Chapter 3
Intimate Partner Violence in Iran

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3.1 Author Background

I was born in Iran and attended the Shahid Beheshti University in Iran. After earning my graduate degree in Iran, I worked as a couple therapist. After seeing the challenges couples faced in Iran more clearly in my work, I decided to go to the United States, earn my PhD in Couple and Family Therapy, and conduct research on IPV in Iran. My major professor was one of the editors of this book, Dr. Sandra Stith. During my PhD program, I conducted quantitative research looking at violence against both men and women in Iran (Nikparvar et al., 2018a; Nikparvar et al., 2018b). I also conducted qualitative research, where we interviewed women from Iran who left their abusive marriages (Nikparvar et al., 2017) and sought to understand the process Iranian women faced adjusting to divorce after leaving their violent marriage (Nikparvar et al., 2018c). Finally, for my dissertation, I interviewed therapists in the United States who worked primarily with Iranian IPV clients in the United States (Nikparvar, 2019). This chapter was heavily influenced by my own experience and my ongoing research on IPV in Iran.

3.2 Introduction

Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the oldest civilizations in the world dating back to 3200–2800 BC (Kamali, 2018). Iran is the 18th largest country in the world with a population of over 82 million in 2018. There are seven major ethnic groups: Persian,

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Azeri, Kurd, Lur, Baloch, Arab, and Turkmen. Most of the population in Iran are Shi'a Muslim (89%), 10% are Sunni Muslim, and the remaining 1% are Christian, Zoroastrian, Baha'i, and Jewish (Aghajanian, 2001). Iran is in the Middle East region, and it has a collectivistic and patriarchal culture like all Middle Eastern countries. In a collectivistic culture, family is viewed as a highly important social institution and the main part of every person's social identity (Amin, 2000). Individuals living in collectivistic cultures often seek to keep family issues inside the family and not talk about them publicly. In addition, the marital bond must be preserved at all costs (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Ghahari et al., 2006; Nikparvar, 2019).

One of the worldwide family issues is intimate partner violence (IPV). Although the prevalence of IPV in Iran is reported to be high, it has not received enough attention through the legal system, the government, nor in the scholarly field. In a study with 1600 women in six different areas of Iran, 64% had experienced emotional abuse, 28% physical abuse, and 18% sexual aggression in their marriage (Saffari et al., 2017). Another study with 2091 Iranian women indicated that 57% had suffered psychological aggression, 28% physical abuse, 27% sexual abuse, and 7% injury (Ahmadi et al., 2017). Regarding IPV against men, there are only two studies, which reported that men also experience different types of IPV in Iran (Faramarzi, 2005; Nikparvar et al., 2018), and due to the illegality of homosexuality, there is no information about violence in same-sex relationships in Iran.

3.3   Challenges and Obstacles

Iran has a patriarchal system, which suggests that women are subordinate to men, both structurally and ideologically. The patriarchal values and practices and the concept of "family honor" in Iranian culture strongly influence the way women deal with IPV (Nikparvar, 2019; Nikparvar et al., 2017; Rizo & Macy, 2011). Family loyalty in collectivistic cultures reflects the importance of family connection and interpersonal relationship between family members, and it leads to a strong sense of belonging between them. In collectivistic societies, individuals get their self-image and self-perception from their family, and they invest a lot emotionally and socially to improve and present a positive reputation of their family.

In my research (Nikparvar et al., 2017; Nikparvar, 2019), we found that women who are in a violent marriage are generally advised to forgive their husbands, and they are committed to keep their family reputation/family honor by maintaining their marriage and sacrificing for the sake of their family, their marriage, and their children. Additionally, "using law to stop violence and putting husbands in jail can lead to stigma and embarrassment, which can make these women and their family feel shame and that breaking up their family can be counter to their value system" (Nikparvar, 2019, p. 29). In my dissertation, I interviewed therapists who worked with Iranian IPV clients in the United States to see what their experience had been working with this population, and they said: "The notion of [Abero] family face or family honor is huge among Iranian people. It's not just a concept, it's an

impenetrable wall in their lives, so that if something is going to threaten their family name, or sense of Abero, there is no moving forward. Inter-generationally they are used to thinking about what people think about them, I need to stay in this relationship. What do people say if I leave?"

