Interview with Fahima Charafeddine
2013

TAPE 1
Interviewer (later 1.): Okay.
Interviewee (later 2.): My name is Fahmia Charafeddin, but on my ID card it says Fahima. That’s if you look me up in Google or any non-Arabic resources, you’ll find that it says Fahima and not Fahmia. I was born in the South and I did my studies in both the South and in Beirut. I majored in Philosophy at the Lebanese University and I worked as primary school teacher for ten years. After I graduated, I started working as an Educational advisor. Afterwards, I went to Paris and did my Ph.D. about the Arab socialism approach; its foundations and what are the pillars or what is referred to as Arab socialism. I started working at the university after I was done with my Ph.D. thesis and I also worked as a researcher at the Arab Development Institute. In 1983 I was appointed director of the Arab Development Institute, which is a very distinguished Institute, in which many Arab intellectuals worked, especially Egyptian intellectuals that had left Egypt because of Sadat’s oppressive regime after 1973. I worked at the Institute for 11 years, during that time, I was still teaching at the university. Afterwards I wrote my D.A. thesis about a very important subject, which was entitled Culture and Ideology in the Arab World. I worked on two levels; I used Derrida’s deconstructional approach and how the intellectual and ideological systems disintegrated in 1967 and were then later reconstructed and islamicized later on. Before 1967 there was rise of nationalist ideology, and there weren’t any Islamic movements. After 1967, there was a regression of nationalist thinking and the way was paved for islamization, especially in 1973 and during Sadat’s reign. My theses were published both in Arabic and in English. I studied the Arab culture and its problems extensively, which neither independence, educational systems nor value systems could change the structure of this culture, which is based on ancient traditions; these traditions which have really affected women’s lives. Now I always say that Lebanon is a civil state, but only when it comes to women do the religious laws come into effect. That’s the mistake women made after independence: They expressed their satisfaction and didn’t pay attention to the fact that the constitution has taken away more rights than it had given them through the Personal Status Law. The constitution ensured equality, but then took it away once more by handing the reigns of Personal Status Laws to the sects and religious orders. Do you understand what I’m saying?
1. Yes.
2. So, women’s rights movements in Lebanon were seriously affected by certain historical turning points. For example, it profited during the time of the French mandate, which tried to... You know how it is with the French or the British; they try to model a society in their own image wherever they go. The French model is of course has its roots in the French revolution and that’s why it was a shining model. So, during the mandate they tried to formulate the constitution to include these values of equality between men and women and many other issues that made Lebanon a beacon of
equality in the East, because of the lifestyle in Lebanon and the diversity – The Christians played an integral role in this and in making personal freedoms an important issue in people’s lives and especially, women. That’s why I agree with Dr. Hoss, who used to be prime minister in Lebanon, when he said that in Lebanon there’s a lot of freedom, but little democracy. There is a lot of freedom and that’s clear, but these freedoms are constricted by the Personal Status Law, and because this law is left to the religious sects and the heads of these religious sects it’s based on the old traditional and cultural values. This is evident whether in the upbringing of children, where the father is the head of the family, the children have no say in anything and the mother comes in second place to the father if not the tenth place. I’ve written extensively about Arab culture and have been published in this field. I’ve also worked in the field of development and the critique of Nationalist thought. Of course, I was always been a member of the Left, even if that doesn’t necessarily mean membership in a party, but I was one of the intellectuals of the sixties; we were raised with this culture of rejection and we demanded social justice and to be part of international progressive culture rather than the imperial culture. I’m sure you know, the colonization was still in its final days. The Arab countries were gradually gaining their independence the last of which was the independence of Algeria, which was, as I’m sure you know, a bloody one and not an easy one. Lately, I’ve been working mostly with cultural clubs and I was a permanent member and on the executive committee of the Cultural Council of South Lebanon. I also supported the national resistance in the South before it became an Islamist resistance. I even supported the Islamist resistance until the occupied lands were liberated in 2000. At the beginning, I didn’t really pay much attention to the women’s rights cause. I used to write some papers about women’s rights, but they were more theoretical and not based on empirical research. Then after 2000 things changed; there as peace in Lebanon. During the war I was partial, naturally, to the idea of building a new Lebanon with the cooperation of all sects and I was against the forms of aggression being practiced, especially against the Palestinians. Of course, we, on the Left, are always supporters of revolutions; the same way we supported the revolution in Algeria, we supported the revolutions everywhere in the Arab world. In Lebanon, we would march in the streets in support of the Palestinian revolution and now we support the Syrian and Egyptian revolutions, of course. We are the sixties youth, who started the students revolution, and as you know at that time I was a student at