

Perceptions of Rape: Insights from Women in Beirut

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Introduction

A review of Lebanese newspaper reports over a one year period (1993-1994) illustrates that rape was the most frequently reported crime against women, compared to kidnapping, battering, mugging, incest and murder (Abul-Husn, 1994). While rape has captured some media attention, this has been mostly restricted to coverage of cases involving children or where excessive force was employed. In fact, authors and activists have begun to argue for the need to conduct empirical investigations since not much is known about rape and other forms of violence against women that are increasingly being reported in Lebanese society (Abu-Habib, 1998; Abul-Husn, 1994; Faour, 1995; Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women, 1997; Maksoud, 1996; R.S., 1997; Tabbara & 'Assayran, 1994). This lack of research was confirmed in interviews I conducted both with Dr. May Majdalani, a psychologist and professor at Haigazian University (Beirut), and Dr. Bassima Al-Moulla, Chair of the Public Health Department at the Lebanese University (Beirut). Their own unique explorations of violence against women within the home have detected incidents of rape, but their studies have not been focused on this form of violence.

In addition to lack of research on the topic, there are currently no state policies that deal with rape or other forms of violence against women. However, unlike domestic violence, there is a law on rape covered under the chapter on "crimes against public morality" of the Lebanese Penal Code. Of particular relevance in this chapter are articles 503-506 and articles 511-512 (Qassim, 1999). Under the heading of *ightisab* (rape), article 503 which is the nucleus of the law states:

A person who forces by use of physical force or threats someone other than his spouse to have sex with him is punished by hard labour for a minimum of five years. The sentence shall not be less than seven years if the victim is less than 15 years old. (Qassim, 1999, p. 78)

As can be surmised from article 503, sentences vary according to the age of the victim and identity of

aggressor—articles 504-506 and 511-512 detail specific sentences. It is worth noting that the law does not acknowledge marital rape.

Clearly, an understanding of rape in the Beirut context is wanting. As Abul-Husn (1994, p.24) notes: "[t]here is an evident shortage in valid and reliable data needed to endorse and produce action" on the issue of violence against women including rape. This concern was the driving force behind a recent study I conducted in Beirut. Relying on 38 interviews, participant observation, and a review of newspaper articles from 1996-1999, this study sought to understand perceptions of rape held by women in the Beirut context. In this article, I present the methodology of the study, followed by a discussion of some of the main themes that emerged from the findings about rape perceptions. The article ends with suggested strategies for continued activism on the issue of rape.

Methodology

The study relied on the principles of grounded methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where the aim is not to verify theories but to generate theoretical concepts and build theories from empirical data. Grounded methodology was deemed to be appropriate for this study because of the lack of research on rape in Lebanon, thereby permitting the collection of salient concepts useful for building further quantitative or qualitative explorations.

Data for this study was derived from three main sources: interviews, participant observation, and a review of written documents. The first source of data is derived from interviews with 13 adult women who were not formally engaged in activism on the issue of violence against women. This was a highly diverse group of women between the ages of 24 and 42, from various ethnicities, classes, educational backgrounds, physical abilities and religious backgrounds. Table 1 presents selected characteristics of the participants quoted in this article.

In addition to women not formally involved in activism, I also interviewed a group of nine volunteers, eight women and one man, belonging to the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women (LCRVAV). In this

Table 1: Selected characteristics of the women interviewed

Pseudonym1	Age	ET	RE	MS	DI	ED	OC
Anna	27	Yugoslavian / Lebanese	Muslim Sunni	SI		B.A.	Accountant
Josephine	43	Armenian	Christian Catholic	SE		Bacc II	Secretary
Lamees	34	Palestinian	Muslim Sunni	SI		B.A.	Recruitment Agent
Layal	24	Lebanese	Druze	M		Primary School	Homemaker
Magida	40	Lebanese	Christian Maronite	SE		Unknown	ESL Teacher
Salma	early 30's	Lebanese	Christian Roman Orthodox	SI		B.S.W	Social Worker
Samia	30	Lebanese	Muslim Shiite	SI	Motor	Bacc I	Unemployed
Zeina	late 20's	Lebanese	Christian	E		College Diploma	Public Relations Officer

ET = Ethnicity

RE = Self-reported religion

MS = Marital status: M = married, SI = single, E = engaged, SE = Separated

DI = Disability, if declared by participant

ED = Last educational level completed

OC = Self-reported occupation

article, I rely on quotes from Fitnat, a college professor, and Nila, a lawyer, who have been volunteers with LCRVAW since its inception.

