

Special topic

Violence against women in Arab and Islamic countries

S. Douki, F. Nacef, A. Belhadj, A. Bouasker, and R. Ghachem

Faculty of Medicine of Tunis, Tunis, Tunisia

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Summary

In Arab and Islamic countries, domestic violence is not yet considered a major concern despite its increasing frequency and serious consequences. Surveys in Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Tunisia show that at least one out of three women is beaten by her husband. The indifference to this type of violence stems from attitudes that domestic violence is a private matter and, usually, a justifiable response to misbehaviour on the part of the wife. Selective excerpts from the Koran are used to prove that men who beat their wives are following God's commandments. These religious justifications, plus the importance of preserving the honour of the family, lead abusers, victims, police and health care professionals to join in a conspiracy of silence rather than disclosing these offences. However, a fair reading of the Koran shows that wife abuse, like genital mutilation and "honour killings" are a result of culture rather than religion.

Keywords: Violence against women; women's mental health; cross-cultural issues; domestic violence; gender issues.

Introduction

The very wide variation in rates of violence against women in different countries suggests that potentially modifiable cultural factors play an important role in determining both actual rates of violence and attitudes towards its acceptability. Indeed, many cultures actually condone a certain amount of domestic and marital violence, which is, according to WHO, probably the most defining characteristic of violence against women (WHO, 2000). Thus, while this topic is largely addressed in Western countries and adequate policies formulated to deal with it, in Arab and Islamic societies, domestic violence is not yet considered a major concern despite its increasing frequency and its serious consequences.

For example, the Tunisian Minister of Women and Family Affairs, last year opened a conference on the subject, saying: "The study of violence inside the family is part of a preventive strategy, knowing that domestic violence doesn't represent at all a worrying problem in our society" (La Presse de Tunisie, 17 November 2002).

We are going to report some data about the incidence of the problem and its characteristics, and then address the issue of its under-recognition in Arab and Islamic culture and its relationship to the religious "right" to beat one's wife.

Epidemiology

Although very scarce, research on domestic violence in some Arab countries has provided considerable evidence to debunk the myth that wife-battering affects only a small percentage of women. In Egypt, the Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey of 1995 (El Zanaty et al., 1996), conducted among a national random sample of 14,779 women, indicated that one out of three Egyptian women ever married has been beaten at least once since marriage and one third of those were abused during pregnancy.

In Palestine, two national surveys were undertaken in the West Bank and Gaza Strip using systematic random samples of respectively 2,410 (1994) and 1,334 (1995) married Palestinian women (Haj Yahia, 2001). The results showed that up to 34% of women participating in the first survey and 37% of those participating in the second survey

reported having experienced one or more acts of physical violence at least once during the 12 months prior to the study (Haj Yahia, 2001). The same author, in another study using a sample of 832 Arab adolescents from Israel (Haj Yahia, 2001), revealed that about 76% of the adolescents reported having witnessed their fathers abusing their mothers.

In Tunisia, a survey carried out among 500 women consulting a primary care unit in 1997 showed that 33.8% of them reported having been beaten by their husbands or another family member, at least once (Belhaj et al., 1998). According to the Ministry of Justice, about 6,000 complaints for marital violence have been lodged every year since 1996.

In 1993, in the emergency unit of Ibn Rushd Hospital of Casablanca (Morocco), 1,506 cases of violence against women were registered, indicating a mean occurrence of 4 cases per day (Kadiri and Moussaoui, 2001). Most of these acts of aggression were committed by a family member, especially the husband. The same surveys indicate that all women are at risk regardless of age, education, level of income, area of residence, size of families, or stage of marriage (Haj Yahia, 2001).

Mental health consequences

The previous studies have also shown that women's experiences with physical abuse have devastating mental health consequences, especially depression, anxiety, somatization and suicide (Haj Yahia, 1999; Haj Yahia, 2000a). A recent study undertaken in Tunisia among 140 married women led to the conclusion that major depressive disorders and medical conditions were highly correlated with wife abuse (Cheour et al., 2001). Domestic violence constitutes a serious public health problem and is a major contributor to psychiatric symptomatology in women in both the developed and developing world. However, when one compares the literature on violence against women in both places, the difference seems to lie in the public condemnation of this violence (Saif El Dawla, 2001).

Societal indifference to wife-abuse

In Arab societies, while extra-familial violence is recognized and publicly condemned, domestic abuse is hidden and regarded by many, including the victims, the police, justice and health professionals, as private and, in some cases legitimate.

