

## Their Stories

Nazik Saba Yared

**U**nfortunately, people in Lebanon do not realize how many of their women are battered at home. They are women of all religions, backgrounds and social classes. Sadly, many non-battered women are not empathetic to the fact that others are beaten by their husbands, brothers or sons. Over and again, I am shocked by the reaction of some women friends and acquaintances when I explain the problem to them hoping they would be motivated to contribute to our efforts to help victimized women. Their replies are as follows: these women deserve to be beaten; or like to be beaten; otherwise, why do they accept it.

They are oblivious to the fact that economic and social factors, and mainly the presence of young children forces these battered women to bear it all. Our laws are not very understanding either, and tend to reinforce the helplessness of battered women. Hence, a mother is not given custody of her children once they are of a certain age, usually set around seven, no matter how violent the father is with his children.

Furthermore, and if proverbs are an indication of the mentality of a people, then our proverbs reflect our society's contempt for women. I shall only translate a few:

**A house bossed by a woman will surely deteriorate.**

**Women are unbearable: if you don't oppress them they will oppress you.**

**Women are a calamity, you have to bear if you cannot do without them.**

**A woman is like a Persian rug: the more you beat her the better she becomes.**

Some of our folk-tales illustrate the situation very clearly. This inferior attitude towards women, which is not that of Arab or Eastern men alone, is current in the West as well, as I have come to realize from reading books about battered women in Europe, Canada and the United States. But, now there is living proof of this among the men and women we live with.

Most of the stories I collected in these testimonies and interviews were told to me by people who are close to the victim or by lawyers who were representing them. The battered women themselves are reluctant to speak up. They hide their plights for many reasons, including social pressure, shame, or the fear of being more brutalized if things came out into the open. Their silence is further reinforced by feelings of hopelessness in the absence of laws that protect them or permit them to keep their children should they decide to leave their husbands. These women are either Christian, Muslim or Druze, a fact implying that religious affiliation is not a determining variable. Only one of the battered women mentioned here agreed to discuss her situation with me. She has already divorced her husband and has had to give up her children in the process.

X. is a beautiful woman and a university graduate who holds a very good position, professionally. She did not marry young having waited for "the man of her dreams". This man turned out to be a violent husband. He would beat her savagely if, for example, he found her talking on the phone and she refused to tell him who was on the line. She finally left the house, although they had a baby, and is

trying to see what she can do about a divorce.

N., is a Druze woman, who was married to a successful engineer. They have three children. He would beat her for any and all reasons. For instance, he would beat her if one of their children lost a pair of scissors; if she was late in coming home; if she opened the front door without first asking his permission. He would throw at her anything within his reach: a shoe, a jug, a chair. She was a beautiful woman and he was extremely jealous. She bore the savage beating for seven years and until her face became disfigured. N., then, obtained a medical report and filed for divorce. The divorce was granted, but she was given custody of her youngest daughter only, until the child reaches the age of seven. N.'s parents forbade her to remarry hoping to get her children back should their father remarry and his new wife mistreat them. She never got her children back, and can only see them on weekends.

F. is a Muslim woman whose husband was a doorman. He spent all his earnings on gambling. She, therefore, had to work as a cook in order to provide for their five children. When F. refused to give him money, he beat her violently. When she could no longer bear the beatings, she divorced him. He did not want to take the children, so she kept them. He never paid her a penny of child support, which forced her to marry off her two eldest daughters at early ages, and abandon the other three with her mother-in-

law. She, herself, had to leave the country.

Another battered Muslim woman, is L.B. She is Palestinian and married to a Lebanese. L.B. is illiterate because her parents sent her out as a maid from the age of six on. Her income was used to pay the tuition to medical school for one of her brothers, who later traveled to the U.S. for further specialization. This same brother, then, forced his sister to marry a taxi driver against her will because he did not want people to say that his sister was a maid. L. and her husband have two daughters, the eldest of which is fourteen, and a son, who suffers from a mental disability. When her father-in-law died, her husband inherited a large sum of money, gave up his taxi, refused to work and took to beating her and the girls. He would beat her in front of the children. L.B. strongly suspects that he also became a drug addict. Once, she called the police, but they did not help her because he bribed them. Then, L.B. sought the protection of some armed militia-men during the war. They threatened her husband and, even, beat him up, so he stopped hitting her for while. He then started to beat her again. L.B.'s daughters could not study at home and L.B. had to work very hard to pay for their food, clothing and education. Her disabled son is enrolled in a special school free of charge. Although L.B. filed and obtained a divorce, it was never implemented, her husband having bribed the Sheikh involved in the decision. Naturally, the divorce papers dis-

