

Interview with Linda Matar

2013

TAPE 1

Interviewer: If I may ask, when were you born?

Linda: I was born in Beirut, in 1925.

Interviewer: Did you stay in Beirut?

Linda: No, we moved out of Beirut, when we moved out of Beirut I was around five years old, we moved to the suburbs of Beirut called Firn Al-Shobbak and Ain Ar-rommaneh, perhaps you know them. So, we moved there and I stayed there. Are you asking me where I received my education? When I was in Beirut I went to kindergarten for little over a year, at the Sisters of Azaria School or 'Soeurs de Charite'. And then we moved out and I went to a private school but after that I went to Sisters of Nazareth School. I received my education at the free school, I didn't pay anything, because at Sisters of Nazareth school there is a ??? (around minute 00:01:25) for rich people and there is another school also owned by them, free of charge for those who don't have money, and I was one of those people, my parents couldn't afford to send me to a school where they had to pay tuition fees. I received my education there, I was 7 years old when I joined that school, I had started my education already and I stayed there until I was 12, which means 5 years. I was a very smart student. In my day, the Sisters of Nazareth School was with the French, it wasn't a Lebanese school; that's why I had a poor knowledge of Arabic, I learned French better than I learned Arabic. When I was 12, we had a principal who was also a nun, they called her Ma mere (around minute 00:02:45) Because there were two types of nuns in the Sisters of Nazareth schools, Ma mere and Ma soeur, so there is some sort of discrimination there. The Mamer??? were the rich ones while the Massers???? were the poor ones. The principal of my school was a Mamer????*, there were also other teachers who weren't nuns. She was a very good principal, in those days, unlike today. Today, any school subject be it English, French, mathematics, physics... there was a separate teacher for each subject, but in the past there was one teacher for everything, the teacher would teach everything, from language to algebra and everything else. I was a very smart student, but unfortunately, that school didn't give out certificates and I didn't know which grade I reached. I left school and I couldn't join another school because our financial situation at home was very tight, so I got a job at a socks factory. Then I decided to start studying in the evening, there was

evening school those days, maybe they're starting to have that now, paid education, not at school but at organizations or something like that. I would work during the day and go to school in the evening, and I would pay for that from what I earned at my job. It wasn't very expensive. I worked at the socks factory for a year, but I didn't like dealing with the workers there, so I quit and went to work in a silk factory, I worked there for another year. There was a rule in the Sisters of Nazareth School which stated that whoever leaves the school has to go there every Sunday to attend the mass at Nazareth, but it wasn't compulsory. And there would be talks for both children and adults, some of those people are now 50 and they still come here. I used to go too, every Sunday morning. Mar Shehab, the principal who was a Lebanese from the Shehab family, she loved me a lot and it really bothered her that I worked in the factory. I was only 12 or 13 years old, she couldn't hire me as a teacher. Also, in the past you didn't need higher educational degrees, you could teach children if you had a school certificate ??? (minute 00:06:35), but this isn't the case nowadays, now you need higher educational degrees or a certificate from the teachers' institution, but in the past you didn't need any of that. She said "I will hire me when you become 14, because now the students will beat you up instead of you punishing them, when you become 14 and I will hire you to teach an elementary class, not a secondary class, an elementary one. Are you following?"

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Linda: So, when I turned 14 she hired me as a teacher at her school. She gave me a class... I was very apt, I also took extra lessons in the evening, so I reached the baccalaureate, because when I left school I had already passed the prove??? (minute 00:07:38) without knowing it because there were no certificates so I didn't get the baccalaureate degree. I taught there for two years. Working in the factory gave me a new experience in life. I lived like a worker, there were no unions, no social security, nothing at all. The worker would go to work at 7 am and finishes at 6 in the evening, with half an hour or an hour lunch break during the day, depending on the factory. If she did something wrong, they would deduct one or two days wages off her salary which was already peanuts. I felt that there was a lot of injustice inflicted on the workers. I kept that in mind and I kept asking why? Why all that injustice? But I had no answer; I had no answer at the time. By the time I was 14 or 15 years, my students were just 2 years younger than me, but I was a good teacher, Mar Shehab was very pleased with me. But I looked like a fully grown woman, I looked older than my 15 years, I was tall and well-built, unlike now. I look different, I'm not going to say beautiful, but very easy on the eye. I was approached by suitors, you know how things were in the past and we still have that today, that a girl must get married. But my father, although he was an old man, he was ahead of his time, he told me: "Listen, my child, don't get married before you're at least 20 years old. By the time you're 20, you will have grown wise that you can make a choice yourself." But it didn't work, things didn't go the way he wanted. The circumstances didn't help. We had a house which we leased out to a group of

Armenian young men who came to Beirut from Syria for work. They saw a friend of theirs, gave him directions to the house so he came to visit, but they weren't home so he came to our house. That man would later on become my husband; because when he came into our house for a while to wait for his friends, I saw something different about him from all my other suitors, but it didn't occur to me that I'd marry him because he was Armenian, and since I was an Arab it would be a little difficult, it wasn't very common. So, I liked him, he was handsome, blonde with blue eyes, polite, tall, he had everything I was looking for in a man. I liked him, and it turned out that he liked me too. So, he did something, he came to live with his friends so that we'd be close to each other and then he asked my father for my hand in marriage. My father laughed, I was 16 years old at the time, he said: "My daughter is only 16, but I'm obliged to ask her". So, my father asked me, he said that this man, his name was Puzint, asked for my hand in marriage. My father was laughing expecting me to say no, but I said: "Whatever you'll say, father". He said he knew my answer then. He knew that meant a yes. So, my family and my brothers didn't approve and so did his family, who was in Aleppo, why? Nonetheless, we were engaged for one year and I took him to my school and introduced him to the Sisters, my friends met him and they liked him, and Mar Shehab congratulated me and told me he was a very good man. I was 17 when I got married. Are we done with that? What else would you like to know about my life?

