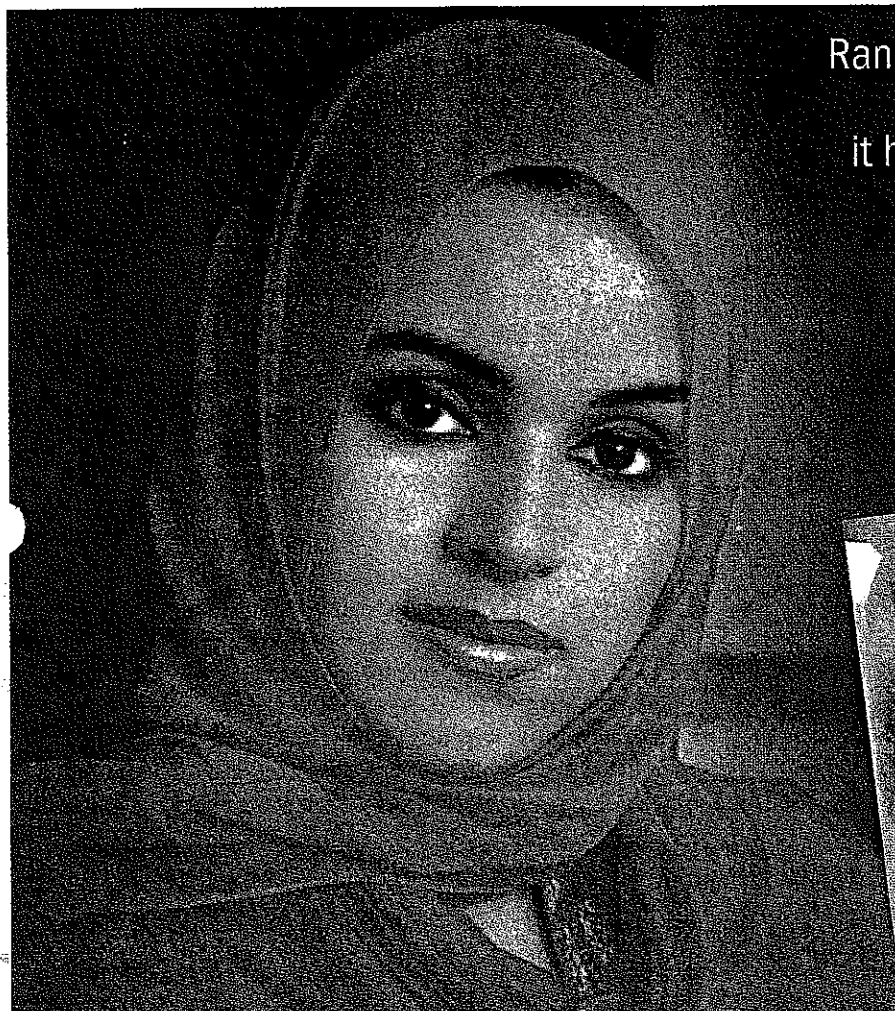


Arabian Nightmare



Rania al-Baz's face made her a Saudi TV star. Now it has become a symbol of domestic violence



"I decided to draw attention to the issue," says al-Baz (before the attack).

Rania al-Baz says her attacker paused just long enough to allow her to utter an Islamic prayer. "He said, 'I am not only going to hit you, but I'm going to kill you.'" As the host of a popular Saudi Arabian talk show called *The Kingdom This Morning*, the 29-year-old mother from the port city of Jeddah was a well-known television personality. But on April 12 al-Baz presented a startlingly different face to the public: one battered almost beyond recognition, allegedly by her own hus-

band. Inviting the press into her hospital room, al-Baz allowed the whole country to witness what had happened to her. "I want to convey to the men who do this that there are consequences to be suffered," she says.

Al-Baz's gesture of defiance has sparked a firestorm in her deeply conservative country, where statutes protect the welfare of women but Islamic law and tradition require them to be subservient to their husbands and fathers. "What Rania did was shocking," says

"She is gathering her strength," says an activist who has visited al-Baz (in her Jeddah hospital bed earlier this month).

