

Society

Jordanian women turn to martial arts for protection

Ruba Zeidan

Amman

In a well-lit, pinkish-walled centre in Amman's affluent western suburbs, one teenager kept to herself as she warmed up ahead of her martial arts class.

The girl, who said her name was Laila, had been encouraged by her mother to take women's self-defence lessons which include tactics to ward off abuse.

"My father used to beat my mother. She remained quiet about it and also forced us to stay silent," Laila said.

The softly spoken girl said her mother acted "out of conviction that a woman will do nothing to disobey her husband, not even defend herself".

Cases like Laila's are not rare, according to Lina Khalifah, owner of SheFighter, a women's self-defence centre. SheFighter and another centre in Amman provide dedicated programmes for women. About 2,800 women are enrolled in classes at the facilities.

"You'd be surprised how a large segment of women in underprivileged areas view submission as part of religious convictions," Khalifah

said. "They believe being submissive is part of their holy duty as wives and mothers."

Scores of Jordanian women of all ages are taking up the strenuous martial arts classes, driven by personal motivation, mere curiosity or because they have been victims of verbal or physical abuse.

Jordanian police say there has been a steady increase in reports of physical and verbal harassment of women in the male-dominated, conservative Muslim country, where men traditionally have the final word in all family matters.

"We live in a society that does not sympathise enough with women victims."

Generally, women would not admit to being subject to harassment because of the "shame" this could bring to the family. The "shame culture" is common in patriarchal societies, where violence against women comes in many forms.

In addition to domestic violence – at least 1,230 cases were reported in Amman in the last quarter of 2015 – there are "honour killings", in which a male kills a female relative

for petty reasons, such as dating. At least 20 women die in honour crimes in Jordan each year. Autopsies determined nearly all the victims were virgins.

Reports of rape are also increasing. Police records show there were 94 allegations of rapes reported in 2015, compared with 57 in 2014. Officials insist the number is no reflection of reality, since many attacks go unreported under the culture of shame.

Niveen moved gracefully while fiercely punching the sand bag hanging from the ceiling, her hair tied in a careless pony tail. She said she enrolled in martial arts classes because she wanted to "explore a different type of sport".

"I wanted to try what used to be a guy thing," Niveen said. "I heard my male colleagues talk about the way they feel after kickboxing classes and thought 'Why not give it a try?'"

Khalifah said women come to SheFighter with different stories.

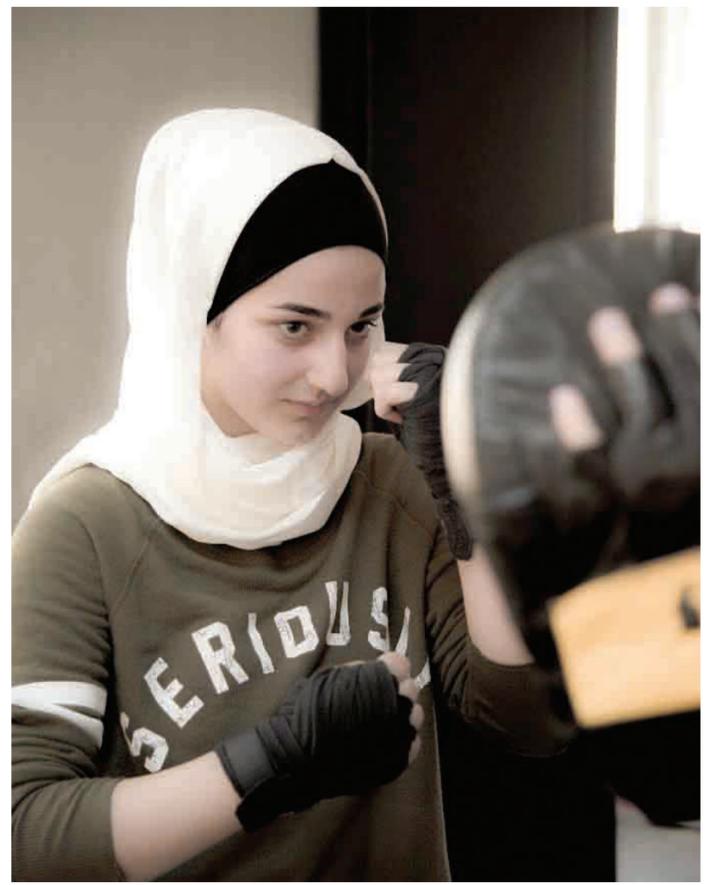
"I've met some who genuinely believe in the concept. Others are here in an attempt to boost their self-esteem. But most of the trainees come to me with sad stories of family abuse or street harassment," she explained.

She recounted the tragedy of a student who was repeatedly raped by her fiancé and could not tell her parents. Eventually, he abandoned her and left her feeling shame and despair.

"She couldn't forgive herself for being weak, for not standing up for herself and saying no," Khalifah said.

A study by Mahmoud al-Jundi at the Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies in 2014 concluded that 53% of Jordanian women have been sexually harassed at least once in their lives. And, in a region where women are unlikely to report such incidents, the numbers are probably much higher, the study noted.

Police Major Alia Obeid said authorities usually refrain from disclosing figures on harassment



(Credit: Courtesy of Shefighter centre in Amman)

A Jordanian woman trains on self-defence tactics at a specialised centre in Amman.

because the matters "need to be tackled in utmost secrecy".

"We live in a society that does not sympathise enough with women victims," explained Obeid, head of the Research Department at Amman's Family Protection Unit.

At the centre, Khalifah does not only provide physical training. She devised a programme focusing on identifying warning signs, anticipating possible attacks, building self-esteem through coaching and counselling, in addition to fighting back.