Interviewer: What did you do after getting married?

Linda: After marriage I did what all women do, I stayed at home. But I'm a person, since I was young, if I don't like something... for example, if I knew a sick person couldn't afford the medicine, I would ask why? There were many questions in my head but I could never find answers. A while after I got married there was a parliamentary election, in those days women didn't have the right neither to vote nor to run for elections, women could not be voters nor could they be candidates, this is before 1953, in 1953 women acquired that right and I participated in it. I was standing by and watching on the day of election, I didn't have the right to do anything. I saw cars coming by, picking up people and whatnot. I saw something that really bothered me, we had a 25 year-old neighbor who was disabled, both physically and mentally. Not only physically that he couldn't walk or talk, he was mentally disabled, he didn't know what he was doing, he had no way of knowing. I saw two people coming into his house, I was watching from my house above, they had the young man in their arms, they looked happy as if they've done something big, I immediately went down to his mother and said, "Em George - His name was George- where is George going?" She said, "I don't know, they gave him a piece of paper and he will put it in the box". He went to vote. Yes! I was furious. I couldn't go there to cast my vote and it was a 10-minute walk to reach the polling station, and this poor man was being manipulated, he had no idea what he was doing. They gave him the ballot they wanted, of course they paid him for it, they paid his mother, because these things aren't done for free. I

was really frustrated and I kept talking about that, to the neighbors you know, but nobody felt the way I felt, most of them thought that women had no business in politics, but I couldn't accept that, especially my husband, he was very open-minded and he had huge respect for women, I might have married young, out of love, it wasn't a rational decision, but I was lucky that he turned out to be a good man and a great husband, all his life he was a husband, a father, not only a father, he took care of my parents in their old age. I was lucky, I don't know, I could not have been so lucky. So, he believed in women rights, he used to support me in the things I said. He must have told someone or something like that. One day two young ladies knocked on my door, they had a petition for me to sign which calls for women's right to vote and to run for elections. In our neighborhood, when someone knocked on the door you first checked out who it was and if a woman was home alone she would not open, because we had Jehovah's witnesses, you know who they are? The originally came from Israel, "Jehovah" means God for them, they preach at houses so people didn't want to receive them because there were too many of them. For me, I'd open the door and I'd tell them I didn't want them in my house, so I said to the girls: "I will walk with you so that people will open their doors for you, they would open if they saw me with you". So, I walked with them and we went door to door collecting signatures. I'm telling you this little story to show you how women used to think before. We reached a house of a woman I knew, she had a guest, another woman, I was happy, thought we'd get two signatures instead of one. I read the petition statement for them and the lady of the house signed it, but the other woman stood in front of me and said: "What do women want?" She looked at me and made this gesture. She was wearing golden jewelry on her hands. She was shackled with gold like a prisoner. She had a key in her hand, it was her car key, and a maid at home to serve her, so what else did she want? I said, congratulations on what you have. I reckoned talking to her would be a waste of time, and then she left. That made me even more furious, how could a woman say that? She didn't want her rights, and she thought those were the only rights she had, the jewelry, the maid and the car, are those your rights? I asked them who they were, those who made the petition didn't mention who they were, they just wrote: "We, the signatories below"*, those who were signing the petition with their names. They said they were from the Lebanese Committee for Women Rights. So I told them I wanted to join them. They said: "we will send a lady tomorrow with the agenda, she will talk to you and tell you the conditions to join the committee as well as its objectives, if you find that it suits you then you're welcome to join". In less than a week, a girl came from the American University, she introduced herself and said: "I'm from the Lebanese Committee for Women Rights, I brought you the agenda, we are an organization concerned with women rights, the right of women to work in all fields, be them social, economic, cultural or political." The word political wasn't used for organizations before, if you said "political" then it would be a party, because women had nothing to do with politics, even the law stated that, women had nothing to do with politics. So, I liked the organization and I established a branch for it in Ain Ar-