the Lebanese University. I think something changed within me, as a person who believed in the ideas of democracy and liberty and fought for them, I started to change what I believed in, in terms of believing in a sort of total change; a change that flips everything around, which was predominant in the Marxist ideals. These ideals believed that if we change society then people’s conditions would change or that if we changed the political administration and gave it to the proletariat then people’s lives would change. The fall of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries proved that this is not true. Hence, and I’ve written about this, the change wasn’t just political. There was also a change in the way of thinking. Starting with how to go about things; how does one bring about change? And it seemed clear that change must first start with the issues and not the overall issues; when we better the situation of women, then whole society becomes better. When
better the situation of children, culture and development and so on. So there has to be a real change in the structure of thought systems and in the methodology of our thinking. Personally, when I was called upon to be a member in the preparation team from the Beijing conference, I wasn’t interested in women’s rights issues, and I had written in one of my books that this subject didn’t interest me. But after the committee that was going to prepare the report for the conference was assembled, which I was member of, I realized that there wasn’t any information about women’s right in Lebanon. If you look at the situation of women in Lebanon, you’d say that Lebanese women have all their rights, but when I working on the report I found out that not only do women have no part in political decision making, but also not in any decision processes. It was then that I saw that fighting for women’s rights is a priority, so I started writing about women’s rights issues and later became an expert on the subject with the UNDP - we’ll give you some books about this subject – and I did a lot of work on violence against women and published books that were based of field research and one that was theoretical, which was called Violence against Lebanese women: a cultural dimension. What I found out was that this culture of violence against women has been around since before Christ; the rejection of women in society, rejecting the idea that women can have their own opinions and favoring the boys over the girls in everything, even when it came to food and education. That was my first study on the subject. Then I did another study about the pain and suffering of battered women, which was also published. Then we had a project in cooperation with the UNDP about Nationality and problems of Lebanese women whom are married to non-Lebanese men and we collected statistics from the courts, and because this sort of information is not digitalized in Lebanon we had to go through the files do it all by hand in order to collect statistics about how many women are married to non-Lebanese and we did a big study about this, which I can give you a copy of. The other day, I brought it to the President and he was very surprised that we debunked the theory that claims that changing the nationality laws would create a disruption of the demographics in Lebanon. We proved through our study that this wasn’t true. Anyway, that’s part of what I do. We also worked on a two year project with Foundation for the Future in Amman, which is based in the USA, in which we examined the culture of discourse and democracy in Lebanese families. We prepared about 600 forms for different, within academic parameters... We also did important work with a society about the discrimination within school curricula, from kindergarten up to secondary school. We found books in the curricula that contained discriminatory language and images, and mainly the message that some lessons are conveying. So we created four stages: kindergarten, primary, middle and secondary school and we were able to get the cooperation of the Ministry of Education and the Center for Education Research, which produces the books, and they are now rewriting the books, based on the recommendations we made. I also wrote a book on the history of the female movement in Lebanon and I did a study about women in armed conflicts, and this was a study never before done. I examined the role of Lebanese women in the conflict not only as victims, but fighters as well. So, I interviewed the women how had fought, whether from the parties, the Lebanese Phalanges, the Lebanese forces or the communist party and I based my work on other
studies although there was only few. So, I used books, magazines and newspapers which were published during that time and that dealt with the issue of the suffering of the Lebanese women during the displacement from the eastern regions to the western regions and the attacks they suffered. This was a very important study that was published by the UNDP in a book that contained two other studies: one about Iraq and the other about Sudan. This is some of what I’ve done. If you want me to tell you about how women were affected, I can tell you a story that will make clear to you how women were affected. I was invited to an interview on the LBC in 2006 or 2007, but definitely after 2005 and the interviewer was Ziad Njeim, who now works with Al-Hurra. The podium discussion included me and a Lebanese singer who had started wearing a hijab, called Najah Sallam and woman wearing a hijab who was a member in Hezbollah. This shows you how women were affected. Najah Sallam was wearing a white hijab, as she is Sunni and the other woman was hearing a black hijab, which means that she is a Shiite. I am Shiite, as well, but I don’t wear a hijab. The hijab-wearing ex-singer had overdone it with her makeup. During the discussion I was asked why I don’t wear a hijab, so I said, ‘let me tell you my mother’s story’. Do you understand me?