Saudi journalist Abeer Mishkhas, who writes for the English-language *Arab News*. "No Saudi woman has ever gone public to show she's been beaten." Newspapers and TV have covered her story, and other victims are now coming forward. Still recovering from 13 facial fractures that have required 10 operations so far, al-Baz has become the public face

AP/WIDEWORLD



"Our relationship wasn't bad at the beginning," says al-Baz (on vacation in Lebanon with husband Muhammed al-Fallatta ca. 2000).

What Rania did was shocking. No Saudi woman has ever gone public to show she's been beaten

of a problem that remains hidden within tight-knit families. Says Reem Abu-Hassan, a lawyer and human-rights activist in neighboring Jordan: "I admire her courage. She had to go to the extreme to [stop] the suffering she was going through."

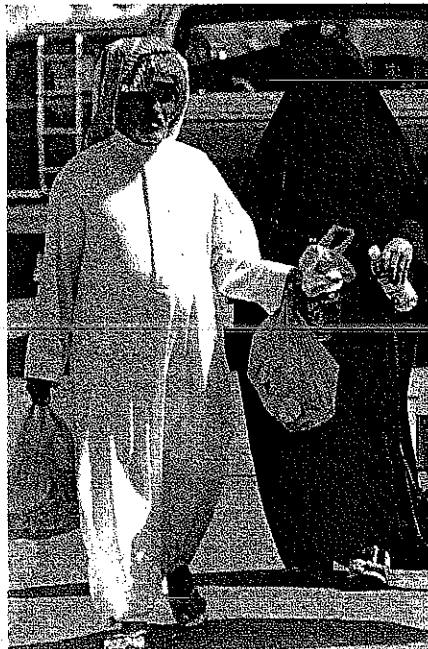
Al-Baz says she's simply lucky to be alive. The beatings, she says, began shortly after she married singer Muhammed al-Fallatta in 1998, after meeting him at the television studio. "He beat me about once a year," says the TV host. Asked why she never left him, she replies that she feared a Saudi judge would side with her husband and award him custody of their two children. But that changed on April 4, when al-Fallatta became enraged while arguing with his wife in their Jeddah home. "I told him, 'Please don't hit me,'" she recalls. As a servant and the couple's 5-year-old son watched, al-Baz says al-Fallatta punched her and choked her, then began smashing her head against a marble tile floor. "He

told me to recite the words 'There are no gods but Allah, and Muhammed is his prophet' in order to be ready to die," she says. "He stopped hitting me long enough for me to say it."

After al-Baz lapsed into unconsciousness, al-Fallatta allegedly wrapped her in a black sheet and drove her to the ER. "He told the nurses I was dead as a result of a car accident," she says. Al-Fallatta fled the scene, but according to al-Baz's family he has since surrendered to authorities and may face charges of attempted murder. (Saudi authorities won't comment.) Many Saudis have rallied to al-Baz's side, including a member of the royal family who has volunteered to pay her hospital bills. Yet along with get-well messages, says al-Baz, "people [have] said a woman shouldn't be working in television, and that I needed some sense knocked into me."

In fact, al-Baz says she'd like to return to TV after recovering from the surgeries that lie ahead. In the meantime she faces another challenge: Her family must convince a judge to grant her a divorce and custody of her children. As for al-Fallatta, "someone has offered to beat him up equally badly for me, but I will leave it to the will of Allah. Allah may punish him more severely than any man can."

By J.D. Heyman. Essam al-Ghalib in Jeddah, Simon Perry in London and Rebecca Paley in New York City



Saudi Arabia Women & the Law

- Women have the right to free education and health care. They can buy and sell property. They can take out bank loans and apply for welfare benefits on their own.
- Women cannot own businesses without a male sponsor, participate in political life or drive cars.
- Women are segregated in most workplaces and in schools and restaurants, and cannot travel without a male chaperone.
- A woman must have her husband's permission for her or her children to leave Saudi Arabia—even if she is a U.S. citizen.
- Saudi religious police pressure women to wear a full-length black covering known as an *abaya* and to cover their heads.