rommaneh, and I was chosen as the head of that branch, but I didn't know anything, I didn't even know what responsibility meant exactly. I needed to learn and I did, I started asking questions and things like that. And I moved up the ladder in the Women's Rights Committee, from the head of the branch to be in charge of the whole Southern Dahieh area, because there was Burj Al-Barajneh and the Hrat neighborhood among others, and Ain Ar-rommaneh was part of that. So, after that I became the secretary general and then the head of the committee. While I was in the committee, I found answers to the questions I used to wonder about. The first responsibility I undertook in the committee was working with female workers, calling female workers. I started calling the factories, there were many factories in our area. There was a biscuit factory, a silk factory, a socks factory, a broadcloth factory, there were factories everywhere in the area. When we needed to see the workers, one of my colleagues would go to meet them at the lunch break where they would sit and eat under an olive tree. Their employers knew about that so he banned them from going out, they had their lunch inside the factory. So, we continued doing our work and we demanded women rights, other organizations emerged and we worked together. The government agreed to give voting rights only to educated women, *which means those who had school certificates. As a committee, I had started working with them and I was still new to the committee, but I didn't represent the committee, there was another woman who held a college degree and had been with the committee for a while, she was our representative. We rejected that, why would only educated women have the right to vote? Why does the illiterate man have the right to vote while the illiterate woman doesn't? It wasn't her fault, there was no school to teach her, there was hardly any schools for girls back in those days, only schools for boys, there were very few schools for girls. Everyone agreed that we should reject the decision, but some said that it was a start at least, there's nothing called a start, what's temporary becomes permanent. After all, educated women are those who have certificates, what difference would that make? I didn't have a certificate because I didn't get one at school, but when I tried to vote Mar Shehab said she would give me a certificate, she could give me more than one certificate. But the committee refused that and we held protests and sit-ins again and the government at last approved the rights of women to vote and to run for elections, and that's all. And we're still working. This is my answer for your question, do you need to know something else about this?

Interviewer: What year did you start?

Linda: What?

Interviewer: What year did you start working in the committee's branch? What year?

Linda: Ghada... Ghada? In 1953. I've been with the committee for 60 years, I didn't leave.

Interviewer: That's impressive.

Linda: But during that time, I contributed to the establishment of two organizations, in addition to the committee: The Committee of Mothers in Lebanon, which is made up of bourgeois women, but this is what we call patriotic bourgeoisie. They love their country, but they don't come to the committee of women's rights, in the committee we have workers, farmers, housewives, women from all walks of life and from all faiths and denominations. We are secular, it's mentioned in our license which we obtained later on, we didn't get official approval at first, I was told so by those who preceded me, the committee was created in 1947, but it wasn't officially approved until 1966. If you stay here you may attend our anniversary celebration, how long are you staying in Lebanon?

Interviewer: Another 10 days

Linda: Our anniversary is on the 23rd of November, we're celebrating the anniversary of the committee as well as Independence day. So, I also contributed to establishing the committee of violence against women, and then I became the head of the Lebanese Women Council, there's a council for Lebanese women and it consists of organizations, our committee is a member of that council. There are many Lebanese organizations; we have 170 organizations today in that council, from all over Lebanon. In 1996, I became the president of that council, I was voted president. I was also the head of the women's rights committee, I wasn't replaced, they wouldn't replace me. I told them I wanted to step down but they refused. There's nobody like me, things are very easy for me at home, I don't mean that I have servants, no. My husband helps me a lot and my mother used to take care of the house. So, that's why I was in the committee all the time whenever they needed me there. So, the Lebanese Women Council in 1996, and there was a parliamentary election in 1996. I ran for the elections representing the Lebanese Women Council, in the precinct of Beirut. But as you know, candidates are chosen according to their religious denomination, and I was raised a Maronite, but when I got married my new ID said I was a Maronite-Orthodox. I ran for the elections as a representative of the Maronite-Orthodox in Beirut. I ran as an independent candidate??? (Minute 00:30:10) Because here, the head of the electoral list is a well-known person, a famous and wealthy politician, so he chooses the candidates for his list, and there were around 24 representatives in this list in Beirut, so they choose those who have money, or those who support them politically, or those who have large families that can vote because the person votes for the whole list, and so this is what the head of the list wants because if this list wins, it could help him become a Prime Minister. Are you following? This needs an Arab to read it, right? They'll explain them better to you. So, even if I ran for the election I would not be chosen for a list. If I wanted to be in the parliament it was because I wanted to say what I'm saying now in the Women's Rights Committee. I will not seek to please the head of the list, I ran for the elections to win, that's true, but I wouldn't feel bad if I didn't win, I had to put women on the political map. I was the only woman in Beirut who was running for the elections but later on many women did, I was

the only one at the time. I needed to put women on the map, they had the right to run for elections. Moreover, to run for elections you had to pay 10 million Liras, which is almost 7 thousand dollars, something like that, and I didn't have a penny. The committee didn't have any money either, nor did the council. So, I created an electoral agenda and I invited people to share it with them. I talked about the money. While I was there, I got 7 million Liras of donations, when I introduced my agenda everyone who was there started to make donations. So, I was 3 million Liras short. We made a donation of 2 thousand Liras, to achieve two things: collecting money and reaching out to people, because when you give them a handout and take 2 thousands you talk to the person and you can tell them this is a promotion for a certain candidate. So, the elections were held and I knew beforehand that I would not win, because... But, some young men volunteered to post my pictures on the walls for free, and they did, one person donated the posters. The person who sat by the ballot box - As I should have someone at the polling station to watch over the process- they were paid for that.