1. [inaudible]

2. My family is one of the biggest landowners in the South. They weren’t feudal lords, but they were wealthy. My mother, because she was married to a wealthy man, no man was allowed to see her. So when she would leave the house she would cover her entire face with a black sheer cloth, that she could see through. I was born in the late forties and I remember my mother with her covered. In the fifties, when I went to middle school, I was about 11 years old, which is the age around which I would’ve been expected to start wearing a hijab, but I didn’t. My mother didn’t tell me that I should. Not even other people seemed to care that I didn’t cover. And I wasn’t the only one that didn’t cover. It was the late fifties and the whole society was moving towards modernity. The effect of the Egyptian revolution of 1956, during that time the whole Arab society was moving towards… Countries were gaining their independence and were trying to build an independent development and put the blame of their slow development on the colonization. The constitution had given women rights, even my mother took off the black scarf she used to cover her face with and started wearing a white scarf the way Benazir Bhutto does. Of course, the whole society was moving in this direction. The problem of 1967 is that it destroyed the dream; the dream of development that Gamal Abdel-Nasser envisioned. [inaudible] 1967 destroyed the dream of rebuilding the Arab countries and making them strong enough to reclaim Palestine or part of Palestine, at least. Because of what happened in 1967, dreams and aspirations became to fall apart and of course, the militarization started and by that I mean the urge to build stronger armies, after Israel broke the Egyptian Army, which was considered the strongest in the region. The Iraqi government oppressed its people. This culture of oppression was born in 1967, because countries started thinking that everything comes second to the war; there’s a war with Israel, that’s the people has to shut up and that all the efforts and development would be geared towards this war. This of course contributed to Arab countries lagging behind and delayed democracy in the
Arab World. The bread revolutions that happened in the sixties and in 1963 - you weren’t even born at that time...
1. I was born in 1970.
2. See. At that time there was something called ‘bread revolutions’ in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt. There was even a journalist revolution and some were put in prison because of it. And of course the 1968 revolution which brought with it the war against the Palestinians in Amman, which they called the “Battle of Karameh” and the migration of Palestinians to Lebanon. This led to the situation in Lebanon to be rearranged according to the situation of the Palestinian revolution. Lebanon became part of the Israeli aggression, with daily attacks on the southern regions and even on the Beirut airport. In 1968 the Israelis bombed all the civilian planes that were on the tarmac. Thus changed the focus and social demands took a backseat and the position on women changed; from activists demanding their rights to aid workers helping the injured of the war. Lebanese women became forced to help, whether by fighting with the sectarian or ideological parties, such as the Baath Party, the socialists and the Lebanese Phalanges and so on or they were part of civil society and women’s organization, which I’m sure Linda Matar has told you about, since she was part of these movements. At the time, I wasn’t part of these civil society organizations as I was more involved with cultural organizations, but I watched what women were doing. So when the time came for me to write about the history of the female movement, I read about the subject in literary works by Laure Ghorayeb, which I think you should take a look at, because the Lebanese women’s right movement was documented by Laure Ghorayeb, Emily Faris Ibrahim and Laure Moghaizel. These women wrote their autobiographies, but Emily Faris Ibrahim wrote also about the history of women’s rights movements, although she didn’t make a distinction between the women’s rights movement as a social movement and the charities, because all societies that dealt with women’s issues in Lebanon were charities. This is why I said that after the independence, they expressed their satisfaction with the situation and then put their efforts into helping women; what Caroline Moser called the practical needs of women, such as the right to education, work and maternity leaves. This is also the vision of Qasim Amin, if I’m not mistaken - Qasim Amin is an Egyptian who lived in the late 19th century. This is I wrote within a hundred years, women’s movements haven’t moved an inch since the time of Qasim Amin, but remained in more or less the same place. Of course, such talk is viewed unfavorably by the women’s rights movements and they consider me as being against the history of women’s rights. Do you get what I’m saying? Good. So those were the consequences of the 1967. The war in Lebanon was a consequence of the 1967 war, because when the Palestinians came to Lebanon, the fighting with Israelis started and Israel triggered the war between the Christians against the Palestinians and the country became divided - the way it is now because of the Syrian revolution – with one part supporting the Palestinian revolution and the other against it. I don’t agree with the saying that claims that the Lebanese have no sense of belonging to Lebanon. That’s not true, they do feel it, but because of the freedoms they have, they express their opinions quickly and freely. Iraq also seemed like a harmonious, indivisible unit up until the point Iraqis had freedom of expression at which point we saw that that was not the case. If
the USA wasn’t as strong as it is but had freedom of expression, I’m sure that there’s a large group of Southern states that would like to become independent. Freedom is a double-edged sword, if it is not contained and protected by law then it can transform into chaos. That’s why the 1975 war in Lebanon is a result of the 1967, during which the women’s rights movements put away all their demands and became nurses and aid workers, trying to help people. This is admirable work, of course. In the history of women’s rights movements in the US and during the war, women also took the same path of helping out during the war. When there was peace... To be honest, Lebanese women and especially... You know, the importance of the Beijing conference is that it changed women’s priorities and made them move from working for their practical needs towards working for strategic needs. The women’s rights movements began to realize that political participation is very integral in changing the status of women strategically, because that would make women part of the decision-making process in the parliament. As for executive decisions, imagine that previously if they wanted to hold a training course in IT – there was no IT here in the sixties...