Wife-abuse as a private problem

The common tendency is to view wife-abuse as a private, personal and family problem rather than a social and criminal problem requiring the intervention of social welfare and social control agents (Haj Yahia, 1998a; Haj Yahia, 1998b; Haj Yahia, 2000b). In a study among a random sample of 625 participants (328 men and 297 women), Haj Yahia (1998b) examined attitudes toward various issues related to domestic violence. Eighty-percent of the men and women in his study indicated that wife-abuse "doesn't justify reporting the husband to the legal authorities".

This trend, which rejects the legal approach toward wife-abuse as a crime, is relevant to the socio-cultural context of Arab society, where emphasis is placed on family privacy, family reputation and family solidarity. This might reflect the fear that acknowledging wife-abuse as a problem that justifies intervention of welfare and legal services will break through the boundaries of the family, ruin the family's good reputation and, thereby, damage the cultural, social, economic, educational, political and religious status of all family members not to mention breaking up the family through separation, imprisonment, divorce, etc. Specifically, Arab families tend to emphasize mutual support, and individual members are expected to sacrifice their own needs, well-being and welfare for the benefit of the family as a unit. Families also make serious efforts to maintain their reputation (especially the reputation of female members), and, therefore, would rather keep their problems to themselves (even at the expense of the well-being of other family members). Moreover, Arab families emphasize the importance of family continuity and unity, even when they encounter a problem such as family violence, which endangers other family members and threatens their well-being.

Marital violence is legitimate

Research conducted reveals that, in various situations, wife-battering is widely justified. Only 41% of the respondents in Palestine "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that "there is no excuse for a man to beat his wife" (Haj Yahia, 1998a). In Tunisia, only 60% of women and 51% of men consider marital violence intolerable (Union Nationale des Femmes de Tunisie, 2001). In another study among a representative sample of 1,000 people, wife-abuse

was seen as “acceptable” or “sometimes acceptable” for 77.6% of the Tunisian women (UNFT, 2002). Moreover, 60% of the men and 50% of the women in Palestine still “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “a violent husband is not solely responsible for his behavior because it is caused by his wife and the conditions of his daily life” (Haj Yahia, 1998a). Furthermore, 60% of men and 50% of women “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “a violent husband is not solely responsible for his behavior”.

This acceptance of violence is correlated with three factors (UNFT, 2002):

1. a religious practice which considers wife-battering, like child-battering, a duty for the husband and father;
2. a close link between wife-abuse and the economic dependence of women: 73.8% of men who take their wife’s income tolerate and justify marital violence; and
3. traditional marriage: 72% of men who married in a traditional way tolerate and justify wife-abuse.

These findings are relevant to the patriarchal sociocultural context of Arab society, which advocates male dominance and subordination of women in public as well as in the private spheres of life as recommended by the religion (Haj Yahia, 1998b). The husband’s role is thus authoritarian, and he assumes responsibility for maintaining the family structure by whatever means he feels are justified, including violence. In this cultural context, wife-abuse is justified by:

1. the wife’s misbehaviour
2. the conditions of the husband’s daily life
3. the religious commandment

1. The wife’s misbehavior

Findings indicate that many men and women place sole responsibility on the wife for violence against her. Specifically, Haj Yahia (1998a; 1998b) found that 49% of the men and 43% of the women in his study “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “a battered woman is solely responsible for being beaten because she obviously did something that irritated her husband”. Twenty-nine percent of the men and 25% of the women “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “a battered woman is solely responsible for being beaten because she obviously keeps talking nonsense to her husband”; and 28% of the men and 22% of

the women “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “sometimes wives intentionally provoke their husbands to make them angry and beat them” (Haj Yahia, 1998b).

Twenty-seven percent to 57% of the Palestinian men “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that battered women are to blame for violence against them under certain circumstances. This mainly occurs when the wife is viewed as failing to live up to traditional role expectations or as behaving inappropriately. It was found, for example, that 62% of Arab men living in Israel and 71% of the Palestinian men as well as 67% of the Palestinian women residing in Palestine agree that husbands have the right to beat their wives “if they believe she is sexually unfaithful”. Even women often view a certain amount of physical abuse as justified under specific conditions. Eighty percent of women surveyed in rural Egypt said that beatings were common and often justified, particularly, if the woman refused to have sex with her partner (El Zanaty et al., 1996). Twenty-percent of the respondents indicated that a husband can beat his wife if she interferes with his social life (e.g., when he visits his family or comes home late); 48% justified wife beating if she chatters, talks too much, nags, or complains too much. Moreover, Haj Yahia’s findings indicate that Arab men and women are prone to justify violence towards wives if the wife does not obey her husband, undermines his authority, insults him in front of his friends, does not respect his parents and siblings, and does not live up to his expectations for functioning as a wife and a mother.

