

LAURE MOGHAIZEL: A SPRING OF BOUNTY AND GIVING

Many of us will always remember Laure Moghaizel's funeral, and the sight of her coffin carried over the shoulders of women into Sayyidat al-Mukhallis Church in Beirut, an unprecedented though very telling act that sums up the feelings of love, gratitude and loss that most Lebanese women felt on the death of this remarkable woman. May 25, 1998, marks the first anniversary of the death of Laure Moghaizel, the prominent Lebanese lawyer and activist. This is an occasion to remember a woman who has done a great deal for the cause of woman's rights, a woman whose achievements in the domain of human rights will always be recollected with a sense of wonder and awe. Over the past year she has left a void and a gap that could not be filled, and, we as Lebanese women, have missed her staunch support and her unequalled sense of commitment to women's rights and human rights.

Far from seeing any contradiction or disparity between human rights and women's rights, Laure saw them as inextricably bound. For her, there "cannot be human rights without women's rights, nor can there be women's rights outside the framework of human rights."¹ In her opinion, equality between man and woman is meaningless under a sectarian non-democratic regime where "poverty, ignorance, violence, occupation, detention, backwardness, deprivation"² and all that

is inconsistent with man's basic dignity affect equally both men and women. This broad "humanitarian" perspective that insisted on the rights of all human beings whether male or female sums up Mrs. Moghaizel's struggle for justice and equality.

In the eyes of many Lebanese, Laure was not only a legal authority, but, to use the words of Mrs. Nayla Mouawad, an "example" and "a person who was known for her wide knowledge and right convictions and was thus respected by people all over the world."³ She was always a strong believer in justice and equality. As a lawyer she undertook an awareness campaign to enlighten citizens and particularly women of their rights. She was out to

fight and eradicate "legal illiteracy" as she referred to it. For this purpose, she issued two guidebooks for the working woman and the Lebanese citizen consecutively. As she asserted in an interview with *Al-Raida*, "we, in the Lebanese Association for Human Rights have carried out a comprehensive campaign to introduce and explain the law to Lebanese citizens, to inform them about their rights, and more importantly, to teach them how these rights should be used." To begin with, "the citizen must become aware of his or her rights; second, the citizen should learn how he or she can practice these rights; and finally, citizens must learn how to amend the deficient



existing laws."⁴

Laure knew that there was a big difference between passing a law and actually implementing it. That is why as member of a Non-Governmental Organization for Human Rights, she, along with her husband, Mr. Joseph Moghaizel, undertook the task of monitoring the Government regularly and ensuring that the law was being implemented. This was done by conducting studies, carrying out investigations, and writing reports to the concerned ministries.⁵

In war time, she fought for peace and challenged the militias by organizing, along with a large group of other women, a peaceful demonstration in protest against the violence and merciless killing of innocent civilians in Lebanon. The demonstrators marched all the way to the demarcation lines that separated the two warring sectors of Beirut carrying lit candles and calling for a peaceful and united Lebanon. Other demonstrations were staged including one in particular organized by the Democratic Party and the Non-Violence Movement (both founded by Laure and Joseph Moghaizel) in coordination with the Lebanese Society for the Disabled. The demonstration covered Lebanon from the very north to the south and lasted for three days, in protest against the violence and senseless killing.

If she was raised in a family that believed in women's rights and that provided her with the best opportunities, whether at the educational or social level, she was never complacent about it. While realizing that "we are a few lucky women" in a society where the majority of women remain underprivileged, she felt that it was her duty to give the help and assistance needed. She had a strong sense that education is a "treasure" that must be utilized in the service of others. Since she was fortunate enough to belong to a family that gave her both love and education, she believed that she owed it to others to give them what she felt was their due. Therefore, she fought hard to help implement laws that can give women their legitimate rights for she was convinced that a nation cannot progress with half its population marginalized and virtually unproductive because of ignorance and backwardness. Since in her view, equality and justice are essential for any progress or prosperity, she was determined to fight for her convictions and for the cause she believed in.

Laure was a strong believer in democracy and a secular state. In her view, what "hinders the development of our laws in Lebanon is the fact that our system is sectarian," and the only solution is the establishment of an optional "(non-compulsory), unified civil law."⁶ With her absence, Lebanon has lost an active and staunch supporter of a truly

democratic and secular state in Lebanon.

Born in 1929 in Hasbaya (South Lebanon), her career as a pioneer and fighter started off as early as the mid fifties in Law school. Being one of a handful of women enrolled at the St. Joseph University, Laure joined other students in the demonstrations that were taking place. On one of the student fronts she met Joseph Moghaizel, who later became her friend and beloved husband.⁷ Together they formed a harmonious and indefatigable team in the service of human rights. They were, as Wissam Abu Harfoush put it, "a couple in a home whose concerns revolved around the country, whose dreams were those of humanity, and whose cause was equality."⁸ It is very difficult to scan Laure Moghaizel's amazing achievements. A daring and determined woman, she was active in a number of committees and associations. In 1953 she participated with other women in the formation of the Lebanese Woman's Council and was one of its most prominent members. She was member of 37 committees and associations both Lebanese, Arab and international all dealing with women's and children's rights, family planning, democracy and human rights. She was the founder of 13 committees and organizations that were directly involved in 31 conferences on women over the span of 50 years (1945 to 1996). Together with her husband, they founded the Democratic Party in 1970, whose political bureau consisted of four men and three women. Among the party's basic priorities was the demand for women's political rights. They also founded the Human Rights Association and the Non-Violence Movement both of which aimed at eradicating internal barriers in a war-torn and divided country.