TAPE 2

Interviewee (later 2.): ... If they would organize training course on how to take down minutes, they would only take male participants; the women had no business taking part. If a woman wanted to get a job at a bank she would have to be unmarried and if she got married, they’d send her home once she got pregnant. Women started realizing the importance of being part of the decision-making process, implementing the decisions and that they had the power to refuse as well. I think we all agree that education has had a strong effect in Lebanon, especially during the time of Chehabism – at the time Fuad Chehab was president – in the late fifties until the sixties. During that time, education became wide spread in Lebanon, new streets were paved to connect different parts of the country and a village girl like me could come to Beirut and finish my education. Also, a secondary school was built in my village where I could also study. The Lebanese University was established in 1964, which didn’t only have Faculties for Law and Sciences, but also Humanities and Arts. This made it easier for women to get their education. I also think that outposts that the university built in the different Lebanese governorates helped women get access to education. This is why 54% of Lebanese women have university degrees. If we look at graduate numbers, we find that the numbers of female graduates is higher than that of male graduates, but the question we should be asking is what do women study? They opt for theoretical disciplines, which mostly do not translate into a job. Because, the image women have of work is still not linked to self-realization and self-worth, but rather is more of on a need basis. A woman might support herself while she is still living with her parents, but once she gets married and her husband is rich, she would probably quit her job. The social culture doesn’t give women a chance to change this image. Women are still expected to care of their outside appearance, be well-groomed and obedient; the cultural system hasn’t changed. What has changed is the capabilities of women. We still aren’t able to change the cultural system to coincide with the capabilities of women. That is why the Beijing conference
was so important. It changed the priorities of women and gave political participation special importance, as means to change the situation of women in Lebanon. After 2005, things are still the same. The problem in Lebanon is that political change isn’t a difficult as cultural change. Cultural change faces many obstacles, which have increased with more conservative rising to power. The challenges started with the oppressive political powers and later were cemented by the conservatives. That is why were working on establishing an Arab democratic forum for women in this transitional phase. What are our new priorities? Personally, I think we have new priorities which include political resistance, because it’s through political resistance that we can change these powers that are clipping the wings of the revolution. Sadly it seems that revolutions are putting islamists in power nowadays, whose first order of business once they get to power is to limit the freedom of women. Once they see that women have started being more aware of the importance of their careers, they try to push them down though the islamization of education and the media, which is what we saw in Egypt last year. We’ll definitely see more of this in places like Iraq. The same is going on in Morocco, but with a softer approach and in Tunisia as well. This is why I think that the Arab revolutions must change the priorities of women and we have to look at these priorities from a different perspective, considering that there is still – and this is a central problem – legal discrimination against women in nationality law, personal status laws and even criminal law, which is full of discriminatory laws against women, and others. But due to the circumstances, women’s rights issues take a back seat. So how do we bring them back to the forefront of our priorities? When we are active participants in the political process. We have to – the way the men are – either support the revolutions or not, because if we don’t do anything our voices will downed out and we’ll remain subordinate to men. Our issues and demands won’t find a place in the political agendas. That’s why the most important point we should be working towards is how to politicize women in the true sense of the word. We have to get women involved in politics and for politics to start with the simplest things such as a loaf of bread, because fighting for social justice is a political struggle towards building state where there is justice and liberty? Is this enough?