These findings are consistent with the other two studies conducted among Palestinian men and women, which revealed that 26% to 71% of Palestinian men (Haj Yahia, 1998b) and 10% to 69% of Palestinian women (Haj Yahia, 1998a) “strongly agree” or “agree” that husband-to-wife violence is justified in certain cases. For example, 55% of the men and 42% of the women indicated that the husband is justified in beating his wife if she challenges his masculinity; 47% of the men and 35% of the women indicated that it was justifiable if she constantly disobeys him and does not listen to him; and 71% of the Palestinian men and 69% of the Palestinian women indicated that they justify husband-to-wife beating if she is sexually unfaithful to him.

2. The husband's problems

The general tendency in Arab societies is to understand violent husbands and try to avoid holding them fully responsible for their violent behavior. Studies revealed that 9% to 13% of the respondents "strongly agree" or "agree" that the husband is justified in beating his wife, based on personal and life conditions related to the husband himself. For example, 13% of the respondents expressed support for the husband, on the grounds that he may be frustrated by problems such as work pressure and debt, and feel that no one understands or supports him.

3. God's commandment

Those wishing to justify violence against women can also turn to the Koran. Indeed, a famous Koranic verse (IV, 34) seems to allow a husband to beat his wife in some circumstances: "Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; as for the women who show rebellion, you shall first enlighten them, then desert them in beds, and you may beat them as a last resort. Once they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great."

The conspiracy of silence

The perception that wife-abuse in general and family violence in particular is a personal and family issue rather than a criminal problem requiring intervention by welfare services, has a strong impact on the decision of the wife and her family to keep the problem to themselves. All the protagonists in this drama are partners in a real conspiracy of silence.

1. The victims

Women are reluctant to report marital violence because of the risk of facing social isolation and ostracism. Arab battered women who use the law to remove violent husbands from the home or issue a protection order against them may be ostracised by their community and blamed for undermining family stability and unity. This can be attributed to the prevailing belief that the children's best interests, the woman's personal reputation and the reputation of

her family of origin take precedence over her own well-being and safety. In the majority of cases, even if violence is disclosed, family, police and even health professional are not of great help, given the importance attached to maintaining the marital link.

2. The family

For the family, the marital bond must be preserved at all costs. The family is viewed as a highly important social institution whose unity and cohesiveness should be maintained. Battered women are generally advised to forgive their husbands in order to protect their children and their home.

3. The aggressors

Violent husbands claim the right to discipline their wives as they see fit because their religious and legal duties reinforce beliefs that their wives must obey the husband, who is the maintainer of the household.

4. The authorities

Although laws against violence exist, they are rarely used to charge violent partners. Similarly, programs of prevention and protection are mainly provided by women's and human rights associations, but face persistent cultural barriers.

According to the Islamic law, a refractory wife has no legal right to object to her husband's exercising his disciplinary authority. Islamic law, in common with most other systems of law, recognizes the husband's right to discipline his wife for disobedience.

In Tunisia, the law has been recently amended to increase the sentence against the offender when he is a spouse but, at the same time, it offers the possibility for the victim to withdraw her complaint. Thus, about 6,000 complaints for marital violence are lodged every year but most of them are withdrawn and only 0.3% are referred to a court. Law-enforcement authorities routinely dismiss domestic violence as "private" disputes. Female victims attempting to register complaints of abuse are often turned away and advised, or pressured, by the police to reconcile with their abusive spouses.

5. The health professionals

Physicians also collude in this conspiracy. The lack of abuse detection by health professionals is alarming.

Women's reports of abuse are often denied, minimized, interpreted as delusional, or ignored. Women in relationships with violent men are often labeled as 'masochistic' and 'self-defeating'. Frequently, knowledge of wife-assault, incest, rape, and other forms of assault are not addressed in individual treatment, marital and family interventions, or discharge plans. There is also a systematic under-rating of the health consequences and the traumatic injuries.

The religious "alibi"

Let's now address this religious prescription by examining the historical context. Indeed, if we want to provide a fair evaluation of what Islam contributed (or failed to contribute) toward the restoration of a woman's dignity and rights, it is necessary to review how women were treated for the past twelve centuries after the introduction of Islam up to as late as the nineteenth century.

1. Historical perspectives

Many civilizations and religions have negative or demeaning attitudes towards women. In Hindu scriptures, a good wife is as follows: "a woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abode with her husband." Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male: their father, their brother, or some other of their male kin. A Roman wife was described by an historian as: "a babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or performing anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband". As late as the nineteenth century, in his essay "The Subjection of Women", John Stuart Mill wrote: "We are continually told that civilization and Christianity have restored to the woman her just rights. Meanwhile the wife is the actual bondservant of her husband; no less so, as far as the legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called".

