



Short Communication

# Violence against women in the Palestinian society.

**Dr. Najah M. Al-Khatib**

Al-Quds University, school of Public Health.

Author E-mail: [naj\\_kh@live.com](mailto:naj_kh@live.com)

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## ABSTRACT

There are various forms of domestic violence, which are kinds of violence that usually occur in families. The victims are children, elderly, or women and girls and the perpetrators are mainly men. This article tackled one form of violence that is violence against women and girls in the Palestinian society. There are no reliable data about the prevalence of domestic violence in the Palestinian society; all the available studies are done on selected samples thus we cannot generalize their findings. Today, violence against women is considered as a crime however; in the Palestinian society, unless the woman proves the injury through medical and police reports, nothing could be done about it. Since many people still consider women's disciplining is the responsibility of men, a lot have to be done to combat this conservative and backward mode of thinking on the legal, social, and medical levels.

**Keywords:** Violence, women, Palestine.

## INTRODUCTION

One of my dear friends has told me one day during her struggle with her marriage, *"I do not know my husband anymore. Is he the same man I married ten years ago? Is he that man I loved passionately and fought with everybody of my family members to marry him? I wonder where my mind was and if I was sane when I married him. After all these years, I see that we are totally strangers". These days, the words of my friend do not leave my mind; I am living a similar situation where I cannot actually comprehend what is happening in my life. The love disappeared totally and in its place there is bitterness, anger, and sadness. I now feel stupid because I wasted my life with a stranger; a husband with schizophrenic mind who holds two personalities. One of them is a radical, secular and sophisticated man and the other is selectively Islamist when it comes to women's rights. After years of emotional divorce, estrangement, alienation, emotional deprivation, and continuous disrespect and humiliation, my marriage is over for ever. Nevertheless, the pain did not go; it remained with all the controversy of that marriage. I after all, am still recovering from the shock."*

## CASE PRESENTATION

Today's Arab woman is a product of the historical changes that happened to women in previous centuries (Al-Merneisi, 1997; Sharabi, 1987; Al-Saadawi, 1990; Abbas, 1987). The social and political changes that happened in the Arab world influenced the life of women until today. Islam also left its key marks on the social and economic life of Arab countries. Therefore, the prevailing social and cultural values and norms in Arab countries are an outcome of the exchanges of all civilizations that passed through the Arab World (Abbas, 1987). The social values and norms of Arabs were more powerful than religion and they influence various spheres of life of Arabic and Islamic societies until today (Khater, 2001).

For hundreds of years, women by the name of Islam, were deprived of education and were isolated from social participation (Khater, 2001). When the woman has to leave home, it should be for significant reason and she should only do that while veiled. The veil became a stipulation and a symbol for true belief in God and Prophet Mohammad. The woman is imprisoned both in home and outside it in the veil.

Despite measures of comparative freedom among women of certain socio-economic strata in Palestinian society, there is a widespread exploitation of women as well as discrimination in all aspects of life (Najjar & Warnock, 1992;

Manasra, 1994; Wad Atta, 1986; Jad, 1991). The social and psychological strains on Palestinian women are the same throughout the different living localities. For instance, women are not allowed to live alone in an independent house whether employed or not, young or mature, living in a city or village. They are unwilling to choose to work, pursue education, or traveling outside the country unless their families approve it. Palestinian women are restricted in their social mobility not only to outside the country but also inside their towns and villages. The society closely observes women and keeps them under surveillance all the time.

Men in Palestinian society perceive women as incapable of taking leading roles, and they treat them according to this perception. In their study about men's perception about women's empowerment and freedom, the Palestinian Family Protection and Planning Association (1997) reported that 55.4% of the men think that women cannot make decisions about their education, work, marriage, and social mobility. On the ground, men do not allow women to make decisions. According to the reports of Palestinian Working Women Society (2002), only 2.1% of women said that they are decision-makers in their families. The official Palestinian data support other researchers in their viewpoints about the social opinion about women's poor capabilities in self-management. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (1999) reported that only 28% of males and 35% of females over age 18 believe that women are competent to manage their properties and life. In the study of Yehia (1997) on 3744 Palestinian women, 41% reported that they are not allowed to manage their properties or money. This means that the majority of Palestinians still do not trust women to direct self. The irony is not in how men perceive women, but rather in how women perceive themselves. Many women view themselves as incompetent and unequipped to manage their lives, which indicate negative self-perception and poor self-esteem.