Interviewer (later 1.): Can I ask you some questions?

2. Yes, go ahead. Just give me a minute. Can you get me some water, Latifeh?

1. Can you tell me more about the sixties? You mentioned you were a member of the Left. Can you tell me why?

2. In order to build strong Arab countries which are based on independent development. You know that in the seventies there was a concept by Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank and others, who spoke of what we call the concept of dependency. Samir Amin wrote his famous book La déconnexion or ‘Delinking’ and what he was talking about is that the delinking of the economy of the Arab countries and the Third World as a whole from the big economic regions internationally... [inaudible] Thank you, dear. Of course, I agreed with this. You know, we came out of colonization and as you can imagine colonization exploits a country, by controlling the resources and controlling the decision-making process because of the control it has over resources. That is why the first focus of newly independent governments was on nationalization. What do you
think the 1956 war about? It was about the Suez Canal. We were supportive of this; supportive of these countries independence, the independence of their economies and to delink the dependence on the international economy. By delinking we don’t mean isolation, but rather to become responsible for the formulation and implementation of development strategies in our own countries. Of course, this was not in the interest of the countries that... You know, that the war against Gamal Abdel-Nasser started in 1956 and ended with the Aswan Dam, afterwards they cut off the aid for it. Abdel-Nasser wasn’t against the US, who were the ones who stopped the 1956 war, but the Americans were against the construction of the Aswan Dam, because it would help supply the whole of Egypt with water and electricity. This made Abdel-Nasser look to the East; to the Soviet Union. This is why we supported the construction of the Aswan Dam, the independence of Tunisia and with the nationalization of oil resources. Of course, it doesn’t make sense any other way! Historically speaking, the sixties, even in Europe, revised all the development strategies of the world. The student movements in France and in the US; stories about the movements in Chicago are very well-known. Those were the times we were living in. If Ahmed Ben Bella got captured in Algeria, people took to the street to demonstrate, especially in Lebanon, because we had the freedom of protest, assembly and expression. Abdel-Nasser used to say of Lebanon, that he takes his cue from the protests in Lebanon; if the Lebanese take to the street in support of the Palestinians, then he would support the Palestinians. You get what I’m saying? That’s why all the intellectuals of the world were with the Left, not just us. Lebanon wasn’t occupied by Israel, the occupation only happened in 1982. In 1978 the Israelis occupied some parts and then they continued until they reached Beirut in 1982.

1. Were there people in Beirut who were against the Left?
2. Of course, The Right. The Right was made up of the religious Christian parties, such as the Lebanese Phalanges. The Phalanges weren’t a national party, they were a party for Christians, which became more radical when they joined forces with the Lebanese forces. Don’t forget that Right was – we called sectarian politics –led by Christians, but it was allied with Sunni Muslims and some Shiites, because the head of Parliament has to be a Shiite and we used to call it Maronite politics. This meant that the president of Lebanon was a Maronite and he could assemble a government or dissolve a parliament, which isn’t the case anymore. So the Right was against the Left and they started their battle against the Left with the fight against the Palestinians. Regardless of the wrongdoings of the Palestinians, that’s not what we’re talking about here and they did much, but you can’t fight a war against the Palestinians without it becoming a war on a national scale. It’s similar to what is happening now with Hezbollah fighting by the side of the Syrian Army. It’s not a national war and a large number of Lebanese that don’t agree with this course of action. The same things applied to our war; the Right led the war against the Palestinians without consulting the Left or a large number of Sunni Lebanese, who didn’t fight alongside the Right, except for a few individuals, whereas all the Shiites fought with the Palestinians. So they started a war without there being a united stand in the country about this war. People nowadays blame Obama for stopping the war, but he’s in the right. To fight a war abroad, Obama needs to have the support
of his people, the same way the British did. If a president doesn’t have the backing of the people and takes a decision that divides the nation then the result will be civil war.