The final set of interviews was conducted with 16 community professionals who had a direct or indirect relationship to the issue of violence against women, some of them actually being activists on related issues. This group included: a priest, a *sheikh*, social workers, a school principal, a psychologist, a psychoanalyst, a university professor, a *mukhtar*, an Internal Security Forces officer, a lawyer, as well as several coordinators of grassroots community organizations.

Another important part of data collection consisted of observations I recorded throughout my stay in Beirut within the following settings: social places or gatherings; community organizations; and public settings. Being of Beirut origin, my time in Lebanon was spent within pre-established extended family, neighborhood or friendship networks where I was able to conduct much participant observation. Moreover, I became heavily involved in the work of various community organizations dealing with issues closely touching the lives of women—e.g. prostitution, disability, poverty, etc. These settings provided me with informal contact with various community activists who were quite instrumental throughout the research process.

Other sources of data included a review of newspaper articles from three Lebanese newspapers (1996-1999) collected by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

(Lebanese American University) on violence against women. In addition, I also undertook a review of non-confidential documents from various community organizations.

Finding and Discussion: What Counts as Rape?

In what follows, I will illustrate that the boundary between what counts as rape and what counts as consensual sex is shaped by four central factors. Briefly stated, an event is more likely to be perceived as rape if it involves a child victim, if it occurs between strangers or within an arranged marriage, and/or if it involves the use of force. Throughout this examination, I will reveal that current perceptions conceal some instances of rape by placing the emphasis on others, and reinforcing the image of women as provokers of the rapes that they endure.

The Use of Physical Coercion

The only theme to emerge from the data that focus on the act itself is that of physical force. As the following excerpts illustrate, the use of force within a sexual relationship leads to an event being more readily defined as rape:

L: About a month ago, I don't know if you saw this on television, they raped a woman in Sidon. He is a mechanic, and she used to go back and forth to see him, in the end he raped her by force, meaning that he held her arms, meaning a man's force is stronger

S: You mean physical force?

L: Yes. He raped her and then he tied her up and set fire to her. This was in all the papers (Layal).

Sexual violence is mostly perpetrated by men because he [sic] possesses more force than a woman does. Sexual violence requires force. Force overcomes weakness (Sheikh).

Nothing happens against someone's will, unless of course by force, two or three [aggressors] (Samia).

[rape is] violent, for example, after the sexual relation, there are traces of bruises and scratches, if for example he's hit me here and bruised me there, that's violence (Nila, LCRVAW).

As the above excerpts illustrate, for an act to be perceived as rape, it has to constitute an extreme physical violation, evident in visible bodily damage such as bruises, scratches or blood. Apparent in the excerpts is the gendered belief that men are physically stronger than women and that rape requires physical force. This physical force is perceived to be necessary to overcome women's refusal to engage in sex.

A possible consequence of the association between rape and physical force is the over-shadowing of rapes that do not involve physical coercion. While some instances of rape do indeed involve physical force, an emphasis on such cases conceals rapes which occur through non-physical intimidation such as threats or through the woman believing it to be her marital duty to have sex. An exchange between Zeina and Salma illustrates this point:

Z: If he's married to her, it's okay, he has a right to rape her, in the true sense of the word, because he has the right. It's his right.

SW: Because he's her husband. What is the true sense of the word rape in your opinion?

Z: For me, rape is anything that the woman refuses but is obligated to do, even if she is obligated ...

S: She will get a beating

Z: Maybe she won't be physically obligated through a beating, maybe she may be obligated through threats or she's obligated because it's her husband and she has to put up with it.

While Salma refers to physical coercion ("a beating") as an enticement to engage in sex, Zeina refers to marital obligations as a possible source of coercion. Sex in marriage is an expected "obligation," even if it is unwanted by the woman. Put differently, this conjugal expectation is a form of non-physical coercion that conceals the existence of possible rape in marriage.

