The story of “Abu Rjal’s” daughters: The Worst Kinds of Social Abuse in One Case

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Three girls sitting on their chairs in a small courtyard in front of their house smoke shisha together. I was walking a little, after visiting a friend, when I heard one of them scream loud enough to wake the dead. I turned around instantly. Here she was, standing there with her thin body shivering to the point of exhaustion. Her veins were on the edge of exploding out of her skinny arms and her neck was so tight you could almost see her throat falling out. She raised her head up to the roof of the building and with one finger up, screamed at the top of her lungs: “I DARE you to throw your garbage on us again”. A girl sitting on a chair next to her tried to calm her down. She gave her the shisha’s hose. “Here, relax”. She inhaled and exhaled at a record speed, turning her mouth into a chimney giving off white smoke covering the features of her bone-shaped stubborn face.

A few seconds later, she left the hose again. She stood up and screamed again until a seventy-ish year old hunchbacked man, dragging himself fast to try and calm down the atmosphere showed up. But the girls didn’t care about his shaking voice asking them to calm down. I looked at my friend and asked, “Do you know who these girls are?”

He shook his head down and only muttered one sentence, “This is Abu Rjal and his daughters. And this is Maryam”.

Here is where this story begins – from a scene that happened by pure coincidence, in the neighborhood of Al-Baqqar, northern Lebanon, to a major litigious legal case.

(It should be noted that the names used are fictitious in order to preserve the privacy and dignity of the survivors)

The lost family

Long weeks passed by and the search for “Abu Rjal’s” daughters who suddenly disappeared from the neighborhood was still on. Day after day, we knocked on the iron door of the abandoned ground-floor apartment, in the neighborhood of Al-Baqqar where the father lives, but no one would answer. All rumors and news and theories and confirmed information and witnesses and evidence revolved around one idea that took three months to be verified: “Abu Rjal harasses his daughters and trades their bodies”.

The story being told in the neighborhood is about four sisters, who have gone through many years of misery, since they were little girls, because of their father "Abu Rjal".

One of the girls, Hana, managed to run away, as rumored. She married a military man, gave birth to a child, and was taken far away from the family's chaos. As for Sarah, Mary and Reem, they have been subject to many gossips and accusations... But eventually, everything that has ever been said about the "daughters of Abu Rjal", requires more investigation and questioning about one painful story with many painful details that no one knows," but them.

A search in the unknown

Among the stories circulating about "Abu Rjal" and his family, it is said that about four years ago, "Abu Rjal" and his wife, the mother of his daughters, got a divorce. At first, she lived in a small apartment next to his room, that was still occupied from the days of war, in the neighborhood of al-Baqqar. So the girls went back and forth between both their parents' places until the mom's location was completely unknown to the neighbors.

We looked around for such a long time, until despair almost caused our search in the unknown to fail – a search for sisters who suddenly disappeared from the neighborhood with their mother, although we had reached all the threads that tell the story of the girls, their father and his living hell. Everyone in the neighborhood knew them but no one would admit they did. None of the neighbors had the number of one of these sisters, or they were rather too ashamed to admit they were in touch with them. This equation is strange, especially since most of them would gossip about the "dirty" house of "Abu Rjal" who opened his door and offered his daughters as "sexual objects" in exchange for some bread or a kilogram of fruits and vegetables or even a small amount of money of barely 20 thousand Lebanese pounds.

Finally, after a constant search and continuous questioning in the neighborhood of al-Baqqar, we came to one piece of information that served as a first thread to the complex story: **the daughters of "Abu Rjal" ran away with their mother to live in Akkar.** Before heading out of the neighborhood to continue our search in Akkar, we kept looking for an extra piece of information in every corner as if our mission was yet to be finished. Suddenly, the finger of a lady who was with us pointed at a young girl and an old man. "**Ohhh. This is Reem with her father"** she exclaimed, as if she had found a long-lost treasure.

Reem walked towards us with spontaneous steps, seeming utterly indifferent. I froze for a couple of seconds and gazed at her with blank shocked eyes. She was a young girl, short and thin, wearing a black hijab and holding the hanging part of it with her childish hand as if she was trying to hide her innocent, miserable face.

