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So-called honour crimes revisited

By Sally Bland

AMMAN — There were no empty seats in Al Balad Theatre last Monday evening when award-winning journalist Rana Husseini gave a lecture on so-called crimes of honour in Jordan.

Introduced by Rima Khalidi of the Jordanian-Danish Youth Dialogue Centre that sponsored the event, the lecture was part of the centre's endeavours to support youth in becoming agents of positive change in their communities.

Husseini quickly established rapport with the audience by speaking both from the heart and on the basis of very solid data which she herself has collected over the past 13 years. Having appeared before audiences abroad and in panel discussions, she remarked that this was her first real solo lecture in Jordan.

"In 1993, when I returned from studying in the US and began covering the crime beat for The Jordan Times, I was more interested in sports, especially basketball," she admitted. "At that time, the subject of so-called honour crimes was hardly spoken of. But in mid-1994, I got my first story that really pushed me to get involved in this field, to document these women's stories."

This was the case of Kifaya, a 16-year old who was raped by her brother and then married off to a much older man after becoming pregnant. When she got divorced, her parents killed her. "What happened to Kifaya really shocked me," she recalled. "The second shock came when I went to the court and learned what light sentences were handed down for such killings."

In the mid-1990s, Husseini's research on these crimes led her to the prison where women who become pregnant outside of marriage are kept, allegedly for their own protection. "This was also shocking to me," she stated. "One would assume that it is the person who kills who is imprisoned, not the other way around. At any one time, there are 20 to 30 females like this in prison, some stay for 10 years. Some of those I saw then are still in prison."

She deeply believes that there should be a better place for women to seek protection, and has been among those who worked for the establishment of a women's shelter. In answer to a subsequent question, she explained that a shelter was opened about two months ago after protracted efforts by women's organisations in Jordan.

Husseini stressed that so-called honour killings do not derive from religion or Arab tradition, though both are used to justify these crimes. Instead, she listed the reasons as being rumours, pregnancy, rape, a women wanting to choose her own husband and last, but not least, economic, if a woman does not relinquish her right to inheritance. "So-called honour crimes most often occur in poor communities with low educational levels," she said.

From her first story, Hussein faced accusations of “airing dirty laundry in public.” Others asked why she bothered. “They told me nothing will change — I hate that sentence!” she quipped. In answer to a question, she reported having received threatening e-mails in the past accusing her of distorting Jordan’s image. “That didn’t bother me though,” she said. “What is important to me is that my conscience is clear. Besides, people started writing letters to The Jordan Times. My work sparked discussion of the issue.”

Discussions culminated in the forming of the Jordanian National Committee to Eliminate so-called Honour Crimes in 1999, which collected 154,000 signatures in four months for changing legislation so that it would be less discriminatory towards women and stipulate harsher punishments for those who committed such crimes. The Lower House of Parliament eventually voted against amending the law however, which confirmed the impression that “honour belongs to men, not women, in our society.” Nevertheless, she listed four positive results of the campaign.

First is the British-funded Family Protection Programme, which trained the police and judges on how to treat victims of so-called honour crimes and other domestic violence. According to Hussein, “one positive result of our work and of this training is that sentences against those who kill are now heavier, though still the courts are not consistent.”

“The second positive result is that our work has encouraged similar work in Egypt, Yemen and Syria,” she added. “Thirdly, the government has acknowledged honour crimes as a fact to be dealt with.”

A fourth positive factor, according to Hussein, was that the government and civil society movement sparked a public debate with the local media picking up on the issue and publishing editorials and columns to discuss the problem in Jordan.

However, so-called honour crimes, which average 20 a year, have not stopped. There have already been six this year, but Hussein remains undaunted. “I’m obstinate,” she said, “I’m not going to stop now. Women have to push for their issues, also in the US. It’s a long fight.”

In fact, she is expanding her work, having completed a book on honour crimes that should be published within a few months. “I gave the book an international scope in order to correct the mistaken idea that honour crimes occur mainly in Jordan,” she explained. “I collected information from many countries and on all aspects — religious, legal, etc. I hope that my book can be a reference for others who want to work on this issue.”

Many questions directed to Hussein had an activist tone. An American asked if it was detrimental to the movement against so-called honour crimes in Jordan when Westerns tried to lend support. “Sometimes yes, sometimes no, it depends on their intentions,” replied Hussein, citing as a negative example a report by an international human rights organisation that gave the impression that these crimes occur only in Jordan and connected them to Islam.”

Another question related Parliament's backward position on revising the law to the current Elections Law, saying that it needed to be changed, while another highlighted the need for law change so that women could pass on Jordanian nationality to their children. Husseini shared with the audience the experience of forming a group of "honour heroes" in Sweden who work among the immigrant population to deal with the issue of so-called honour crimes.

She encouraged all the questioners to go ahead with these initiatives, and stressed that changing laws was only one prong of the work. "We want to change the law to defend Jordanian women's dignity, but a law is not a solution, not a deterrent," she stated. "We need more educational work and more media coverage. Religious leaders should speak out more clearly. The work on this issue in Jordan has been seasonal but it should be ongoing. I encourage others to raise the issue wherever they are. I'm optimistic and we should all be. There is no alternative. We have to keep speaking out," she concluded.