Confronting Taboos and censorship: Women speaking out

International Women’s Day, 8th March 2008
In a region where women are by and large marginalised and where the reclamation of the female body is almost unthinkable, a plucky voice has emerged in avant-garde Beirut acknowledging coco, otherwise known as the vagina. Although Beirut is known to be an oasis of freedom in a largely frustrated and parched region, the riveting play, Hakeh neswan (Arabic for Women’s talk) written and directed by the Lina Khoury, still managed to cause quite a stir.

In spite of the suggestive swaying of the lascivious pop-stars on TV, the mini-skirted women elegantly strutting on marble-floored malls, and the unmarried couples that abound in Beirut, putting the often marginalised issues of sex, harassment, menstrual symptoms, rape and lesbianism on centre stage was no easy task.

“It took three years of research and writing, 18 months of heated negotiations with the censors, a lot of tears and five versions of the script to finally get the OK to stage the play,” Khoury said, her eyes sparkling.

The General Security in Lebanon still practices prior censorship on the arts, particularly in theatre and film. In an attempt to clarify to the young playwright what was deemed ‘too direct’ by the censors, the script was read in her presence and according to Khoury, unscrupulously lacerated line after line. “With every mark of his pen, I felt a knife piercing my body”, she said.

“In addition to the changes made by the censors, I self-censored myself in the process,” she admitted referring to how she finally decided on the name Coco for the female genital organ. Khoury ruled out other considerations including the “vulgar” Arabic colloquial word for vagina and the purposely-selected masculine word for beautiful, Jamil that happened to also be the name of the then head of the General Security.

Eventually, the fifth version of the play was approved on the day of the opening night in April 2006, but, the fourth version was staged. This defiant move prompted warnings from the General Security which ceased after the Ministry of Culture intervened.

The purpose of the play, according to Khoury, was first and foremost theatre that speaks to the audience. “Of course, I also wanted to trigger a discussion about sex, harassment, domestic violence and the female body…I am devoted to this cause” she added. “Many have come up to me after the show and told me they felt I helped purge their frustration,” she said delightedly. Khoury did insist however, that this play was not meant to provide answers, but to acknowledge the existence of these issues and more importantly to initiate more open discussion.

Indeed, she did that and much more. Khoury was invited to numerous talk shows on Lebanese and Regional Arab TV stations, a string of reviews and articles were written about the play around the world, and internet users debated the topic on blogs and in chat rooms for months. Khoury also received numerous invitations to stage the play elsewhere in the Middle
East but, with the exception of Morocco, none of these materialised, undoubtedly due to the unusually “direct” content of the play.

“I am a trained director but had never written much… This was the first play I have ever penned … I didn’t expect this great success… I only planned for five nights initially”, she told ARTICLE 19 on the eve of the last show after an 18-month run. “

Hakeh Neswan was inspired by Eve Ensler’s Vagina Monologues and consists of 12 monologues, three of which were adapted from Ensler’s play. The other taboo-breaking stories are all based on the real life experiences of Khoury herself, or the women she interviewed. The four unblushing actresses Nada Abo Farhat, Anjo Rihan, Zeinab Assaf and Carole Aamoun were meticulously casted by Khoury and have also received well-deserved praise.

In one of the monologues, an 11-year-old girl’s story who was raped by a family friend is shared with the audience: "I could tell my parents that Israel has invaded Beirut, but I could never tell them that your friend has invaded me."

Other less tragic and often comically-written monologues, explore the topics of pubic hair, visits to gynaecologists, premenstrual syndrome, verbal and physical harassment, and a woman’s relationship to her Coco.

One of the monologues narrates a sexual experience between a woman and a partner, not husband, who insists on looking at her Coco before intercourse and heaps an array of compliments on her. The actress seems stupefied, looks between her legs and asks “you found all this here?”

While Khoury received much more praise than she had anticipated, she also received some criticism that was at times less than constructive, to put it mildly. In addition to about 20 people who walked out of the play in the past year and a half, an art critic told her on a TV talk show that he was happy he didn’t have any daughters lest they turned out like her. Other critics left comments on websites calling for her to be stoned and accusing her of Zionism.