Asked why women should not use pepper spray or tasers, Khalifah replied: "Why not to train your body to be the weapon?"

Unfortunate personal experiences are not the sole driver behind the

increase of Jordanian women seeking to learn how to fight.

Sara, a 27-year-old engineer who has been taking self-defence classes for more than six months, said women need to work more on their personalities, not only their physical strength.

"I do not believe that mastering a few moves would shield me from abuse," she said. "The Israeli Army has the world's highest rates of sexual harassment, although female cadets are well-trained and physically fit."

"I'm here for the adrenaline rush."

Ruba Zeidan is an Arab Weekly contributor based in Jordan, where she has covered social, cultural and economic issues for ten years.



(Credit: Ruba Zeidan)

Jordanian women train at a centre in Amman that offers classes in self-defence dedicated to women.

Ideas to reduce MENA youth unemployment in short supply

Gregory Aftandilian

Washington

The recent protests in Tunisia by young people over the lack of jobs rattled a country that many observers hailed as the only success that emerged from the "Arab spring".

These same observers argue that high youth unemployment was one of the chief factors that led to the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and other Arab countries.

"The World Bank, in a 2015 report, called for a 'new social contract' for the MENA region."

Indeed, many analysts had flagged youth unemployment as a serious problem before 2011. In *Addressing The 100 Million Youth Challenge*, a seminal study published by the World Economic Forum, Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef pointed out that youth unemployment of about 30% in many Arab countries was delaying the process, particularly for young males, to obtain a job, marry and have a home of their own.

Many young people hoped that the "Arab spring" would lead to a fairer system by ending corruption and crony capitalism but these hopes have been dashed. If

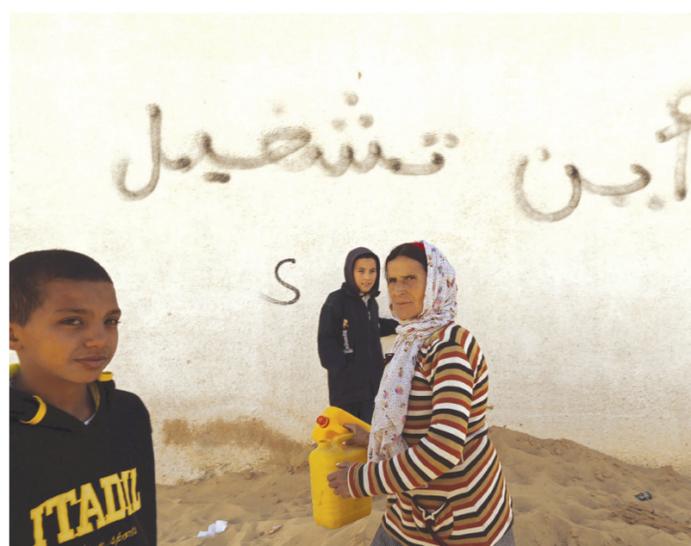
anything, the jobless rate among youth is even higher today.

In the early years of many Arab revolutionary-republican regimes, like that of Egypt, youth unemployment was dealt with by guaranteeing every university graduate a job in the civil service. Although such jobs did not pay very well and often mismatched one's degree with a position, they at least gave a young person a certain status, job security, health benefits and a pension.

This was often referred to as the "social contract": In return for such jobs and benefits, the young intelligentsia was to support the regime. Many young people in that era (the 1950s and 1960s) were eager to be part of the government to help society progress.

Over time, however, this system became untenable. The civil service expanded to such a degree that it became a bloated institution and a drain on state resources. As a result, governments eventually stretched out the hiring process to such an extent that many graduates simply gave up waiting. In Egypt, the wait time for a civil service job for a graduate was nearly ten years by the 1990s.

But what is the alternative for young people? With the government no longer a viable employer, many youths have looked to the private sector. However, because of the legacy of state socialism in many Arab states, private sectors often are not very strong or well-developed and successful private sector companies, as well as sub-



Wall graffiti in Kasserine, Tunisia, reads "where is employment?"

sidiaries of foreign companies, tend to hire those who have graduated from universities abroad.

This situation led to a two-tier system that is self-perpetuating: Children of the elite tend to get the better jobs because their parents can afford the tuition at foreign universities and have connections to the business elite; those from middle- and lower-middle-class families who obtain degrees from state universities are often left with no meaningful job prospects.

Some enlightened business leaders in the Arab world have recognised this problem and are trying

to change the curriculum at state universities to gear education to the needs of the private sector and make graduates more marketable. This is a commendable endeavour but it will take years to achieve, in large part because many state universities in the Arab world are slow to change.

Outside players such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank have also recognised the severity of the problem and are trying to help, but with mixed results. Under the rubric of *Investing for Resilience and Prosperity*, USAID has

been concentrating on job-training skills and promoting entrepreneurship by providing start-up capital, training and mentorships in the MENA region.

The World Bank, in a 2015 report, called for a "new social contract" for the MENA region that emphasises private-sector jobs and quality services, "where the state facilitates competition in domestic markets and organises services delivery so that citizens can hold providers accountable." Like USAID, the World Bank is trying to promote small enterprises.

Although such efforts will likely make some progress in reducing the youth unemployment problem, not everyone is suited to be an entrepreneur nor are governments willing or able to level the playing field to allow for a true market economy because crony capitalism is prevalent.

On top of these problems are poor macroeconomic trends, namely the drop in the price of oil – which hurts not only oil-producing countries but poorer countries that receive financial assistance from the oil states – and the decline in tourism because of terrorist incidents in the region.

Until economic growth picks up, the private sector expands and state universities reform, youth unemployment will remain a serious and potentially explosive situation. It behoves all parties interested in the stability and progress of the Arab world to develop and fund more creative ideas to tackle the problem.