TAPE 2

Linda: They volunteered. Nobody was paid. Everything, even cars, sometimes you need a car, my friends, some from the council and others from the Women Rights Committee have cars, so they brought their cars and drivers to drive people where they needed to go. This office here was the campaign office, not in the council, because many people in the council didn't want me. They did not want me. But, despite all that the council decided that I would run for the elections. I have a book where I wrote about the elections, in the end I wrote: I apologize for those who were in charge of the office because they ate falafel every day, I couldn't make them anything else, I'd bring them falafel and they would eat it, all the time, either manakeesh or falafel, we couldn't make them anything else, even those who were staying by the ballot boxes had the same to eat, but the other candidates would get their people meals from restaurants and whatnot. I'm happy that those who voted for me are those who believed that women should be present, that's the first thing, the second thing is that they believed in me. I'll give you an example: I got 7850 votes, as an independent candidate, if I was in a list I would've won for sure. Everyone said that I succeeded politically, but I didn't reach the parliament. Let me tell you a story, off the record, shut this off. So, we proceeded like that, I stayed a president for the women's council only for four years, that was the law. Then another person would be elected and after that if you want you can run for presidency again but I didn't want to, that was enough for me, because in the women's council it's very hard, in your organization everyone agrees on almost everything, they do have arguments but they all share the same goals and principles, everyone is secular, while in the women's council people belong to different faiths or

sects but they are not secular. Everyone puts their religious sect first; I tried to change that a lot but I couldn't. I told them that I failed, I had worked a lot and I had done a lot of things, I held two conferences about the women's quota which nobody knew about, I worked a lot, but to change the rules, for example, until this day the president of the women's council must be a Christian for one term and a Muslim for the next. I told them, let the women's council be the first to renounce sectarianism. Renounce it. Muslims and Christians can run for presidency and whoever wins will be the president, but they didn't agree. They refused. I proposed a civil law for civil status and it's in effect now, but at that time they said it couldn't be, a civil law for civil status? That goes against religion and whatnot. I didn't succeed, but I succeeded through communication and the activities that we held, and that left a footprint, so to speak, I left a footprint in the council, they still love me and respect me, and that's my credit, you know what credit is? When you deposit money in the bank you say this is my credit, people's love is my credit, this is my credit. Not the money in the bank, I don't have any money anyway. What else?

Interviewer: May I ask you, what was your electoral program?

Linda: What?

Interviewer: What do you call it, the electoral agenda?

Linda: The electoral system?

Interviewer: No, you ran for the elections, what did you want to achieve?

Linda: What is it in English?

Interviewer: The manifesto

Linda: What?

Interviewer: In the elections...

Linda: The agenda?

Interviewer: Yes, the agenda

Linda: My agenda, according to my principles and whether I was going to get into the parliament, I don't want to be in the parliament just to serve women's issues, I want to be in the parliament to build on the work I do outside for society, children, men, workers, farmers, for the country, the freedom and sovereignty of the country, for co-existence, that everyone would live together in peace, against war, pro-peace, this is my agenda, and that was my agenda back then, all of that. Because I'm would never deceive people by saying only what they want to hear, no. I say the things that need to be done and which they need to work towards

achieving. Despite all that, I got that number of votes. I have nothing to hide, I say whatever I have to say, it might be expressed in different ways but the important thing is that it doesn't change. the important thing is that it doesn't change. See? Nobody will comment... I mean people might comment on it, but they have to take responsibility over what they say instead of putting words in my mouth. That was my agenda. What else? And I'm still working on that.

Interviewer: You didn't join any political parties?

Linda: What?

Interviewer: Did you join any political parties?

Linda: I don't understand the question.

Interviewer: Did you join any political parties?

Linda: Oh, have I joined any political parties? I have indeed. When I joined the Lebanese committee for Women's rights, I found answers to many of my questions but there was one thing I couldn't find. At that time, there were a number of political parties. My brother for example was in the Kataeb party. I refused to join, why? Because I don't want a sectarian party. That's why. Because I believed that all sects are as we say: Religion is for God, and the homeland is for all. That's why I'm secular, that means I want the laws of the country to be secular, not sectarian or doctrinal, and I don't want the elections to be a competition between sects, but if you run for the elections you will have to play that game. They won't accept you if you run as a secular candidate. They won't give you permission to run. If you run for the elections, it's inevitable. Back then there was a newspaper that was delivered to our door, we didn't know who brought it, because the newspaper was for the Communist party which was banned. The communist party was banned from doing any activities. The newspaper was called "the sound of the people". I wasn't involved in politics at all back then. I had been in the Committee for women's rights for 10 or 15 years. When the newspaper was delivered, and by the end of World War II, as you know that in World War II there were two sides: the Axis powers and the Allies. The Axis powers which were the USA, Russia, France and others, while the Allies were Japan, Germany and others. Those were the two sides of the conflict. The Soviet Union back then was with the Allies. My husband is an Armenian, Armenia was part of the Soviet Union and he was a keen supporter of it. He was with the Soviet Union, which means he was with the Axis powers. There weren't any Armenian newspapers back then, there was just this newspaper delivered to our door so he asked me to read it for him so that he could know what was happening, although I couldn't care less, this was before I joined the Committee for Women's rights, actually, not before I joined the committee... Yes, the newspaper had been delivered to our door before I joined the committee but I didn't give it much thought because it was a partisan newspaper. But then, as I still had so many questions and I started to read that

