

Women Reporting Violence: Conditions and Implications

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Lebanese civil society organizations that work to promote the principles and values of human rights led the efforts to publicly expose the issue of violence against women (hereafter VAW) in the mid-90s of the last century. Since 2008, a coalition of these organizations has been working on a draft law that protects women from family violence, organizing media and advocacy campaigns, and lobbying with legislative bodies and policy makers to promote the passing of the bill. These campaigns with respect to the draft law are a culmination of a number of activities aimed at assisting battered women by lending an ear to their suffering; providing them with legal, medical, psychological, and professional support; and offering shelter to those in danger.

This paper examines the interplay of factors underlying the act of reporting violence by this group of battered women.¹ It attempts to portray the relationship between women's personal and familial characteristics and their reporting strategies. It also sheds light on these women's expectations from the NGOs they report to, as well as the methods implemented by these NGOs to help battered women deal with their ordeal. The study aims to understand the dynamics of reporting VAW in order to aid in the formulation of strategies to combat domestic violence in Lebanon.

Population, Sample, and Research Tools

The sample used in the study consists of 62 adult women (48 married, 10 single, 4 divorced) who sought the help of the following four NGOs, in the period between January 1 and the end of July 2009: KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women, YWCA, and Martha & Mary.² Social workers from these NGOs filled a questionnaire designed to extract information from the record files of the women beneficiaries (i.e. those who benefited from the services provided by the above-mentioned NGOs). The questionnaire consisted of five parts. The first part focused on personal information concerning the beneficiary, while the second part inquired about the main batterer. The third part focused on the circumstances surrounding violence, the fourth part asked the social worker who is filling the questionnaire to pinpoint some issues pertaining to the act of asking help, and the last part highlighted various issues related to the beneficiary's attitude in different situations.

The questionnaires were completed by the social worker who was counseling the beneficiaries in order to guarantee their privacy. Information which was not documented in the beneficiary's record files was obtained from direct questions addressed by the social worker to the woman herself, if she was willing to disclose it.

1. This paper is a summary of the last section of the second part of the book *Women Facing Violence* authored by Azza Charara Baydoun, published by the organization KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation in 2010, at www.kafa.org.lb/publications

2. Needless to say, this sample is not representative of the studied population. It is a "convenient" one. Hence generalization of results is not advised.

Reporting Violence

The survey revealed that women tolerate various forms of violence before reporting it for a period of time varying from several hours to 24 years, with a median of around five years.³ This means that some women report the violence they are subjected to shortly after it takes place, while others endure their suffering in silence for a much longer period of time.

What are the factors that affect this delay in reporting? The collected data does not show any significant relationship between the time it takes to report violence and many of the variables that one might expect to affect it.⁴ Thus, according to our statistical analysis, the women in our sample reported violence at the same rate, regardless of their marital status (married, divorced, or single), their age (young, adult, or elderly), the age of the men who abused them (older than them or younger), their religiosity (commitment to religious practices and rituals), their occupation (employees or housewives), the number of times they were subjected to violence (daily or less frequently), and the kind of violence they were exposed to (sexual, physical, economic, psychological, or legal).

However, women whose children are less than five years old seemed to endure the violence patiently, and delayed reporting it for years, unlike those who have no children under five. It is likely that the former postponed the confrontation with the abuser until their children grew past the age of 5, given that this age-period is a critical one for a child's development, when the mother's constant care is mostly needed. This implies that a battered woman's socially assigned maternal role is the main determinant factor in her delay to report abuse, and that a woman with a certain level of education and/or paid work - factors which presumably contribute to one's autonomy and sense of individuality - does not necessarily report violence faster than an uneducated and unemployed female victim of violence.

