



## AmataRauf al-Sharki (Raufa Hassan)

1958–2011 ✪ JOURNALIST AND ACTIVIST ✪ YEMEN

Inside me I didn't like that veil anymore. I felt it was a big lie ... I wanted to be me. Just me, accepted the way I was. ... I began to realise that the veil was just something to hold me back in life and not really for my benefit. Since then this started to rage inside me. ... I had become a different person.

—RAUFA HASSAN

It was 1975, and television had just come to the country of Yemen. Seventeen-year-old AmataRauf al-Sharki, famous with the Yemeni public as radio personality Raufa Hassan, was about to appear in one of the first Yemeni television programs. After all, Raufa had been the star of her own successful radio show since she was twelve. But this was entirely different—for the first time, her country would see her. And she had quite a surprise for them.

Raufa had just returned from her first year of college and had vowed to stop wearing her traditional veil. It was the custom of most Muslim women, especially in Yemen, to wear the veil in public at all times to conceal themselves from the view of men. While Raufa went to college in the less traditional country of Egypt, she came to believe that the veil was a symbol that held women back from achieving equality. To her, it was a form of discrimination. If she wore it, Raufa would feel she was lying to herself and her country. She wouldn't do it.

When the cameras began rolling, all of Yemen saw the face of their favorite female celebrity. Many viewers were shocked, including Raufa's family and friends, but Raufa stood by her beliefs. By not wearing a veil, Raufa publicly asserted her independence and began a personal campaign to promote women's rights in Islamic countries.

Amatalrauf al-Sharki was born in 1958 in a North Yemen town called Ibb. By the time she was in the sixth grade, she had begun her work in the media. Her first job was singing in a children's radio show, but she quickly moved on to bigger things. One day, a broadcaster didn't show up for his program at the radio station, and Amatalrauf agreed to fill in for him. The twelve-year-old girl did such a good job as his replacement that she was asked to be an official broadcaster with her own show!

However, Amatalrauf was sure that her father would be angry if she had her own radio show. He would consider it a scandal if his daughter were publicly speaking over the airwaves. But Amatalrauf was determined to have her own show, so she and the other station employees worked out a way for her to continue on the radio. She simply changed her broadcasting name so that no one would know who she was. Amatalrauf did tell her mother, who saw no real harm in the idea and was happy that her daughter would be earning an income. From that day on, Amatalrauf became known to the Yemeni public as Raufa Hassan.

Each day, Raufa would go to the radio station after school to record her broadcasts. Her plan worked well until six months later, when an announcer accidentally introduced her as "Raufa Hassan *al-Sharki*." Her secret identity was ruined! Raufa's father threatened to keep her from working anymore, but he eventually backed down and allowed Raufa to continue her show.

Raufa's broadcasts were different from most. For three years she had a program about family topics. While other such programs dealt with women's household duties as a wife, Raufa emphasized that family responsibilities belong to both men *and* women. Even as a teen, she promoted equality between the sexes.

As of 2009, the illiteracy rate of Yemeni women had dropped to an estimated 55 percent.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next few years, Raufa became more involved in the women's movement, participating in activities and organizations that advocated women's rights. She was active in the Yemeni Women's Association until a religious group shut it down in 1973. That same year, at age fifteen, she and three friends founded a school to teach Yemeni girls and women to read and write. This was a major step for education in Yemen, where over 70 percent of the women were illiterate. Raufa also shocked the public when she marched in a Yemeni military parade. She and a group of girls trained for three weeks, learning how to walk in formation and carry guns. They were the first women to participate in the Revolution Day celebration, previously an all-male activity.

But perhaps Raufa's most significant actions centered around the question of whether or not to wear a veil. Like most other Yemeni women, she was brought up with the tradition of covering her face except for her eyes. During her radio broadcasts, though, she couldn't wear a veil because it would muffle her voice. Raufa decided to keep this a secret; she knew it would be offensive to many people—especially her family—if they knew she performed her broadcasts without a veil. Only the people at the station knew about it, and she didn't even let many of them see her face uncovered. During her five years at the station, only the program producer and the station engineer were allowed to watch while she recorded her broadcasts. Inside, though, Raufa was becoming more and more uncomfortable with wearing her veil. She began to see it as a device that held her back as a woman.

In 1975 Raufa graduated from high school. Despite opposition from her family, she attended Cairo University in Egypt, where she studied

In 2010 Raufa interviewed with the Middle East Youth Initiative about the progress in Yemen over the past 20 years. She explained that although women had more rights than previously, there was still much to improve on: "Women are working, but in rural areas which represent 70 percent of the population they work in family farms and are not being paid."<sup>30</sup>

information and mass communication. When Raufa returned from her freshman year, she no longer wore a veil. This came as a shock to her family and friends, who were even more amazed when she appeared on television without her veil. Soon Raufa became well-known throughout the country for her controversial unveiled television broadcasts.

Raufa continued her education and her work as a women's rights advocate. In 1977 she restarted the Yemeni Women's Association and became its president two years later. She eventually earned a master's degree in mass communication from Norwich University and a doctorate from the University of Paris.

Raufa worked as a professor and a leader in the campaign for women's rights. In 1993 she ran for Parliament in Yemen's first democratic elections. Though she lost, she continued to make a difference in Yemeni politics, inspiring women to be more politically active. She founded the Women's Studies Center at Sana'a University, and she helped form the Arab Democratic Institute, to promote women's voting projects and encourage Yemeni women, especially those in rural areas, to use their votes and let their voices be heard.

In 2011 Raufa died in a hospital in Cairo. Her death was mourned around the world by people who had been touched by her activism. Raufa made progress in her attempts to give Yemeni women more power, but the women of Yemen still have a tough road ahead of them. Traditionally, women's roles have been restrictive and submissive. Even today, girls in Yemen are often encouraged to marry in their teens, setting motherhood as their only lifetime goal and hoping for many children. Education, careers, and anything that takes girls or women

into the public is often discouraged or even forbidden. Illiteracy among Yemeni women is still disturbingly high.

From an early age, Raufa showed independence and leadership in promoting women's rights, a cause to which she devoted much of her life. Her achievements made her one of the most important and influential feminists in the Arab world. She challenged the ways in which her choices were restricted, and she expanded what is possible for women in her country.

## HOW WILL YOU ROCK THE WORLD?

I will rock the world by cleaning up and picking up trash outside of my house. I'll also turn off all the lights when I'm not using them. But the most important thing is I'll be helping others if they need help. We should do more things to help the world and help others.

SIERRA LOPEZ  AGE 12