newspaper, I found that it was very useful to me. After a while, someone came, he was our neighbor, I asked him first as I knew he was a communist, so I asked him why the newspaper was being distributed secretly, he said because the party was banned from issuing newspapers and whatnot. He asked me whether I liked it and I said yes. He asked me whether I wanted to attend the "circle of friends", it turned out that you couldn't join the party right away, instead, friends would talk to you about politics and whatnot. I said I would like to. So, I started to attend those meetings, there was a circle of friends once a week. I would just listen, I had nothing to say, I didn't know anything, so I just wanted to listen and I liked what I heard. A while later I told our neighbor that I wanted to join the party. I told my husband, my husband didn't join the party. Not because he didn't like it. My husband had a different theory, he said: "I don't like that when there's voting they say the majority and the minority." Do you know what that means? It means more votes and less votes, the side with more votes wins. But he said that maybe the minority is right but the majority wins, so he didn't like that idea, and that's why he didn't join any party. I said I wanted to join, so he said: "it's your call, do whatever you want." I said yes, I want to join the party. And I joined the party. I joined the party and I gained a lot of new ideas, I read for Marx and Engels, and I saw that of this philosophy was implemented it would be very important, everyone would have a good life, regardless of who rules the country, rulers come and go. The Soviet Union was destroyed by its rulers, they were behind its destruction, and they were communists. But perhaps being in power changes people, maybe. So, I joined the party while I was still in the Lebanese Committee for women's rights, I wasn't the president yet but I was the secretary general. When I became president, I found that I didn't have the right to be in the party, so that people wouldn't think that the Committee was affiliated with the Communist party. I filed a request to the Communist party to resign from the party and I haven't gone back until now, because I became the head of the committee and I needed to focus all my efforts on that organization, a democratic organization which is made of people from all sects and ideologies. They approved it of course, but that didn't change my beliefs, my mindset is still the same. My perspective on political issues didn't change, on the contrary it became more powerful because I went through different political circumstances in the world. The war was over and cold war was back on and unfortunately there was meddling in countries' affairs, and I would benefit from everything I learned to view the things that took place. It gave a clear perspective on things. I think that if you want to analyze political events you need to use both your eyes, not only one eye. You need to see what's wrong and what's right, you might find something right in what's wrong and something wrong in what's right. You know? If you really believe in freedom for people and for the country and in its progress and if you believed that nobody must be denied their right to freedom, in peace, in stability, in everything, if you believed in all that then you would see who is behind the unrest in the country and you would choose which way to go. I was like that and I'm still like that, but I'm not a part of the Lebanese Communist party but I have many friends there, I don't let the party's

decisions interfere with the Committee but whatever party takes a decision that I find useful for the civil society I borrow that decision, I say that a certain organization took this certain decision and we should use it. You see? I'm not shutting people out, except for one kind people, I'm against anyone who's with Israel. I'm against Israel, not because I'm against the people, you know what they say about their people, it's not because I'm against the people, I'm with all peoples, but this particular people is supporting its government who forced Palestinians out of their homes, Palestinians are now scattered all over the world, they don't have a state, Ramallah is not a state, you see? Unfortunately. Neither Gaza is a state. Palestinians are still stateless and we hope that Palestine will be back, it will not be entirely back but at least they'll have one unified state. That's one thing. Another thing for me personally, I am with anyone that stands against Israel. Anyone who stands against Israel whether by the spoken word, the written word, armed resistance or anything else is my friend. Just in their stand against Israel, I might agree with them on their stand against Israel but not agree with their ideology or ideas. You see? I make a distinction between the enemies... I always say I don't have enemies in Lebanon, I just have opponents, you know? An opponent is not an enemy, you just have different opinions. But there's no conflict between you and them, only disagreement. Ask an Arab and they will tell you what this means. There are different opinions, one day you may see eye to eye, but if there was a conflict you will never be on the same page. So, I'm in disagreement with many people but there's no conflict between us. I talk to them, I work with them, I meet with them and we exchange opinions, that's how I live. That's why, maybe that's why I have lots of credit, everyone loves me, if they don't love me at least they respect me. Respect, for me, is more important than love. Love changes but respect doesn't. People respect you for something you did, but they love you because you talk to them or something like that, but they have to respect you. If a man marries for love but he doesn't respect his wife, then love won't last, it will change. On the other hand, it's hard for respect to change. Are you married?

Interviewer: What?

Linda: Are you married?

Interviewer: Yes.

Linda: How is your husband? Does he respect you as a woman?

Interviewer: He's good. He respects me. He's good.

Linda: If we bring Manakeesh, will you eat with us? Would you eat a mankoosheh? Do you know what a mankoosheh is? Would you eat that?

Interviewer: Yes

Linda: Ghada... Ghada... What else?

Interviewer: What are your priorities at work?

Linda: What?

Interviewer: Priorities

Linda: Priorities?

Interviewer: Yes

Linda: Yes, what are my priorities? What do I want to do?

Interviewer: The priorities of the committee

Linda: The current priorities of the committee

Interviewer: In the beginning

Linda: When the war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, the committee for women rights was preparing for the international year of women, as the year 1975 was the international year of women. We were busy preparing the international year of women, and then came the civil war on April 13th, the 13th of April. We stopped and we said that our country is our first priority, if there's no country then there are no rights, not for women, not for men, not for anyone. We started fighting to stop the civil war, but sadly it didn't stop, there was a lot of destruction but we kept working, we didn't stay home, despite all the shelling, we were on the streets, there were several women from the committee, nobody left the country from the committee for women's rights, everyone stayed in Lebanon. We worked every day that at some point my neighbors told me they thought I was being paid since I was going out under the shelling, that I was charging money for my work. That's what they thought, they told me later on. But when they saw my house and how I lived they knew I wasn't paid any money, that was my orientation, that was how much I loved my country, no matter what happened in my country I would never leave it. I left Lebanon once to take a tour around the world in solidarity with Lebanon, with the help of an international democratic international federation of women. Whenever I reached the headquarters of the member organization they would take it upon themselves to provide a home for me and another woman who was with me, her name was Terez and to conduct interviews with us in solidarity with Lebanon against the Israeli occupation. I traveled abroad, we started with Scandinavian countries, all of them, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden, four countries. We spent two or three days in each country. I saw then how the Western media - I'm not going to say stupid- but biased, looking at things from one perspective. They only cared about Israel, they couldn't care less about the Arab World.