appeared and she was forced to return home. Her only hope to get rid of him is to have him imprisoned. She cannot afford a lawyer to file for another divorce. She is afraid to leave her children alone with him because he beats them and mistreats the disabled one. Once he went as far as to throw her out of the house and hide the children for nine months. L.B.'s only hope is to have him jailed.

G., a Christian, fell in love and married a university graduate and very rich business man, even before graduating from university. Although she has a strong personality, he began to beat her as soon as they were married, hoping to subjugate her. With time the battering became more savage. He sometimes uses a leather strap leaving deep marks on her body. They have three children, and he beats her in front of them. Sometimes, he beats her, even, when she is carrying her little one who screams in terror. He does not beat the children because he hardly sees them. His son, however, is also violent and abuses his younger brother. G. has always lived an atmosphere of violence which explains everybody's unwillingness to help her. Her father used to beat her mother and her violent husband is a battered child. Her family hushes up her plight and refuses to help her, afraid of "what people will say". Her in-laws defend their son, telling her she must put up with him. They stress his so-called good qualities as a husband, i.e. that he is faithful, and does not drink nor gamble. They claim that his only vice is that of beating

*They hide  
their  
plights for  
many  
reasons,  
which  
include  
social  
pressure,  
shame, or  
the fear of  
being more  
brutalized  
if things  
came out  
into the  
open.*

# Battered Women In Lebanon

her, but that otherwise he loves her. G., of course, does not love Tim anymore, but she cannot leave him because of the children and because she has no profession or degree to be able to support herself.

Another battered Christian woman is K. who was married off before sitting for her Baccalaureate at eighteen, to a friend of her family who was ten years her senior. It was not a happy marriage from the start. If she scolded the children because they dirtied the house he would humiliate her in their presence and scream saying: It is your duty to always clean-up after them. What else do you have to do?! If she had to buy a pair of shoes, he would profusely repeat that he was bestowing on her a favor by giving her the money. They lived with his mother who was a despotic, domineering and cruel woman. When K. once complained to her husband about harsh treatment his mother, he slapped her on the face so hard that he cut her lip. On another occasion, while she was entertaining one of her friends, he asked her to get him something. As she left the sitting room she overheard him tell the guest: You see, I can do with her whatever I want. He was also very jealous of her love for their children. Every evening he would invent a reason for contention and end the argument

by beating her up. She once contacted her lawyer friend and his wife when he wounded her face. Instead of helping and defending her, the lawyer told her not to exaggerate the matter and to go back to her husband. Then, her husband chose the evenings when the children slept and could not see him hit her. One evening K. became enraged when she noticed that their youngest son was awake and watching his father beat her. Consequently,

artist first. She was ashamed to tell the doctor that he beat her. She also discovered during the session that he cheated on her and had several mistresses. When they left the clinic the husband said to her: *You didn't tell the doctor that I hit you because you enjoyed being beaten!* This was the last straw that broke the camel's back. They were finally able to divorce, but, she had to give up any claim over her children, inheritance, alimony and even the furniture and jewelry that belonged to her. She broke down after her divorce and received treatment from a psychiatrist during eight months to regain her self-esteem and self-confidence and overcome her fear of her husband. Only, then, could she keep him away and forbid him from seeing her.

*You didn't tell  
the doctor that  
I hit you  
because you  
enjoyed being  
beaten!*

she attacked her husband, scratched his face with her nails and left the house the following day. She had hesitated to stop him for six full years and strove to cope with that unhappy marriage for seventeen years. Her children were 16, 15 and 7. Being Maronite she was denied custody, since custody is not granted to a mother if the children are over two. She asked for a divorce, but her husband decided they should see a psychi-

These are a few of the hundreds of stories and cases battered women do not dare tell publicly. The problem is there and we have to do something about it. Let us not say: We have so many other problems! Violence against women generates violent behavior in children. And nobody more than we Lebanese have known and seen what violence can do. It has ruined our lives and ruined our country ... for how many generations to come?

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