Yet, these threats have not discouraged Khoury. The young playwright and director is currently researching her new play on relationships, sex and society, in an effort to purge more frustrations afflicting women in this largely religious and patriarchal society.
Jacira Melo: Putting sexual and reproductive rights on the agenda

Brazil

When Jacira Melo began her Philosophy undergraduate course at the University of São Paulo in 1977, the school had prepared a reception for the new students consisting of a series of debates on diversity. Among the issues under discussion were sexual orientation, gender, and women’s rights. Jacira could hardly believe that themes such as abortion – still a taboo in Brazil nowadays – were being articulately discussed. Brazil was under a military dictatorship, and women’s rights were rarely recognised during this period.

Students were so enthused by the discussions that they established a number of diversity movements. It was then that Jacira first joined the feminist movement, by participating in the creation of a feminist group called ‘8 de Março’. “The reason why we chose this name is that 8th March was still not known in Brazil”, Jacira recalled.

Jacira Melo, 50, is today one of the directors of the Patrícia Galvão Institute (Instituto Patrícia Galvão), a São Paulo based NGO dedicated to promoting the rights of women through the use of communication, focusing on the mass media. Jacira was one of the founders of the organisation in 2001, together with a group of feminists involved in areas such as journalism, advertisement, polling, and production of video and internet content.

By that time, Jacira had worked for six years as the Communications Coordinator of the National Feminist Network on Health and Reproductive Rights (Rede Nacional Feminista de Saúde e Direitos Reprodutivos).

She has participated in the creation of a housing shelter for women victims of violence, and worked for ten years as a filmmaker. In collaboration with two colleagues, she has made more than 40 films on topics related to women’s rights. Although her films have received a number of awards, Jacira noted that the issues they dealt with remained untouched by the mass media’s agenda. This made her rethink her approach. “I realised I could either stick with my personal talent of filmmaking or do something that might have a greater repercussion within society, leading to public policy changes. I opted for the second alternative” Jacira said.

Today at the Patrícia Galvão Institute, Jacira and her colleagues specialise in interacting with journalists to help them deal with topics or story angles concerning women’s rights that traditionally have been left out of public debate. Their strategy involves producing and publicising information – such as opinion polls, reports and research – that has a strong
potential of being covered by the media. “The feminist movement in Brazil had historically invested in alternative media” said Jacira. Yet a serious discussion of issues such as sexual and reproductive rights is still very far from the mass media’s agenda. “We decided to create the institute with the right to access information as our guiding principle, and the mass media as our tool.”

Sexual and reproductive rights are key issues for the women at Patrícia Galvão. One of their projects is the blog *Mulheres de Olho* (Women on the Lookout), edited by sociologist and social communicator Angela Freitas. The blog ([www.mulheresdeolho.org.br](http://www.mulheresdeolho.org.br)) monitors events and media coverage on reproductive rights, especially abortion, with a critical eye.

But it is not an easy task; talking about women’s sexual and reproductive rights can be very complicated in Brazil due to the political influence exerted by conservative groups, especially the Catholic Church, which has traditionally been against abortion and has been a strong critic of contraception. “We have to be very careful with how we treat the subject of abortion. We have a legal specialist that checks everything we write. If anything we say or publish could be considered an apology for abortion, this could be interpreted as a crime”, says Jacira. Indeed, some conservative groups, she adds, frequently refer to pro-abortion campaigners as “assassins”.

In Brazil, abortion is only legally permitted in cases of sexual abuse or where there exists a risk to the mother’s life. Despite the prohibition of abortion in any other circumstances, estimates indicate that more than 1 million abortions are conducted yearly. Due to a lack of information and legal protection, thousands of women resort to practices that put their lives at risk. Jacira notes that even the practice of safe abortion in situations permitted by law has been very limited, due to lack of information. The Patrícia Galvão Institute aims to counter this information deficit by making room for issues and points of view that have remained far from the public’s attention.

As of 8 March 2008, many things have changed in Brazil. The country has had 20 years of democracy, civil society has flourished, and women have achieved a number of victories. For the future, Jacira hopes that the feminist movement in Brazil will be able to advance further in the fight against racial inequality, and in increasing access to information on sexual education and reproductive rights.
UN award-winning human rights and women’s activist, Sunila Abeysekera, is a brilliant storyteller, say her friends. For as much as her efforts to recount the many stories of abuses in Sri Lanka have brought her problems, her expressive appeal has enabled her to remain active in the arena of human rights activism from the local to the global.