On one hand, culturally, women's rights are under the control and power of men, brothers, and husbands, and sometimes, an aggressive man is known as the one who cares about his spouse. Many Iranians think it is acceptable for men to get aggressive. On the other hand, they think women are responsible for men's violence, and women are often blamed for men's violence (Nikparvar, 2019, p. 29). Another therapist said: "Most of the time men and sometimes even women define IPV as: 'if she doesn't aggravate him and she doesn't do all kinds of controlling behavior, then he wouldn't be aggressive' and he didn't have any other way of convincing her to listen to him therefore, he uses force. That is how they describe it and it is a woman who does something and makes him angry."

Battered women who use the law to remove violent husbands from the home may be ostracized by their community and blamed for undermining family stability and unity (Ezazi, 2007; Nikparvar et al., 2017). This can be attributed to the prevailing belief that divorce is against children's best interests and the woman's personal reputation and the reputation of her family of origin is damaged by divorce. Many women fear living alone, and stigmas around divorced women take precedence over their own well-being and safety (Nikparvar, 2019). There are shared rumors and judgments around divorced women, and divorced women may not have a secure life in society. These fears and concerns regarding stigma attributed to divorce affected participants at the individual level and how they saw themselves as divorced women and reduced their likelihood of leaving violent marriages (Nikparvar et al., 2017, p.14): "Getting divorce is a shame and negative label, which impacts a divorced woman and her family greatly. A divorced woman is blamed as not being a good wife to keep her family together. It is a failure for women because they think there is always something wrong with a woman who left a marriage. People think she is a maladjusted woman and she should have worked harder on her marriage."

One issue that increased this stigma is that, in Iran, birth certificates are required to be updated when individuals marry and divorce. Therefore, when individuals are required to present legal documentation (e.g., when they apply for a job or to rent a house), they are required to show their birth certificates, which indicates that they are divorced which often leads to experiencing sexual harassment (Nikparvar et al., 2017, p. 23): "I thought as I started this marriage, I should stay in it because I liked my life. Every year on our anniversary, I just was thankful that we were continuing our marriage while some of our friends got divorced. I hated being a divorced woman. I hated to have the data about the divorce on my birth certificate because when you have that data on your birth certificate, men take advantage of you and they might think you are available to fill their sexual needs."

These women experience and hear prejudices about divorce and how the culture and the legal system treat divorced women. These messages made women afraid of leaving their violent marriages. They had heard from other divorced women that it is not easy to deal with the stigma, and they reported that they were afraid of the

stigma around divorce and around being a divorced woman. They grew up in families and in a society that offered negative messages about getting divorced and shared rumors and judgments around divorced women. Participants knew that, in many cases, divorced women may not have a secure life in the society (Nikparvar et al., 2017, p. 13): "My family told me that if you divorce, people talk behind your back. Your divorce will ruin our reputation, or our friends will judge us. I heard from my parents many times that we should not be in contact with someone who is divorced because being a divorced woman is a negative thing and it is bad to be a friend with a woman who has gotten a divorce."

Financial dependency is another factor that impacts how women respond to IPV. Battered women who are financially dependent on their husbands stay longer in their marriages, especially those who do not have skills or education degrees. They are worried that if they leave their marriage, they would be unable to manage their lives (Nikparvar, 2019, p. 24; Nikparvar et al., 2017, p. 12): "Economic resources have so much to do with what people do and don't do in the relationship. If you are economically dependent on your husband, it impacts on how you look at the domestic violence and even calling it domestic violence. I thought to myself that I am almost 30 years old, without a job and no income, and no idea what I wanted to do in this society. The idea of being alone was so scary for me, I preferred to stay."

One of the most important points about IPV in Iran is the lack of language and knowledge about it. It is very common that people do not use the word "IPV" or "domestic violence" in their language. They say that "it is just conflict," "this is just a disagreement," or "only physical violence counts as violence." Many IPV clients did not count financial and emotional abuse as violence, and behaviors such as cursing or name-calling are considered part of conflict and fighting. The lack of knowledge about IPV led women to ignore red flags (Nikparvar, 2019, p.34 & p. 23). Two therapists shared: "They identify physical abuse as it is visible and tangible, and they do not want to face legal consequences, but they do not identify financial, isolation, verbal and emotional abuse. No one talks about it until it's really bad."

