

Domestic Violence against Women

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I. INTRODUCTION

A leading cause of death and injury worldwide is violence by intimate partners (Mills, 1996). A serious and extensive problem, it transcends all boundaries and occurs in all cultures. Still, there are societies, mainly in transition countries, where the issue has remained relatively invisible and is often unrecognized. Unlike street violence, which is generally considered a crime, family violence against women and children has been viewed as legitimate, acceptable and even desirable or it has been ignored because it occurs in the private sphere of the home. The same acts that would be punished if directed at a stranger, employer or acquaintance often go unchallenged when directed at women within the family. However, in the last decade, a growing number of organizations, agencies and institutions have come to understand that they have a key role to play in addressing violence. As a step toward increasing knowledge in this area, the present study seeks to gather qualitative information about current attitudes, perceptions and practices of domestic violence against women in Albanian society. There is no agreement on the definition of domestic violence. It varies considerably partly because acts of abuse take many forms and involve women and men as victims as well as perpetrators. However, official statistics reveal that women are more likely to be victims of spouse abuse and to sustain severe injuries than men (Population Report, 1999). The term "violence against women" refers to many types of harmful behaviour directed at women and girls because of their sex. In 1993 the United Nations offered the first official definition of such violence when the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. According to this definition, violence against women includes: any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (UN Report, 1993). In this report we refer to domestic violence

as violence perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members, and manifested through:

Economic abuse includes acts such as the denial of funds, refusal to contribute financially, denial of food and basic needs, and controlling access to health care, employment, etc.

(UNICEF, Innocent Digest, 2000). There is increasing consensus that abuse of women is best understood within a "gender" framework because it evolves in part from women's subordinate status in society. Women's unequal status is pervasive in patriarchal societies. Domestic violence is considered to be supported by the traditional and patriarchal mentality. The conjugal relationship in any patriarchal society is unequal.

DREAMING OF MARRIAGE

Many of the participants talk about their dreams of getting married and for having a happy family. Marriage was of paramount importance to interviewed women, the most important goal in their lives. Through marriage, they were supposed to gain the respect and social approval that are the elements of a successful and worthy life. But for many women, marriage was anything but a fulfilled ideal. The dreams were soon contradicted by the reality. The family home is traditionally idealized as a place of stability, affection and peacefulness. Instead, all too often, marriage appears to be an arena for the emotional and physical abuse of women. Many women reported that their relationships had started out well, but as time went by the men became more violent and controlling.

Marriage as an escape

Marriage is perceived by eight women as the only way to get away from suffering caused by poverty or an abusing father. As they escaped the abusive home environment as children, several of these women were catapulted directly into violent adult relationships. Marriage as a norm In a patriarchal society, to be a wife and a mother represent key aspects of a woman's identity. The status of being married is construed by women as normal and natural. For some women, there was

pressure to get married, pressure that began in young adulthood. Some women entering into an arranged marriage, often orchestrated by the family's male authority (fathers or brothers).

The perception of marriage as a life goal can be a frame of reference, although some women mention as a motivation the desire to escape the parental home poverty or violence. Marriage is constructed through women's discourse as a norm and desirable condition for women's social status.

FACING REALITY

Gender relationship and domestic life Many women talk bitterly about how their expectations and hopes regarding marriage were contradicted by the reality of everyday life. Cultural beliefs regarding obedience as well as family and community traditions and norms take precedence over individual rights.

Gender gap in family roles

A variable that has been linked to spousal abuse is traditional attitudes towards family roles. Research indicates that abuse in partnertype relationships is more likely to occur and continue where the couple, particularly the man, holds traditional attitudes towards family roles (e.g., husband provides family incomes, wife takes care of home and children). Typically, men are given relatively free reign in a patriarchal society as long as they provide financially for the family. Such conclusions are consistent with our findings, which show that every husband or partner considers the housework to be the exclusive responsibility of his wife. Women are expected to tend the house and mind the children and to show their husbands obedience and respect. If a man perceives that his wife has somehow failed in her role, stepped beyond her boundaries or challenged his rights, then he may react violently.