The Home and Leaving it

All the studies that have dealt with VAW concur that, in the case of a married couple, the spousal home is the safest place for the man, and the most dangerous for the woman. Moreover, the home of a single woman's parents is not the safest place for her either, because of the sexual violation she may be subjected to by her male relatives. Indeed, most murders of women in Lebanon occur in the victim's home or its vicinity.⁵

Needless to say, a home is not only a residence. It is the family's vital space which the Lebanese collective imagination depicts as a major source of both material and emotional support, as well as a site that provides unconditional care, protection, and nurturance for its members. Despite the numerous examples that prove this positive characterization of the family and the family home to be wrong, everyone, including NGO activists dealing with VAW, often refuse to admit that families do not live up to this role or expectation. Organizations and individuals in Lebanon alike place the "preservation of the family" above all else, even if it is at the expense of the interest of the woman reporting family violence.⁶ This value is given priority over all others, not only because of its association with religion and its dominance in public and private discourses, but also because Lebanese society has not yet started formulating an alternative, less idealistic discourse on the family. Doesn't violence which occur within

3. These women reported the violence that they were subjected to, to one or more individuals in their family, to friends, health professionals, security agencies, governmental organizations, or NGOs.

4. Here, as well as elsewhere in the paper, our results are considered at 0.01 level of significance or below.

5. See Azza Charara Baydoun (2008), *Cases of femicide before Lebanese courts*, Beirut: KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation at www.kafa.org.lb/publications

6. The term family violence includes violence perpetrated against a woman by her spouse or other family members.

the family constitute enough reason for us to reexamine this dominant discourse? With the aforesaid, we aim to highlight the importance of the act of “leaving home”. This act is an act of confrontation not only between the abused woman and her batterer, but between her and ‘society’ in general. An abused woman who leaves her home will be completely on her own in this confrontation and her claim or complaint that she was the victim of family violence is dismissed because Lebanese society negates the existence of spousal abuse or domestic violence in general, and because violence is often considered ‘normal’ when perpetrated by family members. But who are the women who leave their homes and where do they go?

a. When the husband is the abuser

Thirty five of the forty eight married women (including those separated and abandoned but are still ‘officially’ married) in our sample study left their marital residence at least once. These were distributed according to their destination as follows:

	Parents’/ relatives’ residence	Friends’ residence	Rented residence
Number of married women who headed towards:	29	3	3

The majority of women who left their marital residence at least once headed towards their parents’ or to a relative’s home. This means that the parental family is still the most welcoming haven for women who choose to leave their marital residence in order to avoid their abuser/husband. The remaining six rented a place or went to a friend’s house; they did so either because they were financially independent and could afford to rent an apartment or because they did not want their parents to know that they had been victims of violence. Only five of these women were still living outside their conjugal home, while all the remaining 30 returned to it after a while. Of those who returned, only five had put forth a condition for their return: that their batterer pledge to abstain from resorting to violence again. The majority, however, accepted to go back without preconditions for various reasons: missing their children, succumbing to family pressure, and trusting promises to stop the violence made to them by the abuser.

The remaining thirteen that did not leave their conjugal home presented different justifications for their ‘choice’. What is interesting to note is that women who stayed home for fear of being deprived of their children’s custody represented a mere minority (only around 15 percent). We also did not find a correlation between leaving home and being a mother of a child under the age of five- the critical age period, as already mentioned.

b. When the abuser is a relative

Thirteen women in our sample were abused by a family member. Among the 10 single women, seven left the family home to settle in various other places and three remained at home. The four divorcees also ended up leaving their parents’ home, where they went back to stay after their divorce, to go to different places because they were

abused by their father or brothers. These were exposed to different degrees of violence, sometimes sexual, and lived under the threat of being killed, or of being deprived of their ability to work or of their personal allowance, if they reported the abuse.

The parents' perceived stance

Our findings point to the fact that the vast majority of the parents know that their daughter is being abused. Except for very few cases, women did not withhold from their parents the fact that they were being abused; among the 52 ever married women (presently married, divorced, separated or abandoned) who were abused by their husbands, the parents of only four of them were not aware of their daughter's suffering. The single women and divorcees were abused by their father, brother, or mother. Thus, most parents knew very well about the abuse of their daughter, (and some of them even took part in it), except in a few cases in which the abuser threatened to kill the woman (daughter or sister or relative), if she disclosed the fact that he was abusing her sexually.