As she got closer, Reem drew a smile that disguised her teeth. She looked like an exhausted stroller who doesn't have the strength do anything and doesn't even feel like moving. The woman who knows her asked her if she could sit with us and Reem immediately agreed, without hesitation, and walked her father home. As we sat, and after the lady left us alone,

Reem threw a strange look at me, as if she were asking for help. She didn't even know me. I talked to her about myself, asked her about herself and she would only answer briefly, then smile and sigh with relief, as if she felt comfortable talking. Reem did not deny the truth of the information related to her and her sisters' lives with their dad that I asked her about. She nodded then cried silently and before she told me the whole story, she muttered, **"I need help. I need to feel better." And that's where the second hocking story occurred.**

Reem, the secret story

Reem started talking about her memories with her father. Since she was 9 years old, she hasn't gone to school for more than two years because that specific year was a turning point in her life. One day, her father kicked her out of the house with her sister Maryam, who had left her husband's house. "We spent a whole week sleeping in the garden alone", she says. And the father would pressure Maryam to get him money in any way possible, and she would succumb to the pressure. Reem repeated the famous sentence her father would tell them, " Go to Al-Tall and get me money." To him, this sentence implied them going to stand in one of the corners of the Manshiya garden and wait for a "sex buyer".

"All I'm hoping for is for him to be behind bars"

Reem recalled some memories about her father getting his friends home and them touching her and her sisters awkwardly. And when her sisters would object, he would defend himself saying, "How else can I get you food?" So many stories ran through Reem's mind and they all revolved around the misery and the torture her father "Abu Rjal" caused her, her sisters and her mother when they used to all live in the same room.

"One day, Maryam and I were extremely upset. We went to the harbor together to sit there. Suddenly, a young man we knew came with his mom, so Maryam left me and went with him in the car. Then she came back with 20 thousand Lebanese pounds. He made Maryam do that until it became a habit to her."

What hurt Reem most is every time she heard random men in the neighborhood bullying her and her sisters and bragging, " We slept with Abu Rjal's daughters."

"My father would always be angry with me because I didn't give in to his orders and blackmail." Yet she never managed to get away from him when she had to live alone with him in the ground-floor after her sister got married and her mother ran away to Akkar. She remembered how she suffered at night before bed. "Every night was a nightmare with him. He would stretch out his hand and touch me in awkward places and to defend himself he would say, Come on, we're just playing."

She added, "All I'm hoping for is for him to be behind bars."

Sarah, (He turned me into “a woman”)

Sarah, the eldest daughter, talked about the never-ending journey of misery and injustice she went through, blaming her father for all her sufferings, from her childhood until her third divorce, as if her daughter was cursed too. Sarah couldn’t even enroll her daughter in school, for she only had an identification paper from the mayor. She stared of into distance with her eyes filled with pain, as if she was carrying within all the weight of the world. She said, “Till now, I still can’t take the picture of him assaulting me out of my mind. I was still a kid, not married yet and I can’t even describe how it was. He turned me into a woman, then my life turned into hell when I ran away from him with a man that later passed away.” Then she waited and asked: “What will we endure next because of him?”

Last year, Sarah decided to take on the task of holding her father accountable and protecting her sisters. She filed a lawsuit in the Juvenile Court against her father accusing him of harassing her sister and sexually trafficking the another one, and for being the first one to “fully” sexually assault her when she was young and unmarried. But she quickly relinquished the case, after facing great pressure and feared the "scandal" that might befall them.

However, after Sarah asked to be protected and despite the withdrawal, the Juvenile Court issued a decision to relocate Reem to live with her mother and not with her father, so she can be safe, although it was known that the two houses were adjacent to one another, which is why this decision was not considered to be serious or useful.

The encounter with Mary was faltering because of her psychological condition and her neurological illness. Her sister and mother told us that her condition is the result of the suffering her father caused her. Note that Mary was the one who led us to this case as she was the girl who was sitting in front of the house.

After listening to the girls' stories, it was time to meet and listen to both the mother and the father. Although the mother was a victim in her daughters’ eyes, we were puzzled by a fundamental question: why did she not protect her daughters?

We asked Reem about her mother’s residence in Akkar, and went to meet with her. The mother was in her sixties, suffering a head tumor. Her words did not contradict those of her daughters Sarah and Reem. She spoke of "the years of oppression" - as she calls it - that she had lived with that man. "I lost my life and my daughters because of him, and we are all his victims."

The mother believes that she lost the ability to protect her daughters because her economic condition was extremely mediocre and also because she had no control over her “lost” daughters. She did try, but all her attempts were vain. “The lives of my daughters turned into a living hell even after their marriage because they were lost and abused and I was standing there watching completely helpless”.

The mother told us all the painful stories. She bemoaned with regret because she could not protect her daughters. According to her story, she was watching her ex-husband "Abu Rjal" escape from the window of her house that is adjacent to his room, then bringing young boys to his room so that they would watch sexual films together and then he would harass them. "I was angry with him when he threw my little girls out of the house at night and asked them to go get him money", she said. "He used to abuse them and make the house open to every man who wanted to come in and harass his daughters." Before she ran to Akkar because of "people's gossips", she saw her ex-husband with Reem in the car of an old man where he forced her to sit in front, next to him. A few days later, this man called Reem shouting, "You didn't do what I asked you to!"

