

## Alia Fattah: Housewife, Retired Worker

*(Born in 1952, in Beirut; of Kurdish origin; currently living in Musaitbeh, Beirut. Recorded in her home. A son present. Language: colloquial Arabic, with some French words.)*

I am forty six years old and I have six children, five daughters and a son. What should I tell you about my life story? My life is beautiful, I'm happy, thank God. I'm not bothered by my husband. I won't say - I bore six children, I got a little tired, but thank God they grew up, they got an education and I'm very happy with them. When I was young, I lived in my parents' house, they were very simple people, religious, how shall I tell you, a very simple family. They loved to do good to people. We are religious as well, a very ordinary family, kind-hearted. This was the atmosphere I was raised in. Also, thank God, my husband, he's the same. He's religious, he fears God, our consciences are clear. We haven't hurt anyone, we don't harm anyone. We have no problems with anyone. Thank God, we have a happy life. We educated our children and they all graduated from university. The older ones are employees, they are working, thank God they are satisfied. We are a good family and I know that all the neighbors here like us. I don't want to brag, but we have been in this neighborhood for thirty five years. The neighbors like us and they know what kind of people we are. What shall I tell you?

Michelle: Actually, I don't have questions for you. Could you try to remember your earliest recollections?

Alia: I don't have anything special to say. My oldest daughter -

Son: Tell her about your old dream of getting educated.

Alia: Yes, yes. I used to long to be educated, like my children, to have a degree like them. But in those days forty, fifty years ago, people didn't really care a lot about a girl's education. They used to say - God rest her soul, my mother always used to say that a girl, no matter how much schooling she gets, she has to get married eventually, and stay at home, and raise her family, and cook for them, and take care of her house and her family. Schooling doesn't benefit girls. That's what they believed a long time ago. I don't agree, I'm against this idea. I say that schooling for girls is more important than it is for boys. Because, thank God, my daughters are educated, they worked. I married two of them, the older girl and the third girl, and they are content in their homes and with their men. They are employees, they work and they are happy in their houses. To speak frankly, I like education a lot. I kept telling my children, since they were young, *inshallah* - to the extent that I can manage - I want you to get educated. Education is wonderful, whether for men or for women. What else shall I tell you?



I got married to my husband and I lived here. He worked for the Salamoun family. He was a boy, about twelve years old. They were satisfied with him. He worked well for them so they were happy with him. He stayed with them, and when he was nineteen or twenty he got married. We married young. I was fifteen. That's what it was like a long time ago. People used to marry very young. We stayed here. We got married here, and stayed here. We have been here, for thirty five years, working for the Salamoun family. But thank God, we have another house, for the future. We thought that one should have another house. We bought a house - property is God's - it's our property, we have furnished it and fixed it up. I helped my husband, I won't deny it. I worked, and helped him, because of course he couldn't manage on his own. All the children were in school and there were many expenses. We bought it at the beginning of the 'events' [civil war]. It has been there for twenty years. I helped him, thank God, and I worked as well as him. Now for the past five or six years he hasn't been allowing me [to work], my health doesn't allow me any more. I'm not very well, I get 'crises.' The children are grown up, thank God. So he told me, "There's no need for you to work and get tired." He told me to rest. "Rest! You have a family, if you take care of it, it's enough." I used to work with him, to help him.

Son: She used to cook.

Alia: Even during the war, I didn't stop. I used to cook at the *Al-Nahar* newspaper. Madame Ramadan - she works for the newspaper - she said, "Now is a time of siege and war, do you mind cooking for us?" It was during the Israeli siege. I said, "Yes, why not?" To cook for the newspaper employees, there's nothing wrong with it. At that time, I was still working. Even during the war I kept helping, until we had covered all the expenses and guarantees. As they say, 'a future for our children.' We don't have this - what shall I say? - we don't have so much wealth. I always used to say there's nothing to leave my children except education. And the fact that I gave them education is a blessing from God. And that's it (laughs), what more shall I tell you? I have nothing more to say.

