic burden for many families, which is the main reason why they are killed.
14. Peristiany, John George (ed.) (1965), *Honour and Shame*. London: Weidenfeld&Nicolson; Peristiany, John George and Julian Alfred Pitt-Rivers (eds.) (1992) *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Pitt-Rivers, Julian Alfred (1971) *The People of the Sierra*. London, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Stewart, Frank Henderson (1994), *Honor*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
15. Wikan, Unni (1984), ‘Shame and Honour: A Contestable Pair’. *Man*, vol.19, no.4, pp. 635-652.; Reichenbach, Anke (2001), *Mit Suesser Zunge. Hoeflichkeit und Nachbarschaft im Damaszener Christenviertel B_b T_m_*. Gehen: Escher Verlag.
16. As a German, having green eyes, fair skin, and dark blonde hair, I represented a “typically Western” woman, despite adapted dress code; only when I started speaking in Arabic, people became confused and wondered if I was Circassian or Lebanese.
17. Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm (2000), “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse”, in: A. L. Macfie (ed.) *Orientalism: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 217-238.
18. For a lucid analysis of the problem of (alleged) harassment of women of colonisers by male colonised see Stoler, Ann Laura, (1991), “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia”, in: Di Leonardo, Micaela (ed.), *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge. Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, pp.51-101.
19. The practical consequences of “shameful” behaviour often do not correspond with the discursive threats, and are treated with a lot more pragmatism than is theoretically demanded; see also Wikan (1984), Stewart (1994).
20. Personal conversation with Farideh Heyat.