

Radio Star's Tough Route to the Top

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Farmgirl defies the odds to front popular Baghdad radio show.

In her jeans and sneakers, Majide al-Jiburi, 43, sitting in her studio on the second floor of Radio al-Nas (People) in Baghdad, looks every bit the urban professional woman.

But the moment she begins to speak, her accent betrays her rural Iraqi origin.

"I never dreamt I'd end up in the city, and I am still afraid of my family and my community," said the farm girl-turned-radio anchor.

She began her radio career as a presenter on Radio Mahabba (Love), hosting a programme that dealt with the lives of women in the countryside. Her current show is a popular 45-minute morning phone-in, a mixture of news and history, cultural and educational topics.

Majide's rise from farmer's daughter to host a top radio show in the capital is a rare exception in Iraq, where women from rural areas face many restrictions in terms of education and social mobility.

Tribal traditions often keep them from studying, working outside the house, going out with friends, and can mean that they have little choice when it comes finding a husband.

Born in a village near Hilla, the largest town in Babil province, southeast of Baghdad, Majide had a difficult life before she got married and moved to Baghdad in 2004.

She completed primary and secondary school but had to drop out of further education for financial reasons. There were other problems too. Her family got into trouble with the former regime because of their communist beliefs - outlawed in Saddam's time. She and one of her brothers were arrested repeatedly.

Compared to her former life, she's now very happy and considers herself rather privileged. In the past, she had to work to the point of physical exhaustion just to bring enough food to the table, but now she feels she's treated with respect and dignity.

"I didn't feel like a human being," she said. Only once she moved to Baghdad did she become "a person with a personality of her own".

As well the usual privations rural women are forced to endure, Majide also faced the wrath of the regime over her membership of the then illegal Iraqi Communist Party, ICP. She was arrested for the first time when she was 17, and handed a two-year jail term by the Baghdad juvenile court.

Later, she was tried and convicted for her political activities, and sentenced to life imprisonment - but

released after four years in 1989 as part of a general amnesty.

“I will never forget that night [I was first arrested]. I had just come out of the bathroom - my hair was still wet. They dragged my elder brother and me into a car to the Hilla security directorate where we were questioned and tortured for months,” she said.

Throughout these tough times, she was determined to broaden her mind, keeping abreast of the news and reading widely.

Following her release from prison for the second time, she started working at a farm her father gave her, breeding poultry and growing vegetables.

After the fall of the regime, she was filled with hope and headed for Baghdad, where she had twice been jailed. A human rights organisation offered her some work, and she then went about looking for a husband, approaching the ICP to find her a partner who would respect and accept a woman who had been jailed and abused by the Iraqi security forces.

She was introduced to Ibrahim al-Hariri, a 75-year-old Iraqi, who works as an editor on the ICP’s Tariq al-Shab newspaper. “He told me I have the honour of marrying you if Saddam’s security men [abused] you,” she said.

He also offered to find her a job and to put her in touch with people who could find her another husband if she felt he was too old for her. But she was happy to accept his offer because “I never expected to find someone who feels what I feel. Thank God I found such a nice and educated man”.

They got married in May 2004.

Al-Hariri trained her up as a journalist and she also took computer classes. Subsequently, she got her presenting break on Radio Mahabba, and then moved on to her present job.

She works hard on her Arabic language skills, determined to lose her rural accent. But some aspects of her past are hard to escape. The suffering she endured in prison continues to haunt her. “It’s not easy to get rid of the fear,” she said.

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