Based on the women's perception of their parents' attitude towards them, we were able to classify these parents into three groups, and the parents were distributed according to the marital status of their daughters as follows:

	Parents Supporting the Daughter	Parents supporting the aggressor (husband/ family member)	Indifferent Parents	Sum
Married daughter	21	12	15	48
Unmarried (single or divorced)	zero	9	5	14
Total	21	21	20	62

Our results showed that the parents' support was more likely to be offered if the woman was married, and that there was a higher probability for them to be hostile toward her if she was single or divorced. Furthermore, our results revealed that married women often left the conjugal home, whether their parents were non-supportive or indifferent. The contrary was also true; a married woman was likely to stay at the conjugal home whether her parents supported her or were indifferent. Since most of the women leave their conjugal home to stay with their parents or relatives, we can presume that these women perceive the parents'/relatives' homes to be a welcoming place, or at least consider their parents/relatives as having an obligation to receive them, regardless of these parents' attitude toward them or toward their abusers/ husband. However, the single or divorced woman's reasons for leaving her parental home seem to be more complex; the more her family members (whether the father, mother or brother) were non-supportive of her, or the more they are supportive of the abuser (father, mother, or brother), the more likely she is to leave her parents' home. She is likely to stay at home, however, if her family members were either indifferent or uninformed of their daughter's suffering.

The fact that the parents do not support a single or divorced woman is expected; the abuser is most of the times a member of the family. In case the mother was not herself the perpetrator, the most she can offer to her abused daughter is her silence, non-intervention, and advice to endure the suffering patiently. Her attitude is probably motivated by fear of being herself subjected to violence, in case she revealed her solidarity with her daughter. Thus, her 'neutral' attitude would encourage her daughter to remain at home, and would contribute to her daughter's exposure to more violence. By contrast, if she sided with the abuser against her daughter, she would accelerate her daughter's decision to leave.

These results show that abused single or divorced women constitute a vulnerable category, and unlike the married ones, lack an important source of social support: their parents. For in the case of these women, the parents (or a family member or sibling) themselves are usually the aggressors. This is underlined in cases of family femicide where women are murdered by their kin - the ultimate kind of violence.⁷ Victims, if single, are denied one of their most basic rights, that of bringing the culprit to court and giving the perpetrator the appropriate punishment. What usually happens is that the parents of the victim renounce their right to pursue the murderer, and the court uses this as an excuse to reduce his sentence.

Personality Determinants

The results of the study show that the act of leaving home is correlated with the educational level of the female victim: the more educated she is, the more likely it is for her to leave home in protest against the violence she has been subjected to. However, there is no significant correlation between the act of leaving home and the difference in the level of education between the victim and her abuser; whether they have the same level of education or not, the likelihood of her leaving home is the same. Moreover, the likelihood of a working woman to leave home is not different from that of a housewife. There is also no correlation between the level of income of a working woman and her decision to leave home. However, a woman with a high ranking position (university professor, high school director, etc.) is more likely to leave home than a woman who has a less prestigious job.

Motivation for Asking for Help

As mentioned before, a woman can tolerate violence for a period of time varying between several hours to 24 years! But what are the reasons that drive this woman beyond the threshold of tolerance and prompt her to ask for help?

In case the husband was the abuser, the majority of the women in the study sample cited an increase in the frequency of violence and fear for their life as the main reason for seeking help. Other frequently cited reasons included the woman's fear of being thrown out of the house, violence against the children and threats to kidnap them, or the abuser's long absence from the conjugal home which leaves their status in limbo.