Everyone there was sympathizing with Israel, how could they? Israel was occupying our lands. You should sympathize with us, not with Israel. I think we succeeded, we appeared on TV and in newspapers, they conducted interviews with us, and whenever we went anywhere we would stay as guests in that country. After that we went to Canada, to Montreal and Toronto. They had prepared a schedule for us in both cities, and it happened that on Mother's day there we were in a protest and we held picket signs in solidarity with the Lebanese people against the Israeli occupation. We succeeded in that and held many interviews before going to the United States. There's a very important organization in the United States, it has both black and white members, against discrimination, they received us very warmly, they conducted interviews with us, took us to some places, helped us to appear on TV and in newspapers and whatnot. So, we talked about the same things and said that the American government is helping Israel, why? To occupy more land, is it not enough that they occupied Palestine, why do they want to occupy Lebanon too? That was the only time I left Lebanon, it was for almost three weeks during which we took this tour. We did a lot of work here, the people who stayed and the foreigners who came to Lebanon, we held a sit-in at the American University; you know what a sit-in is? The shelling continued for 21 days while we held the sit-in, not only us but also other organizations, there were people from Italy and marched with us in a protest to where Israeli forces were still in Beirut and they held picket signs saying: "Go out, go home", against Israel. We did a lot of things, we put our country first and foremost, one hundred percent. Despite all that, there were events held for the international year of women, people in other parts of the world were celebrating and holding conferences. We always tried to send someone to attend those conferences so that Lebanon wouldn't be absent from the picture, and so forth, you know that Arabic expression? It's like when you spin a wheel, this is how we proceeded. What else?

Interviewer: Especially during the war, what challenges did you face?

Linda: Excuse me?

Interviewer: the challenges

Linda: Challenges? Everything is a challenge. Whether on the local level, the Regional level or the global level, everything is a challenge. The people that can be united can stand up to challenges, but my fear is that this people was infested with mites, you know what mites are? Like if you have rice and you find something black in it that eats away at the rice, or the lentils or the chickpeas, these are called mites and they cause decay. Lebanon was plighted with the mite of sectarianism. Our work today is against sectarianism, to unify the Lebanese people. Our work is to achieve a democratic nonsectarian system, a civil, not secular system because they thing that seculars don't believe in God, this is not true. Seculars believe in science, that the law must be based on science not on sectarianism or to divide people, everyone should be governed by the law but the law must be civil, not sectarian, and then you can go pray at the

mosque or at the church, nobody will stop you, worship God according to your beliefs, celebrate your holidays, you're free to do whatever you want, but don't mix between people's daily lives from all sects and force them to be subject to the law of one sect, that's it. These are the big challenges today. The other challenges are what's happening in the Arab World, the interference, the shameless interference, you know what shameless means? They have no shame. They have no faith, nothing. They interfere with us. If people took the streets demanding to reform the system or to amend certain laws without weapons, they say no, they send them weapons and tell them to use them, and they send people to do that. Like what happened in Yemen and they brought back that who must not come back. It happened in Libya, NATO intervened in Libya and they are still there. It happened in Tunisia and sadly things are still a mess in Tunisia until now, there isn't a democratic system yet, we used to say: when will we be like Tunisian women who has gotten all her rights. Women in this so-called Arab Spring have taken steps backwards. Their rights are being gradually lost. This is what's happening in Syria and we in Lebanon are waiting to see what will happen in Syria so that we can form a government, we still have no government until now. The Parliament, instead of holding an election, has extended its term for another three years, and I don't know how longer they will extend their term. The government might extend. I can't say...

TAPE 3

Linda: People are seeing what's happening, if you want you can go to the sit-in at the museum on Monday. Do you know the museum? Monday at 12, we have a sit-in there, there will be something for you which you can use for your study. Write it down, Monday at 12 pm. There will be media and everything, and there will be all kinds of people, those who really believe in their rights and in their country, they will be there. So, the challenges I can tell you about are the daily life challenges like high prices, who can still afford to live the way they used to live before? Unless they are millionaires. Houses, who can still afford to rent a house? There aren't enough houses, especially with the influx of refugees from Syria, who are sadly... of course we are against forcing them out of their homes but they have fled the killing and the destruction, we have to welcome them, but where is the so-called United Nations and the so-called Security Council, where are the aids that should be provided to Lebanon so that Lebanon can support the refugees while our resources can hardly cover the needs of the poor in Lebanon. The poor people in Lebanon aren't able to get their rights, everything is a challenge, what can I tell you? A shameless American interference, Obama wants to wage a war, how can you wage a war when you're broke? Your government is broke, you're drowning and you're still meddling with other people's affairs, like what they did in Iraq. What did they do in Iraq? They deposed