That’s not to say she’s had an easy time of it; forced by death threats to flee her country briefly during her pregnancy in 1988 for demanding accountability on human rights abuses, Sunila knows all too well the potential cost of speaking her mind. And yet, as Director of INFORM, a Sri Lankan NGO which documents human rights abuses, she has remained unshaken in her efforts to make human rights violations known: “My job is to document violations, write the stories down, make reports, try and make sure they are heard and read by the people who can act to change the situation, in the country and outside.”

But Sunila is not just a human rights activist, she is also a women’s rights activist with a reputation for speaking out on perhaps the most unmentionable taboo of them all – women’s reproductive and sexual rights. Since the 1990s she has been actively engaged in promoting a broad discussion on the decriminalisation of abortion and repeal of the sodomy laws under which homosexuality is a crime.

She has also been a pioneer in highlighting the impact of the conflict in increasing women’s vulnerability to physical and sexual violence and INFORM, has persistently documented and spoken out on sexual violence committed against women in the context of conflict. In 1997, she was active in a broad campaign launched by women’s groups to seek justice for Jaffna schoolgirl, Krishanthy Kumarasamy, who was raped and killed by members of the Sri Lankan army. Her mother, brother and a neighbour who went looking for her were also murdered. Although this campaign played a role in compelling the government to initiate legal proceedings against the suspects, and resulted in the conviction of several of the accused in 1998, there are many more cases which have never received similar attention and Sunila’s work tries to maintain the focus on justice for the women who have been subjected to violence because of the conflict.

Since the late 1990s, Sunila has also been an active member of the Women’s Support Group, the first Sri Lankan organisation to mobilise on issues of sexual rights and to advance the cause of lesbians, bisexual women and trans persons. Her work has also extended to women who engage in transactional sex. Calling on mainstream human rights and women’s rights communities in Sri Lanka and in the Asia region to take up issues of reproductive rights and sexual rights and drawing in marginalised communities such as single mothers, infertile women, women who engage in transactional sex, lesbians, bisexual women and trans persons into the human rights and women’s rights movements presents the biggest challenge Sunila has faced so far, she says.

“In a country like Sri Lanka, and in much of the Asia region in which I work, so many of us are reluctant to open up a public discussion about sex and sexuality for fear of being attacked as women who promote immorality. We hesitate to defend women’s right to make sexual and reproductive choices because we don’t want to be identified as lesbians.”
Sunila has faced consistent criticism for her outspoken stand on women’s rights in the reproductive and sexual arena. The personal attacks are, she says, not in the least surprising. “In Sri Lanka” she explains “there is a range of quite public commentary about my sexual history. As a single mother, for years I had to deal with questions about my children, their fathers, my relationship with their fathers, their relationship with their fathers, the lack of a marriage certificate ‘sanctifying’ their birth and so on. I think people are tired of asking those questions now, because they see that I have continued with my activism regardless of these criticisms.”

Interestingly, Sunila’s activism on sexuality extends to working on film criticism and analysis. She writes regularly about the role of women in the Sinhala cinema, and is now focusing on the articulation and expression of sexuality in Sri Lankan cinema.

“There are only four alternatives open to a woman who dares to transgress the boundaries of community taboos about sex” says Sunila “she can go mad, she can commit suicide, she can be killed, or she can join religious orders. In film after film, I watch endless women going mad, killing themselves, being killed, or becoming a nun. The penalty for expressing one’s sexuality is most severe.”

In a country rooted in centuries of traditions that strip women of their sexuality and sexual rights, Sunila certainly has her work cut out for her but her unique and enduring spirit have ensured that women’s sexuality rights in Sri Lanka are off to a good start.
Despite the introduction of the general Law for Equality Between Men and Women, and the Law on the Right of Women to Access to a Life Without Violence, there is no evidence to suggest that the trend observed before the implementation of these laws has changed much to the situation of Mexican women.

