

KILLING THE GOOD GIRL

English language edition

Editor

Dr. Farsana Soleimankehl-Hanke

Illustrator

Rania Azoury

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For you!

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Introduction

Claudine Aoun (President of the National Commission for Lebanese Women)

« Human beings are inherently good but have been corrupted by society and civilization » (Jean-Jacques Rousseau)

We were born, as Lebanese women, in a country proud to have taken part in the drafting and preparation of the International Declaration of Human Rights, an international document which recognizes the rights of all men and women. We grew up with a positive image of a country where the principle of equality among citizens is cherished. Therefore, we started our life at school, with the conviction that merit which was the key criterion to evaluate the work of the pupils, would also be adopted elsewhere, along with honesty and transparency, to evaluate the personal path and professional career of individuals. We strongly believed that it would lay the foundation of equal opportunities for everyone.

However, over time, we felt that we were being discriminated against, every time a minor was being married in full view, depriving her of her childhood and her right to education, and violating the innocence of her body. We felt this every time a girl or woman was sexually harassed in the absence of a law that protects her, and every time a woman was denied her right to grant her nationality to her children, in spite of being the one who teaches them the notions of identity, language and belongingness. We felt it whenever children were torn from their mother who had carried them in her womb, and protected them with her soul, because in our country, the custody of the children is often granted to men.

Our sense of injustice worsened when we were affected by the gender pay gap between men and women in the working life, and each time a woman was a victim of sexual, verbal, moral and economic violence, or was excluded from decision-making positions, "simply because she was a woman." We felt the extent of this injustice when she was forced to give up her career to handle family responsibilities alone.

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At this point, we realized that we were born in a society where the inherited traditional macho culture triumphs, and where a woman is not considered a full citizen.

Vis-à-vis this harsh reality, the National Commission for Lebanese Women strives to amend the laws that infringe women's rights, and to suggest laws guaranteeing equity. The Commission also seeks to address gender-biases and stereotypes, empower women at all levels, promote their well-being, and eradicate all forms of discrimination against them, that are likely to negatively affect their daughters, sons, husbands and family as well as their entourage- that is the society as a whole.

After many years of experience in public affairs, I can tell you that the most important challenge we face today and which is slowing down the process of empowering women in Lebanon, despite the progress that has been made so far, is the lack of a serious will of the officials and decision-makers to make a radical and just change for women in terms of laws, general policies and practices. Consequently, the Lebanese woman is still far from reaching the positions of political decision-making leading to a real inclusive change ... Yet, this will never stop us from fighting.

In light of this long journey that is shaped everyday by the relentless work towards women's emancipation, I reiterate my support for this unique book entitled "Killing the Good Girl" which brings to life the testimonies of women who have suffered from discrimination, and sacrificed their souls and dreams for others; of women who fled confrontation and fought for total parity in rights and obligations, breaking the silence by the echo of their voices.

This book relates the experiences and struggles of women from different countries and nationalities that touch us in the deepest part of our being, and the conflict between strength and weakness, courage and fear, mind and heart, and rights and obligations. I recommend that you read it with great care, to sense, through its pages, the injustice they face, and to draw from these testimonies the strength to defeat violence, to establish justice, and to remain optimistic for a better life.

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In conclusion, let's close our eyes and dream of a country that consecrates equality between men and women, regardless of their skin color, their gender, their race, and their health, psychological and social conditions. Perhaps we might feel in the depths of our hearts, our humanity and the wisdom and righteousness of our Creator, and enjoy the happiness, peace and prosperity that we fail to experience when discrimination and injustice prevail over equality and justice.

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Prologue

Do you prefer the sparrow in your hand or the dove on the roof? What if your life no longer seems worth living? What if your dreams and your reality no longer go hand in hand? Or no longer fit together? What sacrifices would you be willing to take in order to make the life you have been given fit within your needs, wishes and dreams? The constraints of society on the one hand, be they family, religious or cultural, and the quest for self-realization on the other, confronted the women in these stories with a dilemma of an existential nature. Brought together through the paths of life, eleven courageous storytellers give themselves a voice, a common cry for justice. From forced marriage to child abduction, the truthful short stories bear witness to a world in which a woman's fate seems to be tied to her gender.

There is the young German-Afghan Malalei, who, having witnessed the effects of an honour killing in her community, was struck by the arrow of love for the first time. She also experiences the heartfelt desire to free herself from social and family obligations, to break away from the rule of the Good Girl and live freely.

The Chinese woman Wei is faced with the difficult decision of giving in to the expectations of motherhood and staying with her husband, who cheated and betrayed her, or should she separate from him and assert herself in the world, alone with her small children.

The young German-Lebanese woman W Mchit thought she had already experienced the height of her misfortune when she was forced into marriage, but rape, humiliation and pregnancy should teach her otherwise. How can she live a life that others had planned for her? Her only way out seems to be death.

Jutta, who grew up in the former GDR, knows the downside of parental love. Stifled by a daily life marked with religious fanaticism on the one hand and the rules of a communist society on the other, she tries to find her own way.

Ella's world view collapses when her mother shows understanding for her stepfather's sexual harassment. Growing up American, what is the price that a good girl has to pay for her mother's happiness?