Saddam Hussein and took his place, they pushed Iraq to invade Kuwait, America pushed the Iraqis to invade Kuwait. Unfortunately, the American administration is the same, a new president comes and we think he is better than his predecessor but it turns out he can't do anything. There's a certain policy, they want to control the whole world and to have a role in forming governments, in parliaments, they want to play a role in everything. But we won't let them do that, we won't allow it. The people have awakened; they might be going through hard times and through a lot of agony right now but in the end there must come about a result in the interest of the people. With your help, journalists and media professionals, you who write in newspapers and speak on TV, you must know the truth, that the Arab peoples are oppressed, why would I care about those in Saudi Arabia and Qatar who are under American protection because they have oil. That's why they are safe now, but their time will come. We don't want anyone to suffer, we just want them to know that they should take the side of the Arab World, we are not against the American people, this is a people, but even the American people are suffering, they are suffering from unemployment, I know that there aren't enough jobs, they are suffering from bankruptcy, the banks are broke, what are they waiting for? They should wake up too. I can't wake them up but I can work to make sure they don't stand against our countries. I can do that, as long as I live, and when I die there will be many others to do that. What else? That's all, right? Is there something else?

Interviewer: Yes, a few things. May I ask you... you talked about the sectarian conflict in Lebanon. But there has always been political disputes in Lebanon.

Linda: Of course

Interviewer: I mean, in the beginning...

Linda: the political disputes are the result of sectarian differences, those lead to political differences. Now you will tell me... before you tell me I will tell you. You will tell me that some people are taking a stance against Hezbollah because they think that Hezbollah... I'm not with Hezbollah, I'm not with them in the sense that I don't have to follow a certain sect, I don't have to at all. I want to have a civil democratic government, not a sectarian one. But I can't deny that if it wasn't for Hezbollah... I'd like to say something, our Lebanese army is a heroic army but one without weapons. Ever since I started to understand politics I used to hear that America, France and England want to provide the Lebanese army with weapons. Once there was this news circulating that America sent weapons to support the Lebanese army, what were those weapons? We saw them being unloaded from the ship, they were motorcycles, small cars and small rifles so that if a civil war broke out the Lebanese army would use them. But, did they send them cannons or planes? Did they send them anything they could use against Israel like Israel destroyed our countries? When they invaded Lebanon in 1982 they completely destroyed the country. If Hezbollah didn't have strong weapons in 2006... I don't care anymore... I know

that for the first time in the history of the occupation state of Israel who's occupying Palestine, for the first time Israel was defeated. They felt that there was someone stronger than them. With that strength, I agree. If they send to the Lebanese army the same weapons that Israel has, I mean the same weapons that Hezbollah has, then I'm sure that Hezbollah will join forces with the army but it's hard to do this now, they can't share their weapons with the army, and I know that many people are waiting to sign a peace treaty with Israel before the Palestinian issue is solved, and this is not right. Palestinians are scattered all over the world. Israel doesn't allow Palestinians to return to their country, despite the UN security council's resolution stating that right. All they do is demanding Lebanon to stick to the resolutions of the security council. Not once at the security council was Israel condemned for invading Lebanon. Why did they invade Lebanon? Why do they still hold 4 thousands prisoners in their prisons? They are dying in prison. There are things like that. The security council is for the whole world and there are laws in the security council. I read all of these laws. Any nation has the right to defend itself when under attack. It has the right to defend itself, why do you deny us the right to defend ourselves? Why don't you support us? Why don't you stop Israel which you created, you and England created Israel, why don't you stop it from meddling with Arab affairs? You put it here to replace you and when it can't interfere with us, you do that. This I one of the challenges and one of the issues that all the Lebanese people in the Arab World, who aren't many but they can do something, they can take a united stand, not to go back to their country and build a sectarian state. Unfortunately there are many attempts now to Islamize the Arab World. Why? People in the Arab World has coexisted throughout history. We eat the same bread, with differences of course between the poor and the rich, the difference isn't sectarian, it's a difference between classes, the poor and the rich, the food eaten by the rich is difference than that eaten by the poor. I'm one of those poor people. But it's not a sectarian matter, all poor sects eat the same food and all the rich sects eat a different kind of food. They don't think of these things but we do, and we see what we have to do, this is ??? (around minute 11:30), but sadly, they are not their responsibility anymore. They do what those who planned Kissinger plan want them to do, which is being implemented in all Arab countries and will affect everyone. The New Middle East project. I remember very well the days of the Israeli aggression in 2006, the whole Southern Dahieh was destroyed, the American minister of foreign affairs back then Condalisa Rice came here, and they took her to Dahieh to see what Israel had done. You know what she said? I said that on TV, I quoted her because I heard her on TV. She said: "Now the New Middle East has begun". The New Middle East project has begun to be implemented. Which is to destroy the countries, divide them into sects and denominations, appoint the government you want, take full control over their oil and the countries will be governed by you not by its people, this is the new Middle East, and we are against it, we've always been against it and we are still against it. I don't know what we can do, but I believe that the peoples will win in the end. All the peoples. Even the American people, because it's in their

best interest to have a good life without meddling with other people's affairs. The same applies for the French people, and the English people, and whoever wants to protect their country and have friendly relations with others. That's all. I talked a lot, this is enough, no? I don't know if you still have any questions, we talked about the challenges and all these issues and I expressed my feelings to you, all my thoughts and feelings.

Interviewer: Thank you so much

Linda: Are there other questions or is this all?

Interviewer: One last question

Linda: Go ahead, I'm not telling you to stop, I'm just asking if you still have any questions.

Interviewer: Okay. What are the best memories you have?

Linda: Memories of what?