As early as 1947, they began their life-long struggle that consisted of monitoring, surveying and studying all laws that needed amendment, addition, or cancellation, and undertook the task of convincing or trying to put pressure on the government to take action. Laure was the first Arab woman to be appointed to the United Nations Committee for Human Rights and was instrumental in pressuring the Lebanese government to sign and ratify CEDAW in 1996. She also served as Vice-President of the Federation of Arab Women and Vice-President of the National Council of Lebanese Women. She was member of many committees and associations including the Committee for the Amendment of the Penal Code (1970), the Association of Women Jurists, the Association of Lebanese University Women, the Lebanese Association of Family Planning, the Lebanese Association of Human Rights, the National Council of Lebanese Women, the National Commission of the UNESCO, the Lebanese

Delegation to the Regional Conference on Human Rights (1968), the Lebanese delegation to the Mexico Conference (1975), the Copenhagen Conference (1980) and the Beijing Conference (1995). She was also member of the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, the Arab Association for Women and Development, the official delegation to the United Nations Conference on the International Woman's Year, the Official Lebanese Commission to the Regional Conference in Preparation for Beijing (1995), the Non-Governmental Organization for Human Rights, the Abolitionist Federation, the National Commission for Lebanese Women headed by First Lady Mrs. Mona Hraoui and many others. An amazingly resourceful woman, she was also the author and co-author of 13 publications on women's rights as well as human rights. She also worked for equality when it came to women's political rights, inheritance, and work and participated in a vast number of conferences at the national, regional and international levels.

If Laure devoted her life to the struggle against all forms of discrimination and fought for pressing public issues, she never forgot the importance of private life and her basic role as wife and mother. If she appeared detached and strictly guided by rationality, she was equally involved and sympathetic. In fact, this generally undetected amount of love and care that she possessed were the driving force behind all the public work she accomplished particularly her tenacious and unflinching support of the underprivileged, notably women and children. This humane and emotional dimension took precedence in her relationship with her family. After all Laure was a mother of five children, and according to her daughter, Nada, she perfected the very details of her daily life at home. Laure was totally devoted to her family. As a child, Nada asserted, her mother read poetry to her, and introduced her children to literature and the arts, and was always ready to listen to them and involve herself in the minutest details of their daily lives. There was dialogue in the Moghaizel home and a great deal of respect. The children never felt that things were dictated to them. They were taught that their opinion mattered, and in this way, they learned how to be active participants rather than passive receivers. That's what gave them self confidence, a powerful sense of respect for the opinion of others, and a strong belief in democracy not only at the public level, but also at the private and personal level. Her daughter Nada told me that it was this kind of dialogue that shaped her own personality and made her the person she is.

For Laure, her life at home was extremely important. According to her daughter Nada, Laure

treated her husband as a perpetual "guest of honor." She always returned home before him and was such an excellent cook and perfect hostess that one of her friends remarked that "if one watches you in a demonstration, he will think that you have no time for anything else, and if one sees you at home, one assumes you are a full-time housewife." This was the wonder of Laure Moghaizel, her ability to excel in everything, the ability to give everything and everyone their due. She was an ever flowing spring of bounty and giving.

My mother was an "elegant woman" says Nada. She was always impeccably dressed up not only outdoors, but at home, a sign of respect for her husband and children. Even when she lost her daughter and then her husband, Nada asserted, "she was elegant in her mourning." She grieved alone and saw no reason to trivialize her very deep emotions and feelings. Even when she fell ill, she maintained this moral elegance and lived through her pain with control and dignity.

It is clear from the sheer scope of the work she has accomplished that Laure Moghaizel devoted her life to social equality, and political justice, and dreamed of a society free of tyranny and oppression. As Abu Harfoush puts it, "it is obvious that Laure wanted her country to be a copy of her own family,"¹ where love, equality, solidarity and mutual respect reigned supreme. The woman who carried the problems of human beings, particularly women, over her shoulders for over fifty years deserved a special farewell, but more importantly, she deserves a special pledge from all of us to follow in her footsteps and carry on where she had left.

Samira Aghacy
Professor of English
Lebanese American University

REFERENCES

- 1- Interview with *Al-Raida*, XII (Summer-Fall, 1996), p. 23.
- 2- Quoted in Wissam Abu Harfoush's tribute to Laure Moghaizel in the newspaper *Al-Nahar* (May 26, 1997), p. 20.
- 3- Quoted in Nayla Mouawad's tribute to Laure Moghaizel in the newspaper *Al-Nahar* (May 27, 1997), p. 20.
- 4- See *Al-Raida*, op.cit., pp.23-24.
- 5- See *ibid.*, p.24.
- 6- *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 7- She married Joseph Moghaizel in 1953.
- 8- Abu Harfoush, *op.cit.*, p. 20.
- 9- *Ibid.*, p. 20.