1. Where you a member of a Leftist party?
2. No. You could say, I was more of a Marxist is the way I saw things. I used Marxist tools and systems. I had read Marx’s Das Kapital and others. I was intellectually supportive of the revolutions and the Left in Lebanon and the national movements, but I wasn’t a member of a party. Maybe it’s because I got involved later in this. I got married young and I finished my university education and my doctoral studies while I was married, that’s why, as a married woman, I didn’t have the chance to be a member of a party. I could only be a friend or a supporter of a party.

1. Can you tell me more about the war in Lebanon? Did you stay in Lebanon the whole time?
2. Yes. I stayed in Lebanon all through the war and I raised my children here during the war. The war was hard, because it had created a rift between the people of Lebanon. I remember after the 1988 war, my children and I left Beirut and moved to Tripoli – there wasn’t a war in the north. From there we went to Bloudan in Syria. After the Palestinians left we came back to Beirut. All the roads to Beirut were blocked by the Israelis in Aley and Bhammdun. I remember driving with my children in the car, I had brought bread with me from Syria, we reached a road block. I didn’t know if it was the Phalanges or the Armed forces, but they took away the bread and forbade me to bring into the western region. The war was really tough, especially on the poor. In the end of the day, the poor are the fuel of the war. The rich can always buy what they need, even if it is more expensive. It was also very tough on the 850,000 displaced from the eastern areas, which were under the control of the Lebanese Forces and the Phalanges. I remember in 1996, Israel was fighting a war against Hezbollah in the South. The people from the south were afraid for their lives so they all fled to Beirut. A group of volunteers and me went over to a building, where some were living to see what they needed. We didn’t have any money or anything with us, but we thought we could check on them, see what they need and then get them help from the municipality or the government. It was during a time of peace and Rafik Al-Hariri was prime minister. We arrived at the unfinished building, which was about 10 stories high, where the displaced were residing. I made a small census on the inhabitants on a piece of paper. Each family had about 10 members; southerners have more children. You had the mother and father, their five of six children and sometimes the grandparents were there as well, and they were all living in one room. On our way out, we found a group of young men from Beirut and from the South talking about how they needed help getting supplies, so I called them over and told them who I was and that I was prepared to help them with what they need. When we did a count of the people there, we found that some didn’t even have a bed to sleep on, no plates or cups or anything. The war was hard and it was hardest on women, because the men either went to fight or immigrated and the women and children were left behind. In the time before the peace, the situation in Lebanon was so bad, that you felt that life was worthless. Children did have schools to go to, there was no electricity and no heating or water.
1. I didn’t quite understand. Was your start in the field of social work in a women’s rights movement?
2. No, I started on my own. There would three or four of us and we’d form neighborhood committees to help out the displaced. During the war there were many of these neighborhood committees, but later the parties and the military took control. After that I didn’t get involved in aid work and I wasn’t part of the women’s rights movement at the time. I was involved in the cultural movement and I was a member of the Cultural Council of South Lebanon and we used to critique and discuss books, try to attract the youth so that they don’t go off to fight in the war and make sure they stay in school, so it wasn’t about the present practical needs of the people, but more of a long term effort.
1. So you became involved in the women’s rights movement after the war?
2. Yes. I used to write some article about it before. I used to be the director of the Arab Development Institute and we used to issue a journal called the “Arab Thought”, of which I was the editor in chief for a while and I used to write for it as well. Once we held a conference, which we would call a cultural day and it was a whole day event where we would invite speakers to talk about women’s rights and women’s role in the war. Later we published a book about it, for which I wrote a forward. That was the kind of work I did. I was published in magazines and because I had done my post-graduate studies in France, I used to go to the Ecole Normale Superieure and I did some work there about political discourse. So you could see that most of what I did was scholarly and theoretical, rather that field work.
1. As for the Cultural Council of South Lebanon. Did you work there because you were from the south?
2. Yes. One had to be from the south to work there, but the council is a leftist center and it concerns itself with cultural life in the south. We founded a library that we named the Jabal Amel Library after the area, because the southern area of Lebanon is called Jabal Amel. In it, we collected manuscripts and started archives, so everything we did –I was teaching at the university at the time – was away from politics, but we were supporters of the national resistance. We even conferences in Egypt and in Morocco in which we called for solidarity. We also went to New York in 1984 to the UN with the League of Arab States to speak about the occupation in the south. As you know, the south was occupied in 1982. Even when I first got involved in the women’s rights movement, I got involved as a delegate of the council in the committee that was preparing the report for the Beijing Conference. There I found out that, in light of the new ideas that were brought about by globalization, it is important to deal with partial issues and that even though women’s rights is a partial issue of social issues it still has large effect on society and that’s what pushed to work with the women’s right movements. Now, within the women’s rights movement, I claim that I am more progressive than the traditional women’s rights movements, because I support full equality, especially when it concerns the personal status law. We are campaigning for civil law to govern personal status affairs in Lebanon and we will not accept any delays concerning this demand. This is a strategic demand that will change the situation of women and we feel that all the cases of violence and discrimination against women are all results of the current personal
status law, because once you give the ‘man of the house’ the authority to discipline, at times by force, then violence against women will undoubtedly take place. Once you make men and women equal in the eyes of the law, in matters of marital rights and divorce and that women are equally responsible for the children and that she shares the household income, then you have changed society and there will be no place for domestic abuse. Of course, there has to be a law criminalizing violence, because then there’s a more comprehensive protection through the police. But we want to go even farther than that; we want the personal status law to rearrange society, because it is a tool that can affect change. This is something that not everyone understands; that equal personal status laws will change the nature of the social relationships and not just the relationship between men and women. Because it forces one party to acknowledging the other, and this ‘other party’ represents half of society. Equality means nothing if there is no equality between men and women. The whole culture of equality begins with equality between men and women. Personal status law can change the social order. It’s the only thing that can change the social order. Of course, we have to revisit how women and their roles are portrayed in school curricula and in the media.

