

## New centre provides lifeline for abused women

By Rana Hussein

AMMAN — Shrouq, 23, has been physically abused by her father and brother since she was a child but kept quiet about it because she thought she had no place to go for protection or guidance.

Last week, the university graduate discovered she did have an option while watching a local television show on family violence.

"I learned that there are local organisations helping abused women and since I could no longer endure the constant physical abuse I sought help at a police station to direct me to one of these centres," Shrouq told *The Jordan Times*.

She was directed to the Family Reconciliation Centre (FRC), established by the Ministry of Social Development recently to provide protection and counselling for abused victims as well as offer temporary shelter for abused women and their children under the age of five.

Shrouq is one of four women to be admitted to the centre since it started receiving cases of abused women last Sunday.

The pilot project, which was officially inaugurated by Her Majesty Queen Rania last month, operates 24 hours a day and can house between 35 to 50 women and 36 children.

It offers social, psychological, family, legal, health and religious counselling for women, children and men.

FRC Director Amal Azzam said the main aim of the centre is to maintain family unity while simultaneously offering security, empowerment and training.

"We want to be able to

norates to raise awareness on violence and the services the centre offers.

One of the centre's goals, according to Azzam, is to conduct rehabilitative programmes for both men and women to help them solve internal family problems.

"Our services extend to include the abusive partner, which is almost always a male relative, to try and solve the matter peacefully... to help stop the violence in the family," she said.

One beneficiary of the new service is Abu Mohammad, 40, who said his family life

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began to unravel as a result of financial problems.

"I was so desperate, at one point, I wanted to set my house on fire and kill my entire family," the father of four told *The Jordan Times*.

He said one of his neighbours, who attended a lecture, advised the couple to seek help at the centre.

"The centre specialists summoned both my wife and me and when they concluded that my rage was related to

and support herself."

The philosophy of the Ministry of Social Development was to maintain location secrecy while publicising the centre's services, Azzam said.

"The public are being informed of the centre's existence through local institutes that currently offer legal, psychological and social counselling to victims of domestic abuse," according to Azzam.

The centre's presence, however, did not escape the attention of the local community, not all of whom were supportive.

"At first we faced resistance and people thought we were running a women's prison or that it was a place to support women against men. We reached out to the residents and invited them to see the centre and the services offered," Azzam said.

The result was that some of the neighbours actually visited the centre to seek counselling, she added.

Azzam urged anyone in need of family counselling to contact the centre's 24-hour hotline at: 488 8705.

Meanwhile, Director of the Jordanian Women's Union's (JWU) hotline and temporary shelter, Mukaram Odeh, said the centre will ease the pressure on the union, while at the same time complementing their work.

"We can only receive up to nine women at one time because of financial constraints. Now with the new centre, we will be able to transfer some of the cases," Odeh told *The Jordan Times*.

Although government plans to open a shelter for abused women date back to 1997, they never got off the ground due to frequent changes of ministers and a lack of funding.

solve family disputes through dialogue and we do not aim in any way to offer an alternative residency for women or encourage them to abandon their families," Azzam told The Jordan Times.

Once an abused woman is admitted, she is interviewed by one of six professional counselling officers before being offered food, clothes, social and rehabilitation services, said Azzam.

"We abide by strict secrecy of our clients and each of our six specialists is familiar only with the case she is handling," she added.

Azzam said preparations for the centre began almost two years ago, including furnishing the premises, conducting training programmes for staff and holding lectures in the gover-

financial problems they contacted the ministry and I was offered a financial grant to start a small business," Abu Mohammad said.

A special children's section and a playroom were included in the FRC to offer psychological support for the children of abused mothers.

One of the three-storey building's rooms also contains fitness equipment where women can relax and release their stress "so that they don't take their frustration and anger out on their children," Azzam said.

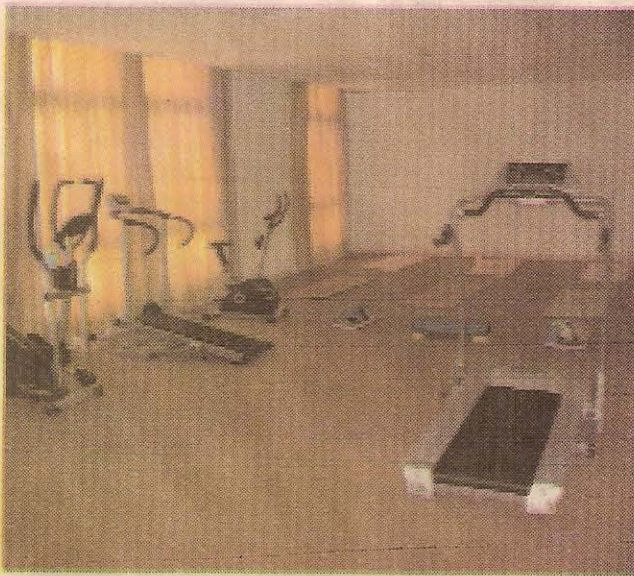
"The maximum time a woman can spend here is six months," the centre's director said, adding that staff would follow up on each discharged case for a period of four to six months until "we make sure she returns safely to her house or can live on her own

Back then, officials wanted to include women who were imprisoned for their own safety, in what is legally known as "protective custody," but this plan was dropped and it was decided to restrict the centre's services to families.

Dozens of women are kept in prison for many years for their own safety out of fear they could be murdered by family members for reasons of honour.

A local NGO is currently working to help women in protective custody by examining their cases and attempting to find a safe alternative for them to start a new life outside prison walls.

Names of FRC beneficiaries have been changed to protect their identities.



**A room furnished with fitness equipment (left) and a playroom for children at the Family Reconciliation Centre, recently established by the Ministry of Social Development to provide protection and counselling for abused victims as well as offer temporary shelter for abused women and their children under the age of five**

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Photos by Rana Hussein