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Sunita, an English girl of Indian origin, has found the love of her life and cannot understand why it should be forbidden. Whether Muslim or Hindu, why does this matter to a family that grew up in exile? After almost her entire family has rejected her, Sunita understands the sacrifice that love demands of her.

The German-Venezuelan Patricia does not know any enjoyment of life since her childhood. Her to-do list was too long to be able to lead a life appropriate to her young age. Her role of taking responsibility for her entire family, which her mother has imposed on her, is extensive. Weakened by the heavy burden, Patricia sees her inner light gradually fading.

Making sacrifices is also part of everyday life in Malika Rania's life. As a Jordanian of Palestinian origin, religious rules are always at the forefront of her life's reality. Very unhappy, she lives under the control of her brothers, for whom family honour is the most important thing. The desire for freedom and self-fulfillment have no place in her predetermined life. Malika Rania believes that marriage is a way out of the prison of her current situation.

Minoo from Iran hardly knows what it means to experience unbiased childhood years. Her father demanded that she grow up too soon. Minoo's wishes were considered too childish to be fulfilled, and as a result, she was to be a very young wife and mother.

Couketta no longer wants to bow to the strict guidelines of Christian life in Lebanon. She wants to break out of her marriage, which only exists for appearances. It is completely unclear, however, whether or not she will lose her children.

Encounters with an old cigar-smoking neighbour and an assaulting doctor silences young Blanche, until later, when she embarks on a journey across the United States of America, her homeland. She learns to let go of her inner emptiness and to face the world with courage, compassion, wildness and love. It is a journey that gives her the strength to rebel and not to stand idly by, but to finally make the boat rock.

Women of different nationalities nevertheless tell the same story: the contradiction between the demands of the society in which they live and their own wishes, dreams and desires. In their personal accounts, these women face challenges and reach crossroads on which they choo-

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se different paths for different reasons. Like a hologram, each one of these women tells of the facets of the Good Girl who enslaves them all.

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Your children

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts.
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness.
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so, He loves also the bow that is stable.

Khalil Gibran (1883 – 1931)

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Under the Sway of the Good Girl

Dr. Farsana Soleimankehl-Hanke

She ran up and down the street. Nervous, excited, tired and at the same time filled with hopeful anticipation. An *eid*¹ of reconciliation, a reunion, an awakening in the parents' cradle were the most intimate wishes of her emotional world. She was thirsty. The street wasn't lit, but she didn't care. Could it really be or was it just a mirage of a soul lost in the desert? No, he had called her and secretly assured her of his love. Yes, he did, several times. She should feel his love more in the future were the clear words he spoke on the phone. This love could only be divine, generous, unconditional and penetrating. After all the grief that she and her family had caused each other, the time for reconciliation was at hand. The reunification of injured hearts was only a few steps away. Inspired by this feeling, she hurried to the agreed meeting point at night. Initially at a quick pace, then starting to run, she literally ran into his arms. The recurrent, stabbing pain left her no time to think. The time to breathe, the time to call for help, the time to speak, the time to say goodbye, the time to return was over. Her time was up. The silence of infinity put comforting arms around her. There was no time to bring unsaid words to life. No reconciliation, no eid of hope, a final separation was the actual end of her story. Unconditional sibling love, fraternal honor, breast milk, betrayal, family murder were her last thoughts.

Malalei woke up in a sweat. Her red alarm clock on her bedside table showed 3:19 a.m. She got up, because one thing she certainly did not want to do was fall asleep again. Malalei didn't want to take any chances to continue dreaming this terrible dream. She took a deep sip from her glass, which was always placed next to her bed at night. It was not uncommon for Malalei to wake up from a nightmare and to calm down with drinking water. How did she dream this dream? Who were the girl and the boy? She hadn't been able to see faces, just outlines. Her dream landscape was an endless, unlit, desolate street that led to a young man suffering from melancholy and grief. The young man exuded this aura—a lack of perspective and a lack of will, but not of danger. He embodied

¹ Festival in the Islamic culture, following the lunar calendar.

a kind of Afghan *diltangie*². Malalei hadn't seen his face either. Who had been the couple of her tragic dream? She didn't know. Suddenly, while still lying in bed, a memory came to Malalei, a memory of a *memanie*³ in her home, many years ago. Such invitations were part of Malalei's everyday life. She didn't particularly like her parents' *memanie*. The children had to be put to the test and present themselves from their best side. The manners practiced for years were in demand. Every *memanie* had to be kept true to the protocol and so it was with this *memanie*. Her parents received their guests, whom they had invited for dinner, right at the front door. It felt like a hundred minutes when the parents asked their guests about their well-being. Inquiries were not only made about the immediate family. No, the inquiries related to all relatives, in ascending and descending lines, were also presented. The answers seemed to be relatively indifferent, according to Malalei's opinion since the greeting was spoken and answered by both her parents and guests at the same time. Malalei also greeted all guests with a loving *salam*⁴ and received various kisses and hugs in return. As is customary for good Afghan children, she called the female guests *kbala jan* and the male guests *kakah jan*. This designation of address was imperative, regardless of the actual relationship. The division of the guests into 'dear aunt' and 'dear uncle' was an expression of respect for the elderly. Malalei had learned never to address older people by just their name. It was also a tacit rule for children to win over not only their parents but every older person. Respect for age has always been a major concern in Afghan culture. So Malalei unfolded the polite phrases in a vocabulary-like manner, but inside she was only interested in the gifts they brought. She was relieved to find that there were more sweets and fewer flowers that evening. After the guests had removed their jackets, they went into the living room. The beginning of the *memanie* was marked, which also led to Malalei's first appearance as a good girl. She offered every guest the obligatory all-time drink of the Afghans, their beloved *chai*⁵ with cardamom. On the table in the living room were dried fruits and candied *nuquls*, almonds coated in icing. The guests had to feel very welcomed,