In addition to instances when a woman is coerced into engaging in unwanted sex because of marital obligation,

there are other instances when rape occurs through use of non-physical intimidation. My review of newspaper reports on violence against women in Beirut, yielded many pertinent stories that demonstrate the use of non-physical threats. In one article, a man sexually assaulted his wife's sister and her daughter who were living under his roof. He threatened his sister-in-law and her daughter that if they resisted or disclosed the deed, he would throw them out of his home ("Al-ashgal al-shaqa 6 sanawat limouttaham bil'ightsab", 1998). In another article, Haddad (1998) highlights the case of Umma, a live-in migrant domestic worker who was repeatedly raped by her employer until she became pregnant. When this happened, he threw her out his home. In this case, he used his authority as her employer to coerce her into having sex with him. Mirella Abdel Sater, a lawyer specializing in human rights and violence against domestic workers, confirmed during an interview that many rapes such as those endured by Umma are quite frequent yet remain hidden away.

A third newspaper story again reveals the use of non-physical threats. It concerned a woman whose husband was away on a trip. She was raped over a period of many months by a painter who was doing renovations in her home. The article states that he

had entered her home in the middle of the night through a window; "she did not want to cause a scandal so she surrendered to him" (Draqibl , 1994, p. 5). In this case, her fear of her neighbors finding out and her desire to keep her reputation intact prevented her from refusing the painter's advances.

Hence, by focusing on the use of physical force, the subtler forms of coercion—e.g. pressure put on women to have sex within marriage—are potentially kept out of view, and are therefore not challenged. Put differently, physical force is often perceived to be the only legitimate way by which women can be raped—or can be said to have been raped.

Stranger Rape

As alluded to in the previous section, an event is likely to be considered rape if it occurs between strangers. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

Rape is when someone she doesn't know and she has never seen accosts her and wants to, this happens against her will. It is done by force and he hurts her; horrible things happen, blood and such (Anna).

He rapes them without knowing, I mean, he doesn't know you and he just rapes whoever comes his way (Lamees). Imagine if a woman is wearing a short skirt and she was

Force is often perceived to be the only legitimate way by which women can be raped

crossing the street and some guy came and raped her because of the way she's dressed, he isn't seen to be guilty, she seduced him. Is it forbidden to wear a short skirt? What if she's dressed that way because she gets too hot? (Zeina).

Two points emerge from the above excerpts. First, stranger rape is sometimes associated with the element of force, but this is not always the case. Second, the woman is perceived to be at fault or to have somehow provoked the rape, i.e. through her inappropriate manner of dress. The theme of blame based on the woman's inappropriate dress is seen in other excerpts:

A grown man, if you show him a skirt this short [points to her upper thigh] will get sexually excited, why are you causing this trouble [rape] for yourself? (Anna).

Blame for [sexual] assault falls on two parties. First, society that has no censoring on fashion designers who create half-naked clothing for women (...) Second, the girl herself is to blame because she excites instincts with what she's wearing which causes assault. There are many people who can control themselves but some people can't. I shouldn't provoke others. That is my responsibility (Sheikh).

Lebanese law precludes from the definition of rape, sexual activity occurring between a husband and wife. In the absence of marriage within stranger rape scenarios, sexual activity is more likely to be perceived as rape. In such cases, sexual activity is sometimes linked to physical coercion, but more often attributed to provocation by the woman through her inappropriate manner of dress. Sexual activity is spoken of in terms of "rape" not "consensual sex". While the woman is to blame for provoking the attack by her attire, she is nonetheless still considered to have been a victim of rape.

Child Rape

In contrast to the blame and responsibility placed on the women's shoulders for provoking rapes, children are perceived to be blameless. While my research did not directly explore child rape, the following excerpts show how being a child victim of rape implied automatic blamelessness and perceptions that the event constituted rape:

There are no encouraging reasons if someone assaults a small girl. This man must be killed (...) This would be a lesson to others. Imprisonment is not enough (Sheikh).

This [rape] happens a lot, a lot. Sorry, but the father is raping his daughters (Josephine).

I think your research is quite important because your topic is so taboo here and needs to be talked about. I have seen so many cases, for example, this teenage boy

was raping his younger sister. We had to act quickly and find her a safe place (Internal Security Officer).