Michelle: I know this is difficult, but can you think of any events in your life?

Alia: Really, nothing happened that changed my life, thank God, ever since the children were young. As I was telling you, I used to help their father in order to educate them and buy them things they wanted. Children, you know - maybe this generation is different - the older generation - I can speak for myself - was more easily contented. My mother used to get me clothes. She was the one who bought them for me. There was no objection [i.e. from Alia]. "I bought you these clothes", "Merci, mama." There were no complaints. Today, the child wants everything according to his own taste. In my time there was more contentment, my mother used to put food before me, I'd eat it, I'd never say, "I don't like this food", or "I don't want to eat it." Now my youngest daughter, if there is food that she doesn't like, she won't eat it. Clothes - I have to take her with me so that she can choose. This generation is different.

Michelle: Are you originally Lebanese?

Alia: Yes, we are. I was born here. We have been Lebanese from a long time ago, from the time of my father and grandfather.

Son: From the area of Musaitbeh.

Alia: Yes, from Beirut.

Michelle: Maybe you can remember something about your life with your parents, you were talking about that a while ago?

Alia: Thank God I was happy at my parents'.

Son: My mother was indulged.

Alia: I didn't have any sisters. I had five brothers, there were no other girls besides me. It's true, I was happy at my parents'. They indulged me. How shall I say this? It's true that they didn't give me an education but, as I told you, a long time ago they didn't care about education for girls. It was the least of their concerns. But thank God, I was happy. Only yesterday I was telling my children how once, when I was young, my father, God bless his soul, bought me a skirt from Souk al-Tawileh, if you've heard of it. This was one of the oldest and finest souks in Beirut. He bought me a skirt for LL70. That was a lot then. Forty years ago, we would pay LL10 or LL15 for a skirt. During those days we used pounds not thousands, right? He bought it for me though it was so expensive, because I liked it and chose it. I told him, "Baba I like this skirt." He said, "You want it?" I said, "Yes." So he bought it. They never disappointed me, they bought me anything that I wanted, and did everything I asked except for this question of education. I would have liked to be educated. But thank God, I was happy in my childhood. Even after I got married, thank God, I am very happy with my family and my house. I got a bit tired, I won't deny that. But I felt that I should help so that they [children] could turn out educated.

I got married at the age of fifteen. Marriage then was not like now. Parents would come and say, "Well, we saw this girl, and

we like her." His mother and father would come, they would say, "We like you and we like the girl. She's calm, we like her, and we want her to get engaged to our son." My mother said, "But my daughter is still young, and she doesn't know your son," and things like that. Before, that's how things were. My mother told me, "There is a suitor asking for you." I said, "I don't know, what do you say?" They said, "These people are decent and their son is decent. He has a job and he's not badly behaved. He doesn't drink, he doesn't gamble." In the beginning, those were the basics. He was twenty four, twenty five, not more than that. My mother said, "What shall we say to them? They come and go, they want you." I said, "I don't know. How do you find them?" She said, "We find them good. We think he suits you." I said, "Fine." Even in my own marriage

I didn't have a say! Now they meet each other, live with each other, study each other's characters. "Each time has its generation, each generation has its time." My children now, I didn't interfere in their marriages. They made their own choices. My eldest daughter married a Christian. Yes! They fell in love. In the beginning, I won't deny it, we found it difficult that our daughter would marry from - yes, I won't hide it - "How is that! Who is he?" She said, "Mama, religion is God, and religion is behaving well with others. He is a very good man and I like him." [I said] "May God give you happiness." My other daughter also chose her husband. Now my son is engaged as well. He too, thank God, is building a house. He is waiting for his house to be finished. He bought a house in Deir Koubel, I don't know if you know it, outside Beirut. Now he is waiting to move. So this generation is different from older ones, just as I'm telling you. Everyone gets married in his own way. We know who they love and we don't object. It is their life and they are going to live it.

Michelle: I wish everybody could think like that.