When that language does not exist in Farsi, it makes it much more difficult for victims to be able to relay their experience or recognize that this is something more than an argument. Iranians often have difficulty recognizing IPV as a violation of human rights, so they may deny or ignore it. Our research supports the idea that only counting severe physical violence as IPV may come from growing up in a violent family and witnessing parent's violence or experiencing violence between their parents or by their brothers against them (Kim & Gray, 2008; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). It may also come from the way women view men as the dominant person in their relationships (Zand, 2008). Expecting men to be dominant leads some Iranian IPV victims to not recognize abusive behavior as being anything other than the cultural norm.

Beside the cultural factors that affect how women respond to IPV, the lack of laws addressing IPV is a big barrier if women decide to use the legal system to stop

violence or leave their marriage. In Iran, the laws remain very broad and ambiguous, and the punishment and consequences for the abuser are not clear. Two Iranian laws that can impact IPV are Code 1103, which states that "the couple is required to offer good companionship," and Code 1115 of the civil law that states that "if a woman in a shared home is at risk of losing her life, honor, and finances, she can leave the home and alimony is awarded to her" (Safaee & Emamei, 2012, p. 122). In 2015, a group of lawyers and women's rights advocates drafted a bill to prevent and protect Iranian women against violence, which included the criminalization of all types of violence against women, the emphasis on the need for shelters, and a focus on violence against women as a public issue and not a private family issue. So far, the bill has not been passed.

In addition, there are legal barriers regarding the custody of children. Based on the civil law in Iran, the full custody of children, until the age of 7, goes to the mother, and after that the custody of a boy until the age of 15 and a girl until the age 9 goes to the father if parents get a divorce. The only reason the father would not get custody during this time is if it is proven that the father is an addict and a gambler, is diagnosed with severe psychological disorders, or has an illegal job. If he forces his children to do illegal work (such as selling drugs or stealing) or is violent toward his children frequently and has caused them severe physical harm, it is also possible that a wife would get custody. If a woman wants to get full custody of her children after divorce, she must waive her financial rights. Therefore, many women prefer to stay in their marriages rather than getting a divorce and losing the custody of their children (Taherkhani et al., 2014; Nikparvar et al. 2017).

Another finding in my study about a serious barrier discussed by participants involved requirements by the legal system to get a divorce. When participants took the complaint to court to end violence, when they called the police to ask for help, or when they filed for divorce, they had difficulty proving that they had experienced violence (Nikparvar, et al., 2017, p.14): "It was disappointing to see that even the police did not take me seriously and just told me all couples fight and it is not something important that you want to end your marriage because of it. My experience with the judge in the court was the same, that as long as violence does not cause serious damage or injury they did not take it seriously."

According to Iranian law, only if a husband is violent repeatedly, and if life is hard and impossible for women, would divorce be legally justified (Safaee & Emamei, 2012). Otherwise, the justice system tries to encourage couples to get back together and continue their marriage.

3.4   Solutions

Making paradigm shifts and cultural changes in a society is a long-term process, and it takes time and effort. Since in Iran we do not have a language for IPV, it makes sense that it is hard for people to recognize it. Most people, regardless of education level, do not recognize psychological abuse, and they see it as the way

men communicate. Educating not only women but also men about what IPV is, the cycle of violence, different forms of IPV in couple's relationship, and how they can prevent it is the most important first step. Not knowing about the examples of IPV makes women justify it by taking responsibility and blaming themselves for aggravating their husband, or they even may normalize it if they had the same experience in their family of origin and no one ever reported it. The lack of knowledge about the cycle of violence and different forms of violence in couple's relationship can lead some women to stay in violent marriages with the hope that their husbands' behavior will change in the future. For some of them, micro-aggressions or psychological violence is acceptable. Given the ever-increasing number of people accessing the Internet and social media, and the widespread use of search engines, social activists and human rights advocates have a great opportunity to use this resource to educate people, serve IPV victims, educate people about safety plans, and even create cultural movements.