1. What or who is standing the way of changing the personal status law?
2. All the sects are against it. It is a shame that even the Christians are against it. I always tell my Christian friends, some of which are MPs, that although their cultural reference is western and the west is secular; Personal status laws are secular, hence you, as Christian men and women, are obliged to carry the banner of equality in order for the Muslims to come around. But, on the contrary, they cite Bible passage that “the head of the woman is man”. It wasn’t Christ that said this, it was Paul. Christ is the head of the church, but that’s a different hierarchy, but that doesn’t translate into man being the head of the woman. Today, thankfully, this is no longer true in Europe. We mustn’t forget that sharing the wealth and income of a family plays a big role in the empowerment of women. When I got married – and I’m from a wealthy family – I contributed financially to furnishing my household, but when I got divorced, I left with only the clothes on my back, because by law everything belongs to the man. Even the what earned during... I didn’t have a cent to my name.

TAPE 3

Interviewee (later 2.): What we need to understand is what do personal status laws mean? It doesn’t only mean that men and women are equal and so, men can’t hit women and if they do, women can report them to the police. Sharing the household wealth and income is also a very important matter.
Interviewer (later 1.): Did you found the [Lebanese Women Network]?
2. Yes, I’m one of the founders and now I’m the president.
1. For how long now?
2. I already was president in a previous term and now I’m in my second term. But that’s it, I’m not going for another term; there has to be a devolution of power. We believe in democracy and fight for it, we’re not seeking power to stay on top.
1. You founded the [Lebanese Women Network], too?
2. Yes.
1. When?
2. In 1996.
1. Why? What was the idea?
2. The idea was an addition. We had prepared the report for the Beijing conference and we found that there isn’t any data about women. We wanted to find out how many women held management positions; we had to count them ourselves. When we first founded [the LWN], we did so with the help of UNIFEM. The goal was to produce data about women, work on empowering women not giving handouts, changing the situation of women among others issues. That’s why it was founded according to a certain model; all the founders are women, who are researchers and lecturers at the university. One of the membership requirements was that the applicant must have a Bachelor’s degree or has long practical experience in the field of women’s rights. That’s why the Network is different. I don’t know what they’ve told you, but we are highly respected among international organizations and by the parliament. I was at the parliament yesterday and found that they consider us experts. We also instituted a program to provide political education for female university students. That’s how we operate; our aim is to raise women’s awareness about themselves, their issues and potential, and to help women find the right circumstances to move forward in life.
1. What were the biggest challenges that you have face during your work in the field of women’s rights?
2. Creating a new women’s rights movement. We have something called the Lebanese Council of Women, which is an extension of the Syrian Lebanese Women’s Council that was founded in 1924. It was rearranged after independence, but this was done by women who belong to the political and bourgeois classes. That’s why I’ve always said that its composition is to an extant sectarian. It was founded by Muslims and Christians, so now the presidency of the council must held by a Muslim and Christians alternating every term. The other day in an interview for a newspaper, they asked my opinion when the new president was elected and if I expected any change in the Council. I told them that I didn’t. Because the Council has grown old; the average age of its members is old, young people aren’t interested in joining it and its goals are do not meet the aspirations of today’s women. We are now beyond the smaller issues. We must now go forward and utilize political participation to affect change. I told them during the interview that I don’t believe that the council can ever change due to its sectarian nature. The women from the council were very upset – I’m not too popular among them. But I believe that what I’m doing is right; that I have to break the