² Literal translation = tightness in the stomach. In semantic terms, it should be equated with claustrophobia.

³ Invitation

⁴ Peace

⁵ Tea

even if this took a preparation time of several days. During this time, which was not visible to the guests, her parents had debated the guest list, accused Malalei of laziness, bought and cooked all kinds of foods. Everything revolved around the upcoming *memanie*.

As expected, the top topic for this *memanie* was the girl who had been killed in Hamburg. The Hamburg-Afghan girl was murdered by her own brother in 2008, only several months before the *memanie*, on the open road with a knife. How should the guests not talk about this family tragedy that happened in the heart of their community? While the standard Afghan *memanie* dishes, such as *qabuli*⁶, *kebab*⁷, *chelan*⁸, *badenjan*⁹, were at last eaten together, the husband of the grand cousin of Malalei's mother finally raised the issue of the room. He was an older man, who had once been to Germany as a student, and obviously looked concerned. Pushing his plate aside, he described the act as a shameful crime that wasn't even common in Afghanistan. This story, however, seemed to move the entire Afghan community in Hamburg. The horrific deed happened in Hamburg, the home port of the first Afghan exiles in Germany. This group of Afghans was particularly educated and mostly wealthy. They were those Afghans, who had been fleeing Afghanistan since the 1979 Soviet invasion. Leaving everything in Afghanistan with the hope of being able to return one day, they saw themselves as a small, tight-knit community, fated to be together in Hamburg. Because they were quickly accepted by the Federal Republic of Germany, these people felt a deep gratitude towards their host country. So, it was no surprise that the guests were worried about their good Afghan reputation in Germany. Khala Nasrin, a friend of her parents with bright red lips, dressed in a brown silk suit, expressed shame and bewilderment. "What will the majority of German society think of the Afghans now?" She asked loudly. "What incredible pain the poor dead girl's family must have felt?" The time had come for gossip. The conversation stopped for a moment because of food, the subsequent dessert and the hot tea. Everyone felt, albeit somewhat involuntarily, pushed into the focus of German media. Honor killings, Islam, the

⁶ Lamb and rice dish

⁷ Meat dish

⁸ White basmati rice

⁹ Eggplant dish

Afghan community, western lifestyle versus Islamist traditions were highlights of the media. Malalei didn't quite understand all the topics and she certainly didn't know what the 'Western lifestyle' should be. Was the 'Western lifestyle' a way of life that could only be lived in the west of the continent? Or was the 'Western lifestyle' a kind of attitude to life that existed all over the world but originated in the West? The media created new terms, the definitions of which they preferred to leave to the reader's own understanding. That Afghan girl was killed probably just because she dressed freely, went out with her friends, and disregarded the curfews set by parents. She probably didn't care about school and, worst of all, she probably wanted a boyfriend. Malalei now wondered, were the girl's behaviors and wishes west or east? Didn't every 16-year-old girl in the world have such desires, desires that were idealized and possibly lived by the majority teenage girls? Or were such wishes specific not to an age but rather associated with the biochemical-hormonal composition in the maturing female body? If a pregnant woman asked for pickled cucumbers on a jam loaf, no one would think of assigning this wish to a specific cultural group because all pregnant women experience this. Didn't all young women want to have some independence in their wardrobe, social activities, and romance? Malalei refused to look at the world in two parts: western and eastern. It reminded her of the worldview of the ancient Egyptians, according to which the world consisted of a disc, which, in turn, was divided into an upper and lower world. It was important to Malalei not to have to classify. She didn't want to have to choose between Spaetzle, her favorite German dish, and *qabuli*. She loved Spaetzle, which didn't make *qabuli* any less tasty. Spaetzle and *qabuli* each had their own significance on her menu and no one had ever asked Malalei to make a decision up to this point. On the other hand, when it came to her cultural background, the situation was different. The majority of the Afghans, as well as the Germans, demanded an either-or decision. An Afghan friend had even accused her of being cowardly and culturally unoriented during a petty quarrel. She called Malalei a tree without roots. Malalei could not possibly be German and Afghan at the same time her friend said. Her best friend, German, had once told Malalei that her father's racist views were full of shame. According to him, the birth of a cat in an aquarium was far from being a fish. Malalei attributed such statements to an IQ deficit. From Malalei's point of view, those people whose heads con-

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