Half of the single or divorced women who were abused by a member of their family said that they had been exposed to continuous sexual harassment by their father or brother, either recently or during their early childhood. Yet, this harassment was not always the reason that drove these women to ask for help, because they were usually

7. See Azza Charara Baydoun (2008). *Cases of Femicide*

threatened to be killed in case they reported it. In such cases, there were other reasons that drove these women to ask for assistance, such as being forbidden to marry, being held captive in the house, etc. But in the case of other forms of abuse, the request for help was motivated by different factors, such as an increase in the degree of violence, illness caused by the abuse and so on.

Whose help do Women Seek?

Has the abused woman ever reached out to someone outside the family for help (the security, health, legal, or social services) before seeking help from an NGO? Of the 20 women who answered “yes” to this question, 11 had reported their case to the police. However, contrary to our assumption, the decision of a woman to go to the police (or not) is independent of her level of education, her work status (wage earner or housewife), or of her parents’ residence proximity to her spousal residence. Furthermore, the decision to seek help is not related to the nationality, profession, and income of the abuser.

Undoubtedly, going to the police has a significant connotation, since the police is a state institution. When a woman files a complaint concerning family abuse with the police, she is in effect making public what is happening in the private sphere and delegating to a ‘public’ entity the responsibility of monitoring what is taking place in ‘private’.

The Referral Process

Various institutions (hospitals, police stations, etc.) which are in contact with women exposed to all kinds of violence referred these women to the NGOs offering programs to assist abused women. These institutions constitute about 42 percent of total referrals. This high proportion indicates that the staff members of these institutions (doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, teachers, counselors, police personnel, etc.) are relatively aware of the existence of these NGOs and their programs. It is also an indication of the women’s confidence in these institutions, since they followed their advice, and resorted to assistance outside the family sphere. This attitude goes hand in hand with efforts made by NGOs that assist abused women to elevate the issue of domestic violence from the realm of the closed private sphere (i.e. the family) to a more public level requiring societal and institutional attention. Around 15 percent of the women sought the help of NGOs without referral. This shows that some women are autonomous and stand up to their abuser. This is the case despite feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem caused by the abuse they endured, and despite the common internalized belief that part of a woman’s worth depends on keeping private what happens within the family and on sacrificing her well-being in order to preserve the sanctity of the family and the ‘honor’ of its (male) members.

Our study shows that it is wrong to assume that the women who have a higher level of education are more independent than those who are less educated and, as a result, are more likely to seek the help of relevant NGOs on their own. In a similar way, the assumption that employment leads to autonomy is not proven by our results: the percentage of working women who seek assistance on their own (i.e. without being referred to an NGO by some other party) is not higher than that of non-working women. Our findings show that both groups, salaried and non-salaried women, are equally likely to reach out to health or legal organizations and NGOs thanks to the mediation of relatives and friends, or to take the initiative themselves.

Personal relationships constitute an important channel between women who ask for help and the NGOs they reach out to: more than 20 percent of the women in our sample were referred to the NGOs by a friend, relative, or colleague. It is noteworthy that of the 55 women who answered this question, only one said that the person who referred her to the NGO was another beneficiary. Does this indicate an absence of sisterhood among this group of women? Or is this simply a manifestation of the shame a battered woman feels and hence her reluctance to tell a sister victim about her own abuse? Does the isolation that abused women choose to live in, prevent them from discussing their problems with other women facing similar situations? Whatever the answer to these questions is, it is clear that we are still a long way from the expected “snowball effect” within this group of women.

The different types of channels through which the women were informed about the existence of NGOs offering assistance to battered women were distributed, in an almost equal proportion, among the following four categories: friends or relatives, health professionals, a social organization, and the media. The internet is still rarely used among these women, and the proportion of those who were informed about these NGOs through the internet did not exceed three percent. Contrary to our expectations, no significant correlation existed between the beneficiary’s level of education and the type of channel that informed her of the NGOs that support abused women.

