

# Staying Alive

**Once there was a thriving Arab women's movement. Right now, survival is our political act. *By renowned writer Ahdaf Soueif***

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In Baghdad on any given day you might come across her. I will not tell you her name - but she is tall and slim with brushed silver hair. She dresses in black with black trainers and thick black socks. Her husband, now dead, was an Iraqi ambassador long ago. Now she sets out from her home every morning and walks. She walks though the streets looking and listening and asking questions. Her project is to memorise what is happening to the people and the daily life of her country. She's 88 and doesn't have much time. None of us have much time.

Have you ever seen a patched book? Here it is: SJ's slim volume *The Poet*. SJ has a PhD in Arabic literature from Baghdad university. The ancient piece of machinery coaxed into printing her book either dries up or floods. On pages where the damage is too bad SJ writes out the missing words by hand on a piece of paper and glues it in place. "War gives birth," she writes, "and mothers do the bringing up." She sells *The Poet* at 125 dinars a copy, hoping eventually to pay back the 3,000 dinars it's cost to produce. Three thousand dinars equals \$1.50.

Do you see these women represented in the western media? Arab women are generally portrayed as victimised, subservient. They sit next to silent, wide-eyed children in Iraqi hospitals, they stumble among the ruins of their homes in Jenin. Many in the west seem to think they need to be dragged out from under their veils and scolded into standing up for themselves. But as we all try to block, to temper, to survive the coming horror, it is crucial for sympathisers in the west to understand the truth. The women's movement started in Egypt, Palestine and Syria in the 1880s. By the 1960s women in many Arab countries had the vote, equal pay for equal work and maternity and childcare legislation that is still a dream in the west. Massive women's organisations worked to improve women's education and healthcare. Women (and men) campaigned for reforms in the personal laws and notched up several successes. But now all this is on hold.

I'm asked what Arab women are doing in these critical times. They are doing what they have to do: toughing it out, spreading themselves thin, doing their work, making ends meet, trying to protect their children and support their men, turning to their friends, their sisters and their mothers for solidarity and laughs. There was a quieter, more equable time when women's political action was born of choice, of a desire to change the world. Now, simply trying to hold on to our

world is a political action.

F is an Egyptian architect. She has always been active in women's organisations. She did voluntary literacy work with poor urban women and her book on mothers and children was published by the UNDP. Her husband is one of the 14 anti-war activists detained recently in Cairo. When she took her two daughters, both engineering students, to visit him in Tora jail, they were astounded at the hundreds of women and children waiting to visit political detainees. Children were waiting to visit grandfathers in their 70s. F's husband (now released) is from the left but most long-term detainees are Islamists. The majority are unofficially detained. They have never been to court and there is no document that gives them prisoner status. They are not allowed to give power of attorney to anyone. Without documents, wives cannot draw their husbands' salaries, cannot travel, cannot marry off a daughter or even bury a child. Because of the conditions in the jail, the detainees' families have to provide them with food, clothes, books, cigarettes. The distance from the centre of Cairo to Tora jail is 20 miles. Because the detainees have no official status there is no agreed system for visits. The women show up and hope that they and their provisions will be allowed in. If they are not they have to come back next day. F and her colleagues now find themselves campaigning at least for the proper application of the hated emergency laws under which Egyptians have laboured since 1981.

The emergency laws proscribe demonstrations or unauthorised public gatherings. Six of the marches that have taken place in Cairo over the last two weeks have been women's marches called by women's NGOs. Unlike marches involving men they managed to reach both the American and Israeli embassies. Men who demonstrate get shot before they come anywhere near these, but the authorities are still wary of brutalising women in public. It seems, though, that their patience may be wearing thin; a recent demo saw 150 women cornered by some 2,000 riot police. Last Saturday's demonstration in front of the Arab League headquarters linked Iraq and Palestine, for while the world's attention is on Iraq, Ariel Sharon's army shoots at ambulances and bulldozes houses down on top of pregnant women. Since November 2000, 51 Palestinian women have had to give birth at check points; 29 of their 51 babies died.

And yet Palestinian women continue to have babies. Is that a political choice? At the centre of most women's lives are the children. Soha, a nursing student, breaks down and cries in her home in Aida Camp when a rocket whizzes through her kitchen window at supper-time and out through the facing wall into the mercifully empty bedroom. Her mother tells her to buck up and not scare the children. It is sobering to note that the first Palestinian woman to make the political decision to become a human bomb was a nurse, caring daily for children injured or maimed by Israeli bullets. In between these two extremes - the giving and the giving up of life, hundreds of thousands of women go about their business as best they can.

Karma Abu Sharif, though 60 years younger than our Baghdadi friend, does not walk the streets of Ramallah. She sits at home and compiles the Hearpalestine newsletter and website, recording what she can of the daily demolitions, expropriations, arrests and killings. Keeping the children alive. Keeping culture alive. Preserving history and telling the story - these seem to be at the heart of our women's concerns right now.

The UN's Peter Hansen, writing in this paper last week of the terrible hunger in Gaza, says that "the Palestinian extended family and community network have saved the territories from ... absolute collapse". Women are the backbone of these families and networks and they are performing the same function in Iraq. Families who have, share with those who have not, through the agency of the churches and the mosques.

Last night IK told me that her mother, in Baghdad, has sold the Virgin's gold. An icon of the Virgin that has been in the family for more than 300 years. A neighbour in trouble - Christian, Jew or Muslim - would come and whisper a prayer, perhaps make a pledge. When the afflicted was healed, the traveller berthed, the child conceived, the neighbour would fulfil the pledge. Over the decades the Virgin was adorned with the most delicate filaments of gold. To her children's appalled protests that the gold was not hers to sell, their mother replied that the Virgin had no need of gold when there were people in the city who were starving. But what comes next? Where do you go after you've sold the Virgin's gold?

- Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian novelist. Her novel, *The Map of Love*, was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1999.