Witnesses involved!

Before meeting the father and standing on all the charges pointed against him, it was necessary to meet with one of the "sex buyers" since they were an essential element in this case and were involved in the exploitation of girls to satisfy their instincts.

We managed to get to some of them through an intermediary, after we promised not to mention the names. All conversations were similar; "Abu Rjal" would invite them over to his house and promise them they would have a "nice" time with his daughters, and so they would pay him back by simply buying cheap food from the market like sugar, coffee, tea, cheese, vegetables. "Anything would do", repeated one of the men.

Security Forces Numbers

The story of the "the daughters of Abu Rjal", who live in an environment that has been the incubator of various forms of violence, as a result of poverty, deprivation and insecurity, is not an individual case, but an exceptional one that brought together all kinds of domestic violence in one case: incest, sex trafficking, marriage of minors, school drop-outs, undocumented children.

We asked the ISF to provide us with statistics on such issues, and we got shocking numbers in 2018. It is important to note that these figures are only those of the reported crimes, so the numbers are likely to be much higher. Below are the statistics published for the first time by the site "Charika wa laken" that show that the top crimes are sexual harassment against minors (32 cases or around 2.6 cases per month), sexual harassment (23 cases or around 2 cases per month), fathers' harassment against their children (15 cases or around 1.2 cases per month).

The moment of confrontation: "Abu Rjal" denies

Finally, came the moment of decisiveness with the father. I confronted with information and taped video, taking into account all the necessary precautions, especially after everything we heard about him, since according to those who know him, his reaction cannot be predicted. I was shocked, from the moment I knocked on his door and he carefully greeted me in his room, to see that “Abu Rjal” is in his seventies and his physiology did not suggest what was said about him. He was old, tired, thin and unemployed.

He went on to talk about how unfair life was, about his poverty, his illness and destitution, and about how he was abandoned by his family. After listening to him, it was time to ask about his daughters and the charges pressed against him.

That was when he turned from being a "poor" man to an angry man, confused, and disdainful of his daughters. His face turned red, his lips fluttered, he slumped on the chair as if he was trapped or to say the least, having a breakdown.

When asked about the absence of his daughters from the house, he said: “They left because I don’t have a Wi-Fi router”. When I showed him the video about his daughter Reem, he rejected it saying, “This is not Reem and this is not her voice”. He went on screaming loudly despite my attempts to calm him down and when he heard what his ex-wife said about him on tape he called her a “liar” trying to control his daughters and make them despise him. I asked him about his sexual assault against Sarah, his eldest, so he raised his hands and cursed, “I hope Allah gets angry with you Sarah”. “Abu Rjal” denied everything then he almost fainted.

When I had met with his daughter Reem, she mentioned a very sensitive matter, and raised many question marks, when she accused her father of bringing in some members from the old army checkpoint in the neighborhood, years ago, and asking her sisters to "flirt with them". A number of sources in the neighborhood did not deny that some of the members of the old army checkpoint were repeatedly sitting with their uniforms on with the daughters of Abu Rjal and even entering their house - which was neither denied by the mother nor by the father, at a later stage.

However, the only thing the father did admit was that some members of the former army checkpoint used to visit him but, "They would only enter my room because we were friends, nothing more", he said.

The Law and its Dimensions

According to a judicial source who asked not to be named, the number of cases of victims of sexual assault that actually reaches the judicial authorities is minor compared to the thousands of cases that do not reach or dare to address the judiciary. According to the source, the main problem lies in pursuing the aggressor, in terms of the difficulty of "proving" the charge, especially if the victim is a minor, since the requirement is that there must be a sign of assault.

Jihan Said, the program officer in the Organization “Abaad” comments on the statistics provided by the Internal Security Forces saying they do not monitor all cases but only a small part, because they only represent those who have filed a report. In most cases, "the abused women do not file a report, for social reasons and fear of scandal and for their lack of confidence, especially as they fear that the aggressor will be released from prison a few years later. The stigma would haunt them longer than the man and the sanctions are still reduced compared to the harm which will affect the victim. "

Commenting on the issue of the "daughters of Abu Rjal", Said considers that when the aggressor is the father, the problem becomes twice as terrible, because the father "is not only the source of authority relatively the child, but also that of support, safety and protection. When he is the harasser, he breaks all the rules of protection and its foundations in the family. "In case the assault goes on for years, and develops into blackmail, exploitation of the minor and luring them in order to take advantage of their presence for sexual work or marriage for money, they become an object of trade. The assistance of these cases is done through specialized social institutions.