Alia: I am like that. I didn't object to the girls' decisions nor to the boy's. "It is your life and you are going to live it." I just want you to be happy." I don't want more than that.

Michelle: What else can you remember?

Alia: (pause) What else shall I tell you? Thank God, now we are religious, we pray, we fast. We went on the pilgrimage, their father and I, around five years ago. He [husband] goes every year. He likes it. But I only went once. So thank God, things are good. I say it is like that because when we are straight with God, God will make us succeed.

Michelle: How do you find Lebanon as a place for women to live in?

Alia: It is a beautiful country. Its people are very ambitious. They are very giving. Compared to other Arab countries, I think it is the most civilized. A woman's pride here, thank God, is respected. I know from my daughters, their husbands respect and love them. Really, I find Lebanon to be the best country.

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# Alia Fattah

Also it's the country I was born in. If they made me choose from among all the countries of the world, I'll choose Lebanon. Seriously, all these wars, and everything that happened, we never moved. When the shelling reached here, we'd just go inside a little bit. There is a room inside, it's slightly safer. We would sit inside. When the shelling got strong, we would sit there. I would say, "God is the one who protects, but this room is better." The shelling reached this street, here, I'd be scared. But I always thought that if God wrote us a long life, we would live. This is our fate.

Son: Tell her about when you tried to learn to drive.

Alia: (laughs) Once I told my husband, "Teach me how to drive so that I can go out and buy things." He taught me for a while and then said, "No, no this is too difficult." I said, "Why? Be patient with me!" He taught me a little more and then he said, "Woman, you aren't fit for this. You're too nervous." When there was a lot of traffic I got nervous. He said, "No, never!" (laughs) So I left the whole thing - "Forget it!"

Michelle: Maybe you can speak a bit more about your work?

Alia: My work, mainly it was cooking. I worked hard but I was happy. It was very tiring. Then I'd come home, work in the house, cook for them, wash and bath them. They needed a lot of work. I'm the type of person who takes good care of her children. I used to bath them twice a day. Madame Salamoun, God rest her soul, used to tell me, "My daughter, you'll die from the way you work! Stop bathing them and changing their clothes so much." Daily I'd wash their clothes. And in those days, there weren't washing machines. I used to wash by hand. She'd say, "Don't do all of it, keep some for later." I'd say, "I

can't, Madame, I can't. I like to see my children looking clean and tidy." I loved to see my children clean. It's the most important thing. I used to take a lot of care of them.

*"There's nothing to leave my children except education"*

Michelle: Are your parents still alive?

Alia: My mother and father, no. But I still have two brothers. Two of my brothers

died. My father died of cancer, my mother had heart problems. I always say, "May God prolong the lives of all mothers." Because, really when one loses one's mother and father, I don't know, I felt that I lost everything. I always say there is no one dearer than the mother and father. The child is very dear, but when one loses her mother and father, she feels that she has lost everything in this world. Maybe because my parents used to love me and I used to love them very much, I was very affected by their death, seriously, a lot. All I can say is, may God have mercy on their souls. No one can do anything about this. One day we will also die.

Two weeks ago, I took the young ladies [daughters] and went to the beach. I don't know how to swim but I love the sea. I don't dare go in deep, only up to here (points to her waist). (A child



Picture Credit: Marilyn Stafford, *A Photographic Journey through Lebanon in the Sixties*, Saqi Books, 1998.

enters and she cuddles her). I think I have told you everything that happened in my life. I haven't had many stories or problems to talk about. My husband works here in this building, he is in charge. He also has a car. He drives people, he works a bit with his car. The children -- Khaled, works in sanitary equipment, the daughters, the older one graduated ten years ago.

Son: She studied mass media in the Lebanese University, four years ago. Mona graduated in marketing from Beirut University College.

Alia: She works for the company owned by the Beydoun family. But the other two are still in school.

Recorded and translated by Michelle Obeid

## End Notes

1. Alia used the word '*crisa*'. This may mean asthma, bronchitis, or other types of chronic illness.