Moreover, seventy-five percent of the women contacted the NGOs by phone before paying a visit; this indicates that they had taken time before deciding to seek help. What supports our argument is that more than 75 percent of those seeking the assistance of NGOs had no visible traces of violence on their bodies, whereas the bodies of the remaining 25 percent had obvious signs of violence: seven percent of these had broken bones and another 7 percent still had traces of wounds or gunshots on their bodies.

The number of times the beneficiaries visited the NGOs ranged from one to 40; half of them visited between two and ten times. As expected, the more visits were made, the higher was the level of commitment of the beneficiary to the program offered to help her by the NGO.

Women’s Expectations

The majority of the women expected the fulfillment of several needs from the NGO they sought assistance from. Moreover, these needs were presented as being paramount and requiring an immediate response from the NGO. Educational or professional services which normally lead to the sustainable empowerment of these women and are designed to allow them to be autonomous were demanded by 24% only. More than three-quarters of them chose to join counseling sessions, while two-thirds chose legal advice. Most of the times, a combination of both counseling and legal advice was sought, in addition to one or more of the following: psychological therapy, shelter, and information about services available.

The divergence and variety of expectations by abused women put a heavy burden on the shoulders of NGOs combating VAW. They demand vast human and financial resources which our society still hesitates to provide in view of the fact that it has not

yet acknowledged the wide prevalence of VAW and is still very hesitant to recognize the necessity to combat it.

Possible Solutions

The most common solution that married women cited to end their suffering was divorce or separation, with 13 of the 48 women opting to remain legally married but not willing to live under the same roof. Another group still wanted to live with the abuser, believing that a modification in the husband's behavior would solve the problem. Women in this category would be satisfied, for example, if their husband got rid of the second wife or mistress, stopped drinking or using drugs, underwent psychological treatment, or provided financially for the family and took care of the children. Only a minority of the women believed that threatening the abuser, bringing him to court, or putting him in jail are the right measures to resort to in order to end the abuse.

We can see that all these proposed solutions are actually unrealistic; for neither divorce nor separation are granted in our society without the consent and desire of the abuser/husband. Moreover, these women are aware of the fact that the husband will not change for they have already experienced occasions when the abuser broke his promises to change, as more than one of them stated. Some of them pointed out that the personal status laws do not present a fair and impartial solution to their marital conflicts and, consequently, dismissed resorting to religious courts to seek a divorce. Moreover, violence has led some of these women to lose confidence in themselves, and has lowered their self-esteem to such an extent that they have already resigned to the fact that there is no drastic solution to their problem. They have become satisfied with temporary solutions as long as they spare them imminent acts of violence. Few entertained the idea of a radical or proactive change in their life circumstances.

As for single women and divorcees, the most frequently cited solution among them was leaving the abuser and starting a new life. However, some of them believed that their situation would be changed by one of the following: convincing the abuser to change his behavior, preventing the parents from interfering in their lives, or putting the abusive father/pimp/brother in jail. Here too the great feeling of helplessness made some of the women declare their inability to think about possible solutions to their situation.

Even these modest and temporary solutions could not be implemented by the women (whether married or unmarried) when acting on their own due to the following: poor or non-existent financial means; the fear that the abuser would increase his violent behavior or leave them and get involved in a new relationship; the time that judicial proceedings take in Lebanon; the husbands' refusal to cooperate in order to reach a solution and perhaps, more importantly, his refusal to grant a divorce; the parents' refusal to support them; the fear of losing their children's custody; and the abusers' influence in the civil and religious circles that are legally authorized to deal with the problem.

It is noteworthy that few women were ready to take matters into their own hands. These women knew that the solution to their problem included finding a place to stay away from the abuser or looking for a job and securing an income that would allow them to be financially independent.