Decision making process

As recounted by the women, abusive husbands appeared to be dominant in family decision making. Women have to do their best to preserve their family. They are supposed to find fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers and be prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their marriage. The majority of women indicated that their husbands held a strong belief in the traditional culture that dictated women's submission to men. On the contrary, most of the women did not favour the traditional gender roles.

EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

Men's violence against women is generally characterized by privacy, which means that it tends to elude the gaze of an external observer. Women's accounts prove that abuse is a complex phenomenon because it includes various forms, ranging from humiliation to isolation, forced prostitution, coercive sex and battering. Intimate partner abuse is generally part of a pattern of abusive behaviour and control rather than an isolated act of physical aggression.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Most physical abuse occurs in the context of other forms of abuse, such as verbal, emotional or economic abuse and social isolation. All the women in the study experience a high level of both physical and psychological abuse.

This finding suggests that men who are physically abusive are also emotionally abusive. Women often say that the psychological abuse and degradation are even more difficult to bear than physical abuse.

VERBAL AND PHYSICAL THREATENING

Battered women commonly experience diverse forms of psychological abuse. Threats are common, aimed at terrorizing the woman to such a point that the male partner feels in total control. Overtime, emotional abuse and threats lead, some women to an attitude of passivity, low self-esteem and "learned helplessness" in relation with their partners. This results from the experience of uncontrollability or the lack of a clear relationship between response and outcome.

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

When describing physical violence, informants mention a series of incidents ranging from a slap to an assault with a deadly weapon. The findings show women had been shaken, slapped, punched, kicked, pushed against walls and furniture, lifted and thrown across the room or out of the house, pulled by the hair, strangled. They had their arms broken; they were burned by cigarettes. They had guns pointed at their heads, they were forced to have sex and they were threatened with knives and grenades. Physical violence frequently includes controlling behaviours such as monitoring the wife's movements.

INTIMATE TERRORISM

The majority of women were physically abused by their partners many times. In fact, the informants often described an atmosphere of terror. One third of women say that they had feared for

their life at some point in their relationship. Intimate terrorism is motivated by a strong wish to exert control over one's partner. The problem of domestic violence is complicated by the high rate of unemployment and the severe housing shortage in Albania.

Often, divorced women are forced to stay in abusive relationships because they have no other place to go. Intimate terrorism is likely to involve serious injury and also a high risk of homicide. Many women live in fear not only for their own lives, but also for the lives of their children and family. The domineering behaviour and physical abuse is not only a tool of control, but it puts women's lives at great risk.

Sexual violence

Some male partners attempted to restrict the respondents' activities in various ways, such as limiting contact with family and friends, accusing them of paying too much attention to other people or things, and prohibiting respondents from going to work. Social isolation as an aspect of domestic violence is complex. The abuser may impose isolation in an effort to control the woman. On the other hand, the abused woman might create the conditions for her own isolation because of her helplessness and hopelessness. Social isolation of the woman can be a risk factor for domestic violence, preceding the onset of abuse. It is also a strategy of abusive partners to increase their control, and it reduces women's ability to leave abusive relationships.

Economic abuse is another form of abuse in which women are the primary victims. Men have traditionally controlled and dominated the financial assets of the family, and have retained the power to make financial decisions within the family. The abuser's tactics of financially dominating his wife are diverse. Economic or financial abuse involves the control of the use and availability of money, preventing her participation in money-spending decisions and refusing to give her money for basic household necessities. Even in the cases where the woman's financial status outside the home is better than that of the man, the husband continues to control financial resources. Women's economic contributions to the family did not reduce or influence the dominant position of their husbands within the family. The experience of violence itself is the salient aspect of women's accounts of partner's abuse.

BEING AN ABUSED WOMAN

Recurrent physical violence coupled with emotional, sexual and economic abuse has multiple effects on women.

Among all variations in forms of abuse and situational contexts in which women are victimized, partners seem to use violence to deprive women of their physical, psychological and social integrity and wellbeing.

Not surprisingly, women experiencing physical, psychological or sexual assault, suffer from emotional distress.