The Dark Destiny

So far, the fate of "the daughters of Abu Rjal" remains dark, for they still haven’t stopped paying for what their father did to them. Sarah, sad and broken, lives with her sick mother, and cannot find anyone who to be in charge of her child's matters. Maryam is waiting to give birth to her baby from her second marriage and she is suffering from an unstable nervous state. Hana is away from her sisters, she doesn’t know anything about them neither do they. As for the "lost" Reem, as Sarah describes her when asked about her after they stopped communicating, she returned to her angry father 's room after he was "exposed". She came back to the stronghold of her first unfairness, and of the endless stories of misery.

We put all this data in the hands of the authorities and the competent parties to take the appropriate measures to protect the sisters and to hold the father accountable. We also enclosed excerpts from some interviews recorded in the video below.

Here is what happened legally regarding the case of “Abu Rjal’s daughters”

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The case of “Abu Rjal’s daughters" resounded with great echo from the first second it was revealed in an inquiry that took long months of preparation. This echo, however, did not go unheard, but was accompanied by a broad security and judicial action, which reached the ultimate goal of protecting the victims and punishing the criminals.

From the first day of the investigation, a huge "cyclone" hit the family of “Abu Rjal’s daughters", who was threatened, physically violated and morally assaulted by their father and members of their extended family as a kind of revenge for accepting to reveal to us what happened in their lives with their father. These threats, addressed to me as well, came from the father himself, who sought for the removal or withdrawal of the investigation, otherwise, "He would ruin our lives" he shouted, while denying all the charges pressed against him from harassment to sexual assault and trafficking the bodies of his daughters.

After sensing the immediate danger threatening "Abu Rjal’s daughters" Sarah, Maryam and Reem - especially that the latter is still a minor living alone with her father, so she was enduring double the risks and threats - as well as threatening their mother who faced direct death threats from her brother (!) who was defending her ex-husband, saying he was "free to act as he wished with his daughters" (!), We communicated directly with the Minister of the Interior Raya Al-Hafar Hassan, who responded quickly, and recommended the security forces in Tripoli to follow up the issue.

Al-Hassan's speed of response was striking and highly appreciated in a country whose citizens were not used to a rapid response from the officials to emergency measures or security protection when needed. A team in the ministry took over the file right away, with the help of the Information Division in Tripoli, which initially heard my own testimony in order to obtain the information, evidence and documentation available that would contribute to the investigation.

After the file was made available to the Information Division, which they submitted to the Public Prosecutor's Office, I received the following day an approval from the judiciary to send a security force to the house of “Abu Rjal” in order to arrest him.

The security forces succeeded in finding “Abu Rjal” and arrested him, along with his daughter Reem, who was alone with him, in order to hear her testimony, then they arrested the mother

and her brother as well. The investigation with Reem, which lasted long hours, was attended by a juvenile commissioner after the juvenile court took up her case. Reem admitted many shocking details, after she tried to disguise her confessions in the inquest as a result of her state of terror and intimidation. These confessions led to her being referred to a forensic doctor at the hospital for disclosure of her health status and she was found to have been sexually abused since she was about 10 years old. As a result, the Juvenile Court issued an immediate decision to transfer her to a safe place in one of the institutions that provides full health, psychological and educational care and to separate her from her surroundings and her small and extended family for lack of safety and protection.

At this time, the investigation was going on with the seventy-ish father, who kept on denying the charges against him, refusing to admit that he was sexually harassing and assaulting his daughters, and that he was trading their bodies with many young men and older men. However, the Fact Finding of the Information Division in the area where the father lives, as well as the mother's confessions - despite the judicial charges against her for not protecting her daughters - and the confessions of his daughter Sarah, Reem's older sister which coincided with the medical confirmation of Reem's poor health state as a result of sexual assaults, cleared up all doubts on the father's involvement.

The mother, who is suffering from a cancerous tumor in the head, was released with her brother with a residence permit. But some "serious" confessions done by Reem were the reason two other young men were arrested. The first one, on charges of "violating a minor's virginity", and the second one, who is a family's relative, on charges of "sexual intercourse with a minor". These confessions might be the reason for the arrest of other individuals involved in the assault of the girls, along with the father. "Abu Rjal" who is in jail, was referred to the Public Prosecution and is waiting for his trial to be held on charges of qualified offenses and crimes.

Therefore, we managed to ensure the minor girl was protected by moving her to a safe remote place and saving her from a brutal and unfair dark fate. As for "Abu Rjal", who thought he would get away with his atrocious actions against his daughters didn't know the "eye of the press" was there to look for the full detailed truth, with the major help of the Minister of Interior Raya al-Hassan and the quick response undertaken by the security forces on the matter.

Justice and punishment better come late than not at all.