Solutions Suggested by the host NGOs

The organizations dealing with abused women suggested, on their part, solutions which they had started implementing. With a few exceptions, these solutions, which were not very different from those suggested by the beneficiaries themselves, can be grouped into three categories:

The first category has to do with interventions at the level of the beneficiary's affairs of daily life. It is worth noting that all of the host organizations are keen "not to split the family". Whether the abuser is the husband, the father, or the mother, NGOs listen to the different versions of the case at hand, as presented by the different persons concerned. They try, through negotiation, to arrive at the family's intervention, and sometimes seek help from the clergy to achieve reconciliation. However, NGOs sometimes intervene to ward off life threatening situations, by offering or referring the woman to a shelter/home and submitting a complaint to the police or security forces. NGOs in this category also provide temporary services such as schooling for the beneficiary's children, or securing a job for her, in addition to other basic services.

The second category seeks to find a solution within the legal framework - resorting to civil or religious (Muslim or Christian) courts - and counting on the help of lawyers. This is the kind of assistance that all the organizations in this category offer in order to secure alimony or a separation, or to incriminate the abuser/rapist.

NGOs in the third category follow a dual approach. They are neither satisfied with interfering legally nor are they satisfied with finding temporary solutions, and aim at modifying a woman's state of affairs. Hoping to empower her, they often offer multiple services, including legal counseling, so that the woman is familiar with both her religious and civil rights. They also offer social guidance, professional training, psychological follow-up, and even psychotherapy when necessary – all aimed at enhancing the woman's status and self-esteem so she can effectively overcome her sense of helplessness.

Evaluating the Organizations' Intervention

How do the NGOs confronting VAW assess the effect of their intervention on the woman who sought their guidance and assistance?

The evaluation that these NGOs used includes indicators related to a woman's modified behavior as well as her overt attitude change: the capacity to control her emotions (when facing violence), improvement in her mental capacities and relationship skills, as well as commitment to the intervention program implemented by the organization.

When examining the indicators adopted by the social workers to assess the beneficiaries' improvement, one can identify the mode of intervention used by these organizations and the results intended and expected from this intervention. We can notice that most of the indicators considered by these social workers to assess the development in the woman's condition fall within the scope of empowering her psychologically and socially. They seem to aim at helping the battered woman become autonomous, adapt to her milieu, and deal with her problems in a realistic, rational, and non-violent yet assertive manner. These standards, which the social workers rely on in order to assess the quality of their work with the women and its results, reflect

their professionalism as well as the quality of specialized training they were subjected to in order to deal with women victims of domestic violence.

Conclusion

It is well known worldwide that the incidence of violence against women is under – reported. Lebanon is no exception and women who do report violence in our society represent a very small proportion of abused women. But the number of unreported cases of abuse is likely to decrease if health and legal professionals, educators, social workers, clergymen, and local community leaders who may witness this violence report it to the police or to the concerned social institutions. This is especially true when reporting violence against women by these ‘witnesses’ becomes mandatory i.e. required by law as I will argue next. This will encourage women and witnesses to their plight to report violence which would lead to a better estimation of the incidence of domestic violence against women. Needless to say, a better estimation will allow us to better address the problem of VAW.

The National Coalition to Protect Women from Family Violence in Lebanon argues that combating violence is the responsibility of our society at large and not only its security institutions. The Coalition has lobbied for a comprehensive law that would authorize the Lebanese state to take the responsibility for abused women, to allocate human and financial resources, formulate strategies, take appropriate measures, and monitor the implementation of solutions aimed at tackling violence against women at all levels and providing women with a safe environment. Mandatory reporting of violence against women is also included in the draft law.

It is often argued that passing a law that seeks to modify deeply entrenched attitudes and practices, especially those pertaining to women’s subordination, is not sufficient in order to overcome gender-based violence. It is rightly expected that its implementation will be met with resistance by parties (religious courts mainly) whose authority will be compromised by it, and who will try hard to discredit its effectiveness and to sabotage its implementation. But the passing of such a law is necessary because implementing its provisions will make the issue of VAW part of the public debate, and will make it possible to challenge discriminatory ideas and beliefs concerning women and to reach a reformulation of gender attitudes and practices which can be more in harmony with the ‘spirit of our times’.

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