Violence against women has historical, political, economic and sociocultural roots. Violence against women is a strong indicator of discrimination against women and patriarchy. In patriarchal societies, violence is practiced against women as a mean to enforce authority and the control of men on the life and destiny of women. Men abuse women because they own every thing in the family and they believe that they also own the women. In addition, men believe that they are free to manage their properties as they wish (Al-Saadwi, 1990). This situation is typical in traditional, conservative, patriarchal societies whereby men and some women agree to give men full authority in the home and society. In short, violence against women represents the mentality of ownership and control that men have over women in traditional and patriarchal societies. The Palestinian society is not different. Power over women and violence against women through physical strength are examples of women's subordination (Mayers, 1986). Moreover, people in traditional societies accept the battering of women as a rectification measure for those women who act improperly; irritate or disrespect their men; act irrationally or do not do their house responsibilities in the perspective of the man (Johnson, 1997; Hasan, 1981).

Fundamentalist Muslims defend women's beating by saying that God allows it in the Quraan therefore, it is the man's absolute right to discipline, and correct the behavior of his wife (Al-Rahabi, 2005). Other Islamic scholars negate this viewpoint and say that even though Quraan talked about women's beating as a disciplinary technique; it should not be used as the first approach. Rather, other more humane methods should be used with the woman who disobeys her husband first, before using beating (Abdel Sattar, 2001).

According to UNICEF (2000), there are several factors that perpetuate domestic violence. These factors could be economic, cultural, legal, or political. Men, physically and emotionally, abuse women using different claims. They abuse women to discipline them and shape their behavior; women are not knowledgeable or sophisticated enough to fit the man; they are irrational in their actions; disrespect men and aggravate them; are imperfect as mothers and house wives in the man's perspective; are dependent on men for living and decisions; are raised as subordinate and passive. In addition, the absence of legislations and laws that define abusive behaviors and punish perpetrators encourage the perpetrators to continue their abusive actions without punishment. Moreover, it is still evident that domestic violence against women is not taken seriously by politicians and civil society leaders. It is rarely observed that a parliament member addresses this problem in his or her electoral agenda. Therefore, only women's organizations and some mental health agencies deal with victims of domestic violence or educate the public about this problem.

In the Palestinian society, violence against women takes various forms including domestic physical and sexual violence; killing for family honor, emotional abuse and neglect, restriction of movement and mobility, early and forced marriage, divorce and separation for irrational reasons, deprivation from inheritance and property, oppression and discrimination in treatment at work and home etc. Men, whether brothers, fathers, or husbands, have authority and they enforce this authority by using violence on women. In a study done by Yehia (1997) on 2410 married women, 52% of them reported that they were emotionally and physically abused by their husbands.

As Al-Sabei (2004) put it, women are the main victims of rape; discrimination based on gender; genital mutilation; they pay the highest price in wars and arm struggles. This is exactly a situation that Palestinian women encounter in a society where war-like living condition augment the socioeconomic problems and adds to their family problems. According to Al-

Rahbi (2005), women are victims of emotional abuse that is practiced by Islamic family laws, and it includes the following issues:

1. The woman is not considered as a competent, mature person, and she needs a guardian in marriage; the mother has no right to custody of her children even when she raises them by herself.
2. The man has absolute right for divorce. Women might not get divorced if their husbands abuse them or rape them. The divorced woman does not have right for custody of her children after adolescence years. If the woman wants to divorce her husband, she should return the dowry that the husband paid her. After divorce, the woman has no right for family properties and assets even if she was employed.
3. The husband has full right to prevent his wife from traveling.
4. One condition for marriage is that the man should be equivalent to the woman.
5. There are no legislations that protect the woman from abuse and harassment in the family.
6. The legal age of marriage is less than 18 years.
7. The woman receives half the man's share in heritage of the dead parents, even though many women today have full financial responsibility for themselves and their families.
8. The judge has the right to prevent a man for marrying for the second time if he is not financially competent.

## CONCLUSION

There are millions of women who saw the 90's as years of poverty and terror, where they have to struggle for their lives, fairness, and equity (Amnesty International, 1995). Now, we are in the 21st century, and the living conditions are not yet better for women. A lot have to be done by civil society and the local and international organizations of human rights, in order to induce the rights of women and introduce new legislations that could maintain their respectful living.

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