Interviewer: in the field of women rights.

Linda: I have so many memories from different phases of life. Sometimes you have to attack and sometimes you have to retract a little bit. Depending on the circumstances, as I told you, when we have to put our country first, we put women's rights on hold. But what I want to say is that the Lebanese women movement, the Lebanese women organizations which was previously concerned only with charity, like providing help for the poor, providing medical care for the sick in free clinics, or by admitting them to public hospitals for free if they didn't have any money at all, things like that, but that wasn't enough. That is taking pity, you know what that means? It means to help people out of empathy. I think that every person has the right to medical care, to education, to a home, to speak out, they have a right to everything, they have rights. ???? (16:40 - French). We are called the Lebanese committee for women's rights. These are rights. So, that right at this point is present in a large number of organizations. Because I told them and I still tell them that I respect them because they are doing something that should be done by the state, they are doing it, those charity organizations. I say that instead of doing this, how can I help? On any given holiday, be it a Muslim, Christian or any other holiday, and those organizations, are sadly sectarian too, either Sunni, Shiite, Maronite, Durzi... Most of them, maybe there are nonsectarian organizations but most of them are sectarian. On holidays, I donate some provisions to them, like sugar, flour, canned foods, etc. How much do they last? A month? 2 months? 3 months? 4 months? They have nothing for the rest of the year, until the next year. I tell them, let's suppose I'm sick, I have a lot of pain in my hand or in my back or wherever, so they give me a morphine shot which lasts for 24 hours, but when that morphine effect wears out the pain comes back. People are like that, when they consume the things they

give them they go back to being poor. This is not what we need, we need to give them their rights. They have the right to work and make money, the young man, the old man, the woman, they have the right to work and earn money, it's their right. So, this is happening now, that's why I have lots of hope, and it's happening in the field of women's rights with regard to their right in political participation and to be in the parliament and the government. The right to have one civil law, so that all women can get married according to one law, not everyone getting married according to the law of her sect, so the role of the sect is limited to teaching them about their religion, we don't want to do away with sects, we respects the sects and denominations but we don't respect them if they want to take the place of the law that will govern everyone. Because we are in the 21st century, it's ridiculous to have 15 different laws for civil status. You know? That's what we're working on now, this is one of the things we want to achieve and that we have great hope that we will achieve one day. But the most important thing now is security and stability. That's the most important thing, if there's no security there will be no peace. Domestic peace is the basis to achieve global peace. When every country is living in peace then the whole world will be living in peace... Peace, Paix. In English and in French. That's all, we have great hope, come on Monday ad hopefully you will see some of that hope... Did they come? Ghada?... You need to stay for a month to hear everything, but I gave you a general summary of everything, this should be enough for you. I'll tel I you this, once I was at a protest and they started shooting at us, and someone died in front of my eyes. That protest was... (inaudible) In the south there's a lot of tobacco, tobacco leaves, because tobacco is taken from a plant that has leaves which they take and grind and use them to make cigarettes. We went where they plant the tobacco and there were little girls, around 10 or 11 year-olds, at first the tobacco is green, vert in French, what is it in English?

Interviewer: Green

Linda: Green, yes. That should turn yellow like this, it should become yellow, when it's dried under the sun it becomes yellow, even darker than this, like this color here, like this box, it turns this color when dried under the sun. There are girls who are given needles and thick thread to sew the green leaves together and hang them in the sun to turn yellow so that they will be used to make cigarettes. This is what these girls do. We asked the girl how much money she made, so she said that for each line of leaves she gets 5 piasters. I asked her what she'd rather do instead of that job? She said she wanted to be a nurse. I asked her why, as you know Israel used to bomb the South all the time back then, ever since they occupied Palestine they have been bombing the South. She said: "So that I can help the injured people". The difference between Akkar and the South is that Akkar didn't see Israel, they have never been bombed, children and young adults don't know much about this, while in the South the girl said she wanted to be a nurse so that she could help wounded victims. We've taught people there how to do first aid, how to give shots or help the wounded and whatnot, we taught them a lot.

There's differences between areas in the way children are raised and in the circumstances there, the circumstances change from one area to another.

Interviewer: Was that in the 1950's? You did that work in the 1950's?

Linda: What?

Interviewer: This work, this research, when was it done?

Linda: I told you, we were preparing for the international year of women. We started to work on that in 1973 because it was announced by the International federation that 1975 will be the international year of women, we were informed about that, so we started to work on that in 1973, so that we would announce the results in 1975. Then 1975 came and went.

On the card there are two e-mails, one for me at home and one for the office here. Send it to both e-mails, because I don't have a printer at home to print it out, but they can print it out for me here. I can read it at home but I don't have a printer.

Interviewer: You need to give me another card.

Linda: What?

Interviewer: I have only one e-mail on the card.

Linda: This can't be. Which card do you have? The one for me as a president?

Interviewer: Yes, from the last time I saw you.

Linda: When was that? I forgot.

Interviewer: 2007

Linda: Oh yes, I changed my card as I was no longer the president, I'm in charge of foreign affairs.

Interviewer: Who's the president then?

Linda: There were two presidents after me, the woman I introduced to you and another one who has recently become president, her name is Azza Bayrouni. She usually come here but today a relative of her passed away, his name is Mohammad Dakroub, he's a writer. A Lebanese writer, but he's old, he's my age. I'll give you a card.

Interviewer: Thank you