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**Violence against women**

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In the past few years the issue of violence against women has become a major concern in many countries of the world because of the increase in the number of cases reported. Very few countries, however – lease of all Arab countries – have taken serious and effective measures to bring an end to this phenomenon. Domestic violence takes place between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and different generations living within the same house. In this article, however, we will address the issue of violence between men and women since most cases involve men abusing, threatening, humiliating or sexually harassing women. Studies have revealed that a high percentage of women are exposed to such assaults, however we rarely hear about their cases because the victims are usually too afraid, depressed or ashamed to talk about the matter openly.

**The scale of the problem**

Domestic violence is a very sensitive issue and as a result it is difficult to obtain accurate or comprehensive data. It is worth pointing out, however; that Palestinian women are not only exposed to domestic violence but also to violence by Israeli soldiers. According to a study conducted in Nablus titled *Women's Rights and Development*, 54% of unmarried women have been exposed to physical abuse either by members of the family or by Israeli soldiers. In another study which was conducted in Gaza in 1988, 1000 adolescents were surveyed, 22% of whom indicated that they had seen their mothers beaten and insulted. A study involving 1153 women from the West Bank and East Jerusalem indicated that 35% of the respondents were exposed to violence by members of the family. A study conducted by the Center for Women's Issues in 2001 indicated that 46.2% of the female respondents were subjected to physical violence and abuse, 51.5% were subjected to verbal and emotional abuse, and 14% were subjected to sexual abuse. These statistics indicate that violence inside the family is occurring on a scale which poses a serious threat to families and to our society as a whole.

**Definition of violence**

It is difficult to find a consistent and comprehensive definition for what constitutes violence against women; however, a team of experts at the International Health Organization agreed in 1996 on a definition of violence against women as any violent act

based on gender resulting in physical, mental, psychological, or sexual harm or suffering; this includes threats and/or deprivation of freedom whether in the private or the public domain.

### **Causes of violence**

The reasons men give for committing such acts of violence center on their strong beliefs in violence is a way to demonstrate their power and manhood. Some men can, for example, quickly and easily end debates and arguments by resorting to violence. Others might find violence exhilarating, and might want to experience that feeling over and over again. Additionally, some men achieve a sense of triumph and dominance in violence, were they can impose their opinion or demands without the effort involved in debate. Some men also believe that they have the right to control a woman's life completely. This stems from their perception of women as being part of their property, having 'bought' them from their fathers at marriage.

### **Forms of violence**

Physical abuse has been defined as violence that leaves marks on the victim's body such as bruises, wounds or even physical disabilities. This is usually caused by beating, using a weapon or tool, slapping, or kicking. Psychological abuse involves speaking to a woman in a way that is inappropriate for a human being. Neglect and abandonment are also forms of psychological abuse. Sexual violence and rape include any form verbal or physical harassment, whether over the phone, in the street or involving touching any part of a woman's body without her approval. Depriving a woman of financial support or controlling a wife's income without her approval is considered economic violence.

### **Effects of violence**

Violence has many negative effects not only on women, but on children and on society in general. The impact on women can result in a lack of self-confidence and a sense of insecurity. On the physical level, woman can be exposed to serious harm that may lead to disease or/and disability. Without intervention, violence may lead to divorce, family fragmentation, sexual diseases and problems, psychological traumas, insomnia and drug use as a means of coping.

### **Why would a woman stay with a husband who abuses her?**

Threats by the husband, and fear of the consequences of leaving, are often the answer. A woman may feel that she is still safest with her husband. Additionally, economic pressure, religious and social beliefs exert pressure on women to stay in abusive relationships, and do the fear of being separated from their children, or separating their children from their father.

### **What should battered women do?**

Battered women should be aware of the types of services available to them, such as the shelters and centers near where they living. Some centers offer legal aid, job programs, mental health services, as well as literacy and other educational programs.

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Gaza

The coordinator of the Women's Unit at the Palestinian Human Rights Center, Mona Alshawa, reports that there has been an increase by 18% this year in the number of cases the center has taken to court. This increase she explains is the result of the greater awareness women gained about their rights under the law through educational workshops and sessions on legal issues that have been offered by the center on regular bases in marginalized areas in the south of Gaza. The main objective of the workshops was to inform women of their legal rights, and develop their understanding of the law as a powerful tool which can compete with traditional tribal power. The workshops also helped to develop the women's confidence in their rights and the law's role in protecting their rights.

Alshawa adds that the center is the only place where women can find free legal representation. The Women's Unit was formed in 1998 and has received an increasing number of referrals from other organizations.

Alshawa indicates that the role of the organization is to follow court cases and provide financial support to women who are unable to afford the cost of a lawsuit. The center also follows civil cases in order to execute adjudications regarding maintenance for the wife and/or children. She also indicates that the courts often adjudicate those who have failed to pay maintenance but because of the current instability in the country these are often not enforced.

The highest percentage of lawsuits that the organization represents on behalf of women relate to maintenance, followed by cases relating to the rights of women during marriage or after divorce. Alshawa reports that the institute also works on raising awareness among women of their rights, introducing them to the law and addressing misinterpretations of legal texts especially those related to marriage, the right of a woman to choose her partner in marriage and heredity and so on.

She says that the institute receives support and cooperation from many other organizations working on humanitarian and judicial issues. However, many inadequacies in the law still need to be addressed, until which some achievements will remain limited.

The unit has produced four legal manuals on marriage, divorce, heredity, and women in courts. These are distributed to women attending the center's workshops.

Alshawa notes that the unit is part of the social jurisprudent feminist movement that calls for the amendments of the laws that continue to perpetuate discrimination against women. She stresses the importance of institutions reviewing and commenting on laws related to personal affairs and presenting recommendations to the Legislative Council before laws are passed, with the goal of creating a legal framework which is democratic

and contemporary, addresses the needs of the majority and elevates the status of women to a higher position.