stereotypes and the taboos. How can women fight for their rights if they are not free? How can a group of people who aren’t free themselves, help women in their fight for freedom? Only a free woman can help other women gain freedom. In order to be in a position to speak about personal status laws, you either have to be in a civil marriage or divorced and suffering the legal consequences. Then you can say that it is important that a couple should divide their assets after a divorce and that the woman should have the right to keep the house. When I got divorced, I was the one that had to leave the house that I had rented, with my children and rent a small apartment, while my divorcee stayed alone in the big
house; the house that I lived in with my children for ten years – this makes no sense. If a woman wants to defend women’s rights, then she must sincerely believe that women are treated unjustly in their religious marriages. Then she has the right to demand a civil marriage. This something that we always speak out about in the [LWM]. The biggest challenge we face now is building a new women’s rights movement, and when I say new... We experimented with this by founding the Lebanese Women’s Network, but sadly... It was made up by different societies and this time, I want it to be made up by societies, human rights organization and individuals and I don’t want to be rigid. The charter we drew up for it was one the best ever written, and I don’t say this only because I wrote it, but it really was. It was debated for over 6 months among the societies, but then everything came to a halt because every society would say that they had their own affairs to take care of. We want to establish a body or a framework that is more flexible that can work on women’s rights issues, regardless of the positions of the societies. The outcome we hope for now from this forum is that the priorities of women’s rights movements rearranged during the transitional period – this is a transitional period. And women must have a role that is not just supportive, but active. They have to be part of writing the constitution and not accept a constitution that they weren’t involved in creating, else the men will write according to their whims and interests as they have done in past. In legislation, in the national discourse movement, in conflict mediation, all these issues effect women and are what women’s right movements should be about. It’s not just about long maternity leaves are anymore, not that this isn’t important, but there societies and organizations that are handling these sort of issues. What need to have a new theoretical framework that takes into consideration women’s priorities in the in the stages we are witnessing now and that’s what we’ve done during the previous wars. Can you imagine that in the conferences during the last war: the Lausanne Conference, the Geneva Conference and the Taif Agreement, no Lebanese women took part? During the 2005 war and the Doha conference there were also no Lebanese women participating. The discussion circles at the Presidency – also no women, but women haven’t objected to this. We were the only ones who released a statement, but that that’s not enough to change things. We need a framework that can set new priorities, that demands that there can’t be a true national discourse in Lebanon if women don’t take part in it, or a peace treaty that we didn’t help create. Those are the new challenges that women need to realize and this requires women to not concentrate solely on the smaller issues, but to place themselves in the areas where they can affect change. Now a new authority is being produced and women need to understand what this means. The authority now is desultory and Hezbollah are trying to produce a new authority in which they would have the upper hand. Where are the women in all this, even the women from Hezbollah?

1. Is there anything else you’d like to add?
2. I’ve already said plenty. I don’t know what you’re most interested in or that is most useful to you.
1. I’m very happy with all that you have told me. You really have done a lot of important work.
2. If you like, you can take a collection... We also have an abstract concerning the nationality law that. This is something we haven’t talked about, but we were the first society in the Arab world to produce a shadow report for CEDAW. Till now we have produced four of them. I’ll give you an English copy of the fourth.
1. Okay.
2. You can understand the situation of women in Lebanon from this document.