The above excerpts emanated from my requests to hear about stories of rape. Though I was exploring sexualized violence against women, interviewees provided stories of child rape. In these stories, children are assigned blamelessness. Blamelessness does not however imply that the sexual violation of children is readily acknowledged within Beirut society. Nonetheless, the gravity of child rape is recognized in Lebanese law; a person who is guilty of raping a child, under 14 years of age is sentenced more severely than someone who rapes an adult.

Hence in examining what counts as rape, the following can be summed up about situations involving children. Because children are innocent and above blame, they have no part in provoking an assault. This means that they were truly raped. In contrast, blame is placed on women who are seen to provoke assaults. In the case of children, I would argue that while they may be perceived as too young to be marriageable, they are nonetheless potentially marriageable and hence have much to lose by engaging in pre-marital sex—i.e. becoming non-virgins and hence possibly unmarriageable. Therefore, they are perceived to be victims of an act that has caused them much damage. An examination of the Lebanese Penal Code confirms this observation. As previously noted, sentences for rapes where the victim is virginal and under 14 are higher than other rapes because the victim is seen to have suffered a great loss.

Arranged Marriages

Marital rape was identified through my interviews and interactions. However, as will become clear in the following excerpts, marital rape is more likely to be applied as a label to sexual acts occurring in arranged marriages in which love is assumed to be missing.

Tonight I was invited to dinner at a neighbor's house. There was a group of us all in our thirties, and I was asked what my thesis was about. I told them and the immediate reaction was that this happened only with the older generation because so many of these marriages were arranged and hence not entered into by mutual choice for love (Journal entry: May 29, 1999).

Let me tell you about the cases [of sexualized violence] that I believe to be very frequent. (...) To abbreviate, I call them "armchair husbands." An armchair husband is the one who gets told that "so and so is really wonderful," he takes an appointment with her parents and he goes. They all line up, he's wearing his new pair of shiny shoes, etc. She, the poor thing, comes in, and plays hostess. They all ogle at her to see if she's good or not good, then she gets married. This is where violence starts I believe, why wait till she gets married. No, this is where it starts, because they were already forced to marry each other (Fitnat, LCRVAW volunteer).

Sexual violence isn't specific acts (...) If I don't want to have sex and someone is forcing me then that's sexualized violence. (...) As we know, an important aspect within marriage is sex. Many times, there are couples who are very compatible in terms of knowledge, education, culture, socio-economic class, but who are not compatible sexually (...) You get a lot of problems then. For example, she doesn't want to [have sex] and he does (Nila, LCRVAW volunteer).

I can't explain this to you, but I hear about this, sexual [violence]. They are married, of course not just a passing relation, but marriage. But there is no compatibility. (...) She's at fault because "you are supposed to be compatible in bed." You marry someone against your will, and you have to be compatible. For me, this is the ugliest form of violence, that she has to be a machine that just receives and she lives her whole life like this because she can't speak about it (Lamees).

Another one of my friends for example is a young 16 year old girl, Christian. (...) This friend of mine used to tell me that he [husband], sorry, used to sleep with her in a very savage way (...) and she would run away from him (...) And if she refused to sleep with him, he would beat her. (...) She got to a point where she couldn't handle it anymore. She told him "I don't love you.

I don't want you. My parents married me off against my will" (Josephine).

As evidenced by these excerpts, unwanted sex in marriage is acknowledged as a form of rape even though this is not the case in Lebanese law. References are made to the savagery and ugliness of these unwanted sexual relations, and to the expectation that women will be no more than "receiving machines" to their husbands' sexual advances. Also seen in these excerpts is the association of marital rape with sexual incompatibility between the partners. This incompatibility is often attributed to the nature of the marriage. More specifically, arranged marriages are seen to be hotbeds of sexual incompatibility that lead to rape. For some, it is possible that the very act of marrying someone in an arranged way is the beginning of violence.

In short, arranged marriages which are not seen to be entered into for love or by mutual choice are more likely to be perceived as fertile ground for marital rape. While arranged marriages may have their share of marital rape, rape may also occur in marriages emanating from love. By focusing on violence in arranged marriages, rapes that

occur in marriages that were entered into for love are concealed. In a sense, arranged marriages are scapegoated. Yet, as the stories of many women illustrate, violence of all forms can occur in marriages that were entered into for love. Magida's story provides a poignant example.

