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THE SUNDAY TIMES

How I make it work: Halla Diyab

Halla Diyab is half-Syrian, half-Lebanese and calls Britain home. She is a TV presenter and has written five dramas

The Sunday Times Published: 11 September 2011



Halla Diyab, 30, is a half-Syrian, half-Lebanese TV presenter for the London-based Arabic News

'An international education influences people enormously': Halla Diyab (Joel Marston)

Broadcasting (ANB). Her own production company produces her weekly show, From London. She has written five dramas that have been aired in the Middle East. She lives alone in Leicester

How has your upbringing influenced your work?

Because my father worked for the United Nations, we moved around, to Lebanon, Egypt and France. As a progressive liberal, he wanted to raise my sister and me as strong women. But because of his travelling, we used to stay with his conservative father, where all we heard was: "You can't do that, it will bring shame on the family." My mother was fearful under my grandfather, so I never had a strong

female figure. I wanted to fill that role and be an inspirational figure who pushed for change. The catalyst was my father's death in 2005, when suddenly I had nobody to protect me.

Why did you come to Britain?

You can't improve intellectually in the Middle East, and I knew the only way to be liberated was to get out. When I arrived at Warwick University in 2002 to study gender and women's studies, I didn't know who I was. Being suddenly in control, I went to the other extreme and was partying a lot (though not drinking — I'm a practising Muslim) in search of emotional attachment. I realised relationships can be closer here, and they made me stronger. My relationship with my body also changed — I even began to sit comfortably. I also started to read British feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf. It was like I'd come out of a cave. I finally learnt how to be free.

What frightens you?

When I was younger, I dreamt of being an actor, but the family's response was: "What will society say? Who will marry you?" Fear is contagious, so I felt it, too. But now I use drama as therapy. Initially, my mother was very worried and didn't encourage me — success to her would be staying and marrying. Now she has seen the recognition for my work, she understands.

How did you launch your tv career?

My big break was when I was invited by an Egyptian news channel to discuss my drama *The Beautiful Maiden* in 2005. The female anchor, Hala Sarhan, who interviewed me, then offered me a job as her co-presenter. She was that female figure I hadn't found before. She taught me to be frank and free with my ideas — that gives you conviction. TV is my *métier*. I had been in the shadows for a long time, and it's given me a voice.

Do you struggle to get your material aired and be taken seriously?

While ANB is progressive, some Arab men still regard me as an Arab woman — they think they know more. Filming in the Middle East can also pose problems, mainly because men are not used to listening to women. I simply put my professionalism across — I deliver and go. I am not interested in gender, class or race — I learnt that from British culture. Being educated in Britain has given me confidence. An international education influences people enormously.

Is Britain home now?

I had to leave Syria as I was being persecuted for speaking out against the burqa and the hijab — one senior cleric asked the government to ban my dramas. I've been attacked verbally, on air and by email, and accused of working for the West. I've been living in Britain since 2002. Home is not where you're born, but the place that provides you with protection, freedom and respect. The uprising in Syria worries me — I believe evolution is better than revolution, because Middle Eastern society is tribal and used to being led. We need time for people to change.

Do you ever feel the situation is hopeless?

It can feel very lonely to be an outcast for your ideas. There are forums against me, but there is also a Facebook fan page where a lot of Arab girls say I'm voicing the struggles that they're too ashamed to speak about. That gives me hope and inspires me to keep on writing better, more daring dramas.

How important is fashion in your work?

If I'm interviewing someone conservative, I also have to look conservative, though I won't cover my hair — someone once refused to be interviewed by me because of it. So I wear a nice dress but in a daring colour, keep my hair and make-up simple and add beautiful, colourful accessories.

Is there room for anyone else?

Work is my freedom and how I get my self-fulfilment. I have a partner, but I feel afraid whenever I come close to commitment. I have contradictory feelings about it. There is pain in my heart, because I haven't found the family to replace my own, and I need someone who understands me and my background.

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