Men's lack of understanding of how they should use power appropriately in a healthy relationship is a big issue, which may lead them to use violence and aggression as a way to communicate with their spouse (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2010). Most men in Iran grew up in a context where effective communication skills and conflict resolution skills have never been considered as important skills to learn. Therefore, increasing relational skills, communication skills, and anger management skills is critical.

Educating families about peaceful parenting may be a way to help raise children who, when they become adults, they know how to communicate when they are in intimate relationship and not resort to violence. Another way the family system can help to stop IPV is using the kinship system intervention as a resource for couples when they experience violence. In kinship system interventions, older family members gather and speak with the couple about their relational problems and try to help them resolve conflicts and solve problems, which have led to violence. These interventions can be in the form of advice on how the couples should treat each other or, if couple's conflict comes in the form of financial stress, they can help them financially.

Gender discrimination and cultural myths lead to a cultural delay in accepting women's rights. The patriarchal culture in Iran has an influence on rejecting women's rights and creating unrealistic and unfair expectations of women encouraging them to keep their experiences of violence at home a family secret. As violence against women has a strong root in mistaken religious and cultural beliefs, religious leaders can help to educate society and change these beliefs.

Most Iranians also need education about legal rights. It would be helpful to offer trainings about lawful rights as a part of the Iranian education system to increase awareness for both genders about the importance of this subject. Women can ask for the right to divorce and custody of their children and add it to their marriage certificate before officially signing it, which would allow them to leave their marriage, when it comes to violence, without being concerned about financial rights and losing custody of their children. It is essential that changes be made in the justice system and the police system to meet the needs of victims. There is a lack of effective

laws punishing perpetrators or holding them accountable for the abuse. Laws need to be effective and up-to-date. IPV should be criminalized, and a strong connection between the law and the police is needed. The slow process of legislation and a lack of coordination between the law and police intervention do not allow police to enter a house where violence is happening, and even if the police come inside the house, they try to reconcile and often do not take the issue of violence seriously. Clear identification of the responsibility of different organization such as the police can provide the basis for more effective interventions and create more legal consequences for IPV.

Expansion of social services in public and private sectors to help women access these services is also needed. A national plan to protect vulnerable women and victims of violence, and to collect data regarding the incidence of IPV, is necessary. To facilitate the process of recording the information required by law, it would be important for health centers and clinics to document IPV and to provide this documentation to the police. Cooperation between health centers, social service agencies, the judicial system, and police is needed to enhance protection for victims.

At the institutional level, providing and extending the services by increased government funding and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and collaboration among experts are what we need in Iran. Although the social work system has a long history in Iran, it is not functioning at the optimal level, especially when it comes to IPV. The social service system does not have adequate knowledge and the appropriate services to intervene, so they need to educate their staff to be able to identify populations to target and give needed services.

Although there is currently little help for domestic violence victims in Iran, sometimes even when resources are available, there is no proper information about available services. For example, the judiciary and some legal counseling clinics have provided free phone counseling services to individuals, and the social welfare organization has provided 24-hour telephone numbers to individuals in case of danger and has allocated cars with the logo of 123 in different location of each city which gives people free emergency counseling. There are also shelters available in a few big cities, but unfortunately, not only are these services not advertised but also sometimes they are even hidden.

The issue of IPV is not taken seriously at the government level, and sufficient funding is not allocated for doing research and/or providing services for preventing or intervening in cases of IPV. Since research has not been conducted with a large sample in different parts of Iran, the information about the prevalence of IPV in Iran is not comprehensive. Further, because of the lack of research on the topic of IPV in Iran, the healthcare system does not educate their staff to screen and assess their patients for IPV and does not know how to respond and find resources for patients.

Addressing IPV in Iran requires the coordination and participation of many organizations and institutions. There are many shortcomings and challenges in this path. The first and most important step is to change the attitudes and beliefs of people at various levels, especially political leaders. This goal cannot be accomplished without taking small steps to inform and sensitize citizens, authorities, and politicians.

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