

The Women's Tribunal

Hania Osseiran
Staff Member, IWSAW

A revolutionary and innovative event, heralding significant changes in contemporary Arab society and culture, took place in Beirut in late June. El-Taller, an international NGO movement, in cooperation with Secours Populaire Libanais, organized a Women's Tribunal at the Carlton Hotel under the patronage of Lebanon's First Lady, Mrs. Mona Al-Hrawi. Women from various Arab countries testified before the court, each sharing a personal experience of violence and humiliation, whether domestic, social or political, with the jury and the audience.

The women who testified shared their personal tragedies in the hopes of establishing new values and behavior patterns which will improve the way that Arab society deals with victims and abusers. The ultimate goal of the Tribunal is to eliminate all acts of violence against women. According to the participants, women should join efforts to break their silence about violence and thus make it a political issue relevant to all members of society, not just to women.

In general, the live testimonies criticized the patriarchal structure of traditional Arab society, which places women in a subordinate position, thus enabling some men to control, dominate and exploit women. Many political, economic and legal

factors legitimize men's authority over their wives and companions, and give fathers complete authority over the family. This stems from the traditional concept of a woman as the property and dependent of a male protector, whether father, brother, husband or son. Societies organized on the basis of gendered hierarchical power structures legitimize violence against women, not only in the form of physical abuse, but also as emotional abuse, expressed through threats, exploitation, discrimination and other forms of control and coercion.

Shared cultural beliefs and attitudes which regard women as inferior to men, in addition to traditional values and practices giving men proprietary rights over women, are critical factors in shaping abusive and exploitative behaviors towards Arab women. It was these beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, rather than specific individuals, that were on trial at the Women's Tribunal. According to one of the testimonies, a woman was murdered by a male member of her own family, who had accused her of dishonor in order to inherit from her. Courts generally accept the dishonor defense, and then drastically reduce the sentence given. Another case was that of a man who killed his wife because he doubted her fidelity. In this type of

case, the courts often relied on concepts of family honor to justify light sentences for men who kill their wives and daughters. In fact, the more violent the nature of the crime, the more likely the court is to believe the man's defense; for a husband to have killed his wife in so brutal a manner, the logic goes, she must have given him serious provocation. The victim, not the victimizer, is to blame. In such cases, the state itself is blameworthy for not enforcing appropriate laws and policies to protect women. The state is also guilty of permitting violence when it accepts the "honor" defense and thus grants men immunity from punishment for violence in cases where they murder their wives. The state, under these circumstances, is a co-perpetrator of violence.

Most societies regard the family affairs of their members as private matters not to be dealt with in public. Legally, this places women at a clear disadvantage. Women are most vulnerable to violent actions when their dependence on men is total: their freedom is restricted and they have no access to the public world, nor any options for escape. Men are entitled to control the mobility of the women in their charge and to punish any behavior they deem inappropriate. With reference to another woman's testimony, wife-battering is

regarded as simply a normal, ordinary feature of domestic life. The fact that state intervention is discouraged indicates official acceptance of a certain level of violence in the family.

Perhaps the most crucial factor legitimizing and facilitating the mistreatment of Arab women is shame. Shame will continue to obstruct women's progress in the Arab world until the family and the community become reliable bases of support for women at risk. It is unlikely, however, that shame will entirely disappear from our social life. A woman who is raped or battered still brings shame upon herself and her family because traditional societies believe that she is not a victim, but that she herself did something wrong to bring this calamity upon herself.

Violence against Arab women calls for urgent measures. Although there is a need to change social attitudes and behaviors so that the relations between men and women are free of the abnormalities that lead to violence, that goal will not be achieved unless women are empowered by education and a full awareness of their rights. The recent Women's Tribunal offers dramatic evidence not only of Arab women's suffering, but also of their courageous struggles towards equality and justice.