Magida described to me her eight year dating relationship with her husband before marrying him: "It wasn't set up. No. It was love, it was Romeo and Juliette." He literally used to stand underneath her balcony and serenade her. Immediately following their wedding, he began to be emotionally abusive. Magida gave an example of this type of abuse which occurred during her pregnancy. At that time, he constantly berated her for having morning sickness; he also refused to buy her the medicine.

Magida mentioned that he had been physically violent with her on two occasions but did not want to give details of those incidents. She described fear for her safety as one of the key consequences of living with his emotional and occasional physical abuse during their fourteen year marriage. This constant state of fear created tension in their sex life. "I hate sex because of him, because of what I went through with him. It [sex] was more than torture to me." She described the harsh consequences she suffered when she refused him sex:

You are supposed to be compatible in bed. You marry someone against your will, and you have to be compatible.

I was teaching that year and I had corrections to do. I had to give the grades the next day. I was up until 1:30, 2:00 a.m. I was correcting. (...) He comes in and he feels like it [sex]. (...) I said no, so we had a fight and he hit me (...) and kicked me out of the room. I started to sleep outside. I slept outside for a month and a half. And if I left the house, I had no key [he had taken it]. So, I had to wait for him on the stairs (...) until he would let me in.

While this story involves minimal physical violence and no forced penetration, Magida's account demonstrates an obligation to have sex in a marriage that was entered into after an eight year romantic courtship. Similarly, Josephine spoke to me about the physical, emotional, verbal and financial abuse that she endured at the hands of her husband when he left her for another woman. As with Magida, she described their long courtship and their nine years of marriage as "sweeter than honey." Indeed, their friends used to call them the "lovebirds."

Failing to listen to Magida's and Josephine's stories and to the stories of many others like them, hides an important reality. The idea of love and marriage as a necessary ingredient in determining consent and as a way of avoid-



ing rape or the possibility of it, is reinforced by commonly held beliefs that only arranged marriages could involve rape or violence.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I presented the findings from a recent research project on women's perceptions of rape in the Beirut context. I highlighted four themes from the data that spoke to the boundary between rape and consensual sex. I demonstrated that when a sexual incident involves strangers, child victims, the use of physical force, or occurs within the bounds of arranged marriage, it is more likely to be perceived as rape, not as consensual sex. Throughout this discussion, I argued that these perceptions of what distinguishes rape from consensual sex conceal the rapes that happen within intimate relationships, through the use of non-physical coercion, within marriages entered into for love or where the victim is a woman, not a child.

Knowledge of public perceptions is an important first step in confronting the issue of rape. It is such knowledge that lays the foundation for subsequent action. Therefore, in concluding this article, I would like to highlight some strategies for activism on the issue of rape, as suggested by participants in the study. In short, suggested actions include both a prevention and an intervention focus.

In terms of prevention, the central suggestion was for the development of awareness-raising campaigns. These campaigns would target three types of audiences: women, men, and community professionals, including clergy. The topics covered would be the following: general discussion of violence, making women aware of their rights, and information about current services that may be available. Various venues were suggested for these campaigns, including: television, newspapers and magazines, as well as specialized sessions integrated in school curricula.

It is important to bear in mind that increased prevention efforts in the form of awareness-raising tend to generate a demand for intervention services. Therefore, a second important strategy would be to focus on this aspect. More specifically, participants proposed the creation of a women's shelter that would provide services and safe refuge to women who have been raped or beaten. Also in terms of intervention, participants highlighted necessary changes to current laws that limit women's ability to respond to violence in intimate relationships. One poignant example is the preclusion of marital rape from Lebanese law.

In adopting an intervention or prevention focus, a common element would be to continue to foster and strengthen cooperation among local organizations to better respond to the multiple issues involved in rape. For example, collaboration could be enhanced between those work-

ing for the rights of migrant domestic workers, and others working specifically on violence against women. Indeed, the key to any successful resistance to rape lies in the strength and unity of the community's response. Only through such consolidated community efforts can women live safely in a society that would no longer blame them for the rapes that they might endure.

Endnotes

1. All names of participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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