The statistics on domestic violence, illegal abortions and maternal mortality make for shocking reading. According to a survey by *la Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares*, 44% of women over the age of 15 living with their partner report having suffered some form of violence in their lifetime. 9% of this was attributed to those in rural areas. 80% of the victims of sexual crimes are women who are also victims of domestic violence. The government estimates that 120,000 are raped in the country every year. Human Rights Watch estimates that when all factors are considered, this number is closer to 1 million a year. According to GIRE, the estimated ratio of abortions is 21 for every 100 births. There are estimated to be 533, 100 dangerous and illegal abortions carried out in Mexico each year. This situation constitutes multiple violations of a range of international instruments including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

**The Challenge: Access to information as an empowering tool**

Access to information is potentially one of the most important tools in the fight to improve women’s rights in the Mexican state. Yet, Mexico is failing to make full use of this right, thus contributing significantly to the denial of Mexican women’s rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. It can in fact be asserted that violations of women’s rights begin with a violation of women’s right to information.

According to the Inter-American Principles on Freedom of Expression, “(a)ccess to information held by the state is a fundamental right of every individual. States have the obligation to guarantee the full exercise of this right.” The government is obliged under international and domestic instruments to protect and improve access to this right.

The Mexican Freedom of Information law passed in 2002 states in article 4 that two of the law’s primary aims are to “Provide that which is necessary so that all persons have access to information through simple and expeditious procedures; (and to) Make public administration transparent by disclosing the information generated by subjects compelled by the Law.” As well as being party to the American Convention on Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Mexico signed the Convention on the Elimination on

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1 National Women’s Institute of Mexico, Violence, [http://www.inmujeres.gob.mx/](http://www.inmujeres.gob.mx/)
2 Ibid
all Forms of discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on 17 July 1980 and ratified it on 23 March 1981.

The public’s right to be informed on issues of sexual and reproductive health is of particular paramount importance. Yet, the government has failed in its obligation to ensure that this information is forthcoming.

This information is not only necessary for the individual, but also for the policy-making public bodies. Information is an important vehicle for the realization of other rights and access to services; it is a tool to improve standards of living, and to work towards a life free from discrimination. Withholding information, particularly health information, has proven time and time again to have lethal results. From that standpoint, access to information is indeed a question of life or death.

The threat: Decriminalisation of Abortion Challenged before the Supreme Court

Last April a reform was passed in Mexico City that decriminalised abortion. The new law stipulates that sexual and reproductive health is to be made a priority and also that “(h)ealth services will be provided in a way that respects person’s right to make free, responsible and informed decisions about the number and timing of their children.” However the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) is currently in the process of attempting to declare the reform unconstitutional.

While abortion is already officially legal in all states in cases of rape, victims often find that they are prevented from accessing this right in practice. Furthermore, a survey conducted in 2006 revealed that 44% of the population was unaware of this legal provision. It further revealed that of 8 cases examined, 6 victims were not made aware of their right to abortion by medical authorities. The two women who were informed about their right to an abortion were not provided with the practical details of how or where this could be done. Many women that are aware of their right to an abortion experience illegal delays and other tactics designed to prevent their access in practice.

Threats and challenges

2008 will be a decisive year for sexual reproductive rights in Mexico. Access to information will be at the heart of the discussion. Mexican society must be informed of the great threats facing more than 52 million Mexican women because of sexual violence and their lack of access to safe abortion. In Mexico city, women must be informed that they have a right to abortion. They should also be fully informed about the decision of the National Commission of Human Rights to challenge the decriminalisation of abortion. Yet, the Mexican State is failing to meet its responsibility to proactively and widely distribute relevant information for the full realisation of women’s rights in the country. It is time for Mexican society to receive accurate and objective information regarding their rights; it is time for the Mexican State to fulfil its responsibilities under international law. Let 2008 be the year when the rights to information and the right to a healthy and safe life with dignity are finally realised.

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7 Article 16.8 The reform of the Mexico City Penal code and additions to the Mexico city health law. For English Version see [http://www.gire.org.mx/publica2/MexicoCityLaw_English.pdf](http://www.gire.org.mx/publica2/MexicoCityLaw_English.pdf)
8 The case was due to be heard early this year but as of March 2008, no date has been set.
10 Ibid
11 For more information on this see Human Rights Watch report, Ibid.