The partners' degrading verbal remarks often erode the woman's self-esteem and sense of competence as a person, woman, worker, wife and mother. Many women consider the psychological consequences of abuse to be even more serious than its physical effects. Many abused women experience post-traumatic stress disorder, an acute anxiety disorder that can occur when people go through or witness a traumatic event in which they feel overwhelming helplessness or threat of death.

LIVING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES

Domestic violence directly or indirectly isolated some women from their support network. They gradually curtailed social activities, either on the partners' demands, out of embarrassment or in order not to make family and friends worry. Domestic violence has profound consequences on women's overall well-being. The experience of domestic abuse puts women at greater risk of physical and mental health problems including injuries, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders, low self-esteem, loss of confidence in life and suicidal tendencies. The influence of domestic violence can persist long after the abuse has stopped.

WORRYING ABOUT THE CHILDREN

Children are profoundly affected by living in an environment of violence, fear or intimidation, whether or not they actually experience physical abuse.

CHILDREN AS VICTIMS

The abusive husband and father victimizes children in different ways. Children become alternative targets of male control and dominance.

DIFFICULTIES IN PARENTING

Abused women reflect on how the partner's violence affects their parenting abilities. They are aware that domestic violence has negative outcomes on their mother role. Women express their wish to exert more self-control in their

relationship with the children, and not to transfer their stress to them.

COPING WITH VIOLENCE

Women use several strategies for coping with the abusive situation: understanding, enduring, avoiding, hoping, reframing, compromising and leaving. Social, cultural, familial and personal factors interact to constitute the specific coping process of each abused woman. Possible determinants of the selection of a strategy include: the woman's beliefs about marriage and family, the frequency of violence and her idea of that causes it, the presence of children, her economic security and her support network.

FEELING TRAPPED

It is well known that in a patriarchal society, women are socialized to accept responsibility to ensure a successful marriage. This way, women are entrapped in the patriarchal structures of family and go to great lengths to save their home and marriage. Many women in violent relationships suffer years of oppression because they are taught to live their lives according to traditional values.

The decision to leave the partner is usually not a sudden one. Leaving an abusive relationship is rather a process triggered by some specific situations: the violence becoming increasingly severe, more frequent, and more constant in the relationship; violence beginning to take a toll on children; coming to the conclusion that "he" is not going to change. For most women the perception that their lives or their children's lives were threatened was the main trigger to break the "helpless-hopeless" attitude and

leave the relationship. Women who decide to leave the abusive partner may also have to deal with some troubling behaviour on his part.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Silence around domestic violence is certainly an efficient way of reinforcing power relationships between man and woman. Silence is not only a sign of victimization, but a mark of oppression as well. Violence, oppression and silence are all linked in an attempt to maintain domination and control.

Empowering women

Through their narratives, women create a tool to free themselves from their partners' abuse. In this context, breaking the silence could be a dangerous act, and it is not surprising that it is fraught with anxiety and fear of stigmatization.

Women fear that the family will not be supportive of them if they go public, that they will feel ashamed and guilty because they brought this into the open, that their husbands will retaliate, and that their children will be taken away.

II. CONCLUSIONS

Traditional values induced in many women the perception of marriage as the most important goal in their lives.

Through marriage, women expect to reach a desirable social condition and a worthy life. Women see being married as a key element of a woman's identity. The patriarchal traditions of arranged marriages by a male authority are still mentioned by women. Marriage is also perceived as a means to escape a poor and/or abusive home environment. Transgression of traditional gender roles and expectations leads to physical and psychological abuse. Intimate partner abuse has generally appeared to be part of a pattern of abusive behaviour and control, rather than an isolated act of physical aggression. Women's accounts have proved that family abuse is a complex phenomenon because it includes various forms, such as verbal, emotional, physical, sexual or economic. Physical violence experienced by women ranges from a slap to an assault with a deadly weapon. expectations leads to physical and psychological abuse. Intimate partner abuse has generally appeared to be part of a pattern of abusive behaviour and control, rather than an isolated act of physical aggression. Women's accounts have proved that family abuse is a complex phenomenon because it includes various forms, such as verbal, emotional, physical, sexual or economic. Physical violence experienced by women ranges from a slap to an assault with a deadly weapon. Domestic violence has profound effects upon children, whether or not they actually experience physical abuse.

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