In the Islamic religion, the divine allowance to beat one's wife is real progress compared to the status of women before Islam when girls were buried alive and husbands had the right of life and death. Islam prohibited female infanticide and also mocked the fathers who viewed the birth of girls with contempt: "when news is brought to one of them, of

the birth of a female, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on contempt or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil choice they decide on" (Koran, 16:58-59). And the Prophet added: "Whosoever has a daughter and does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise".

2. The forgotten Islamic teachings

As with all holy texts, in the Koran it is possible to find verses to support one's own beliefs. There has been much controversy among scholars who give different interpretations, especially when discussing the many teachings describing males and females as pairs. According to Badawi (1971), even texts which imply that violence is permissible do not mean that it is desirable. Such a measure should always be seen as an extreme, preferable to divorce, a 'lesser of two evils' which may be used to save a marriage threatened by a wife's misconduct. It must be seen as a rare exception to the repeated exhortation of mutual respect, kindness and good treatment advocated in all the Islamic teachings.

a) In the Koran

It is important to remember that the Holy Book severely condemned the old customs of ill-treating women (XVI, 58/59, and LXXXI 8/9), and protected their rights in one of its longest chapters, IV, which is given the title "Women". Among the most impressive verses in the Koran about spouses are the following:

"... He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect."
(Koran 30:21).

The Koran clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, besides perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its bases are love and mercy. "... But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good." (Koran 4:19).

When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible for any reason, men are still taught

to seek a gracious end for it. "When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits)". (Koran 2:231).

b) The "Hadith" (sayings of the Prophet)

In several sayings, Prophet Muhammad discouraged wife-abuse: "The most perfect believers are the best in conduct. And the best of you are those who are best to their wives". "It is the generous (in character) who is good to women, and it is the wicked who insults them".

c) The "Sunna" (tradition according to The Prophet's conduct)

True followers of the sunna follow the Prophet's example. Prophet Muhammad never resorted to wife-beating, regardless of the circumstances.

d) The "charia" (Islamic Law)

As defined by the hadith it is not permissible to strike anybody's face, cause any bodily harm or even be harsh. What the hadith qualified as "dharban ghayra mubarrih" or as "light striking" was interpreted by early jurists as a use of a "miswak" (a small natural toothbrush). They further qualified permissible "striking" as that which leaves no mark on the body. This makes it clear that this law does not permit anything we would label "physical abuse", "family violence" or "wife-battering" in the 21st century.

All of these sources illustrate that any excess, cruelty, family violence or abuse committed by any Muslim cannot honestly be traced to any revelatory text (Koran or hadith). Rather, such excesses and violations are the responsibility of the individual offender.

3. The "non-Islamic" violence

Wife-beating was only intended to discipline the rebellious and potentially unfaithful spouse as physical sanctions were, until recently, largely accepted as a way of educating children. But currently this idea that it is a husband's obligation to beat his wife has transcended these old limits such that beating her can be considered as a transgression of the religious commandments. In this respect, of particular concern

are the so-called honour killings, which in too many Islamic countries are increasing and benefit from great impunity. They are rarely prosecuted on the grounds that these are a form of private violence that has strictly to do with personal family and honour matters. Similarly, contrary to common and false beliefs, female genital mutilation, still performed in many Arab and Islamic countries, is not a religious requirement. It largely preceded the advent of Islam and has never been practiced in the North African societies or in Iran.

Conclusion: ending violence against women in the name of God

Domestic violence and its acceptance cannot be attributed solely to religion but also to patriarchal ideologies. Often religion is used to rationalize and give authority to more human motives. "It is also true, however, that in many so-called "Islamic" countries, women are not treated according to their God-given rights. But this is not the fault of Islamic ideology but rather the misapplication or sometimes the outright denial of the ideology in these societies. Much of the practices and laws in "Islamic" countries have deviated from or are totally unrelated to the origins of Islam. Instead, many of these practices are based on cultural or traditional customs which have been injected into these societies" wrote a famous Islamic scholar, Badawi (1971).

It is impossible for anyone who is truly informed to justify any mistreatment of woman by any decree of rule embodied in Islamic Law, nor could anyone dare to cancel, reduce, or distort the clear-cut legal rights of women given in Islamic Law. All these cultural factors may be changed by information, sensitization and education. Mental health providers can play a critical role in preventing violence against women in addition to treating its consequences by beginning to address the cultural as well as psychological conditions that create and support this kind of violence in our societies.

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Correspondence: Saida Douki, Razi Hospital, 2010 La Manouba, Tunisia; e-mail: saida.douki@gnet.tn