

Time, A Gift of Love

May Majdalani

Much has been written about wife abuse, battering, and specifically about physical violence. It exists in Lebanon, but I cannot document it. I can document, however, the existence of psychological violence as I encounter it more and more in my practice with women being treated for depression or anxiety. Each eventually complains of the same thing: a consistent grinding down of their sense of identity by well-meaning partners.

It is a process that leaves them baffled, lost, doubting their self-worth, reaching a point where even minor decisions take major proportions of anguish and despair. Do these subtle or not so subtle attacks happen only to women? I do not think so. Other people or groups of people who are in a position of weakness suffer from the same problems for one reason or another.

I have chosen to talk about women for the problem seems of increasing magnitude in an age where more of them seek the freedom and autonomy they never sought before because they were told that it was not part of their roles. It is important to talk specifically about women since their productivity is affected when subjected to this kind of abuse.

Sometimes their behavior becomes disruptive to the couple and detrimental to the psychological development of their children. They may also miss opportunities in domains where their contributions would have made a significant difference.

The aim of this paper is to mobilize awareness about the psychological health of women. Should psychologically abused women recognize any of the behaviors that are described below they will be able to evaluate their real faults and those they are wrongly blamed for. They need to know that help is available.

Violence according to Webster is *A use of force so as to injure or damage; An unjust use of force or power as in deprivation of rights; Desecration - Profanation.* Physical violence

is all of these directed against the body of the other individual. Psychological violence is also all these, but directed against the feeling of identity, the soul and the self-worth of the other. One must also keep in mind that violence is perceived differently by different countries and from one cultural context to another. How does psychological violence manifest itself? What are its short-term effects? How can it be explained, or better, how do women subjected to it try to explain what is happening to them? What are some ways to manage it? These are some of the issues this article attempts to deal with along with examples taken from real life situations.

The forms of violence that are inflicted on the psychology of women are numerous.

Constant criticism, and verbal abuse are common. They embody comparisons that are demeaning to the victim, which usually refer to other members of her immediate family or close friends. *Why can't you keep as fit as your sister who has had five children and the body of a model.....Why does your rice always look so sticky and the food extremely unappetizing?....Why don't you shut up when you see me watching the news?.*

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Battered Women In Lebanon

It is important to note that these statements do not cause much harm if said "en passant" or as an occasional angry reaction. It is their repetition that causes damage, just like a drop of water falling on a rock may slip away but the constant drip will eventually cause a dent, crevice or valley on even the most solid rock.

Degrading or belittling the woman in front of her children, her family, relatives or friends; denigrating her achievements, attacking her properties and her family are additional forms of psychological violence.

Don't listen to your mother kids, she's hysterical How can you pretend to be a teacher when you are not even patient with your own children They must be keeping you out of pity in that school where you teach. Your whole family is a bunch of villagers who don't even know how to socialize properly, no wonder you can't entertain decently in our house.

Sexual criticism, abuse, isolation, are also inflicted in statements like *how can I keep looking at you when you have gained so much weight. Why don't you go look at yourself in the mirror.*

Having intercourse just to satisfy his needs, without expressing previous signs of affection is often encountered in psychological abuse of women. If she refuses he threatens to go elsewhere.

Totally ignoring his wife is also common. In this case he has no sex, no communication, not even eye-contact with her. It al-

so includes episodes of silence so dense it could be cut with a knife.

Control over her freedom and feelings including how she spends money, who her friends are, what her activities should be, takes place. Control over her thoughts and feelings are expressed in a variety of ways:

- Getting angry and screaming if she is not at home when he comes unexpectedly.

- Forbidding her to see some friends or family members because he does not like them, or threatening not to accompany her if she chooses outings including them.

- Putting down some of her ideas, readings, interests, activities and most of all preventing the woman from complaining about his constant ill treatment of her, calling her ungrateful because she does not appreciate the fortune of having him, trying to turn her into the perfect being he would like her to be.

Between threats, and terrifying screams, the woman gradually starts wondering what is going on, who or what is to blame and doubt sets in.

The first stage involves rationalization of his behavior. Hence, the woman justifies his misbehaviors with statements like *I can understand. No one likes to be argued with. After all he has all these responsibilities at work to deal with..... Men are brought up by their mothers to have their own way.*

In the second stage feminine values like patience and understanding are tried. Slowly the woman sacrifices her own

pleasures and interests to please her partner or in order to avoid and escape the fights and screams. Those screams that leave one terrified, wanting to hide, fearing for one's life, screams that often frighten the children who are the most important people to shield in this event.

Soon, the wife finds herself walking on eggs, not knowing what to do in order to please her partner and finding herself unable to do anything whatever she tries. In fact, as many women have confided, it is the unexpectedness of the quarrels and the complete shift from charm to fury for no apparent reason that becomes exacting on the nerves. It happens during happy times that appear to be undisruptable. At this point, many women start to ask questions and rebel only to find that even their own understanding of the situation, perceptions, and memories are put in doubt. Events are reshaped and rewritten for them, mostly by their abuser, family members or values and norms that dictate submission. Now, they start to doubt the accuracy of their own perceptions, their general adequacy and become more submissive. In fear, they begin to lie about minor things, justifying behaviors that otherwise should have been considered a part of their inherent rights.

Consequently, the woman's self-esteem starts disintegrating and a process often called "identification with the aggressor" emerges. Women perceive themselves and other women the way their partner does, i.e. as in-

capable of rational, purposeful, and productive thinking and/or decision-making and planning.

Self-doubt increases as their tyrant acts charming, entertaining, agreeable, generous, humorous with strangers and acquaintances who are distant from the family. The contradiction between the two images arouses feelings of confusion *Am I right in my negative assessment or is it a product of my imagination?..... Perhaps it is I who demands too much and I who is the selfish one as HE says.* HE becomes the point of reference for her own self-perception. Another factor that reinforces doubt is society and the family's attribution of blame on the woman for her lack of method, patience, femininity. Other times the woman rebels. She sees clearly and attempts to correct her perception of events. She searches for possible reasons that trigger actions like the ones described above. For more illustration here is an extract of a conversation between two women who are successful in their careers and who have had their abilities repeatedly put down by their spouses: *Are they threatened by our success even if it is on a small scale? Do they feel that they get smaller if we get bigger? Are they afraid they might lose total control over us if we assert and find ourselves?*

Un-answered questions often lead to unhealthy results. They begin to disrespect their partner and exercise manipulation. Thus, the relationship deteriorates as a result of this disrespect and yet the

continuity of the marriage persists for social, familial and other reasons.

This psychological war has a detrimental effect on the fate of the children watching. They are torn in deciding which parent is right and who they should side with. They eventually acquire verbal aggression as one problem-solving mechanism and define their gender roles accordingly rather than learn new definitions.

If women can be professional and perform jobs that equal men's, why can't men and women have equal rights, equal pay, and share home duties? Men feel off-balance and struggle arbitrarily to defend their turf when they feel that their roles are challenged. Consequently, women who maintain the values of

normality and equality that they were taught by their mothers or in their parental homes begin to doubt the validity of their demands.

It seems to me that in the absence of a uniform redefinition of roles and responsibilities in society, each person, each couple, each family has to define its own roles and find its own balance. It can be achieved through communication, respect, tolerance, understanding and consideration for each other's needs. It requires a sensitivity that can only be acquired by observing, asking, answering and explaining. All this takes time, a rare commodity in our age. Perhaps, this is one reason to consider time one of the important gifts of love!

— May Majdalani



Painting by Doris Mukabaa. 1986.

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