

The Women's Rights and Family Violence in Syria

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Summary of the Research

The Family Planning Society, in cooperation with UNIFEM, completed a field research entitled “The Women’s Rights and Family Violence in Syria” in the year 2004.

The research discussed the importance of dealing with the issue of family violence in theory in order to encourage the research and studies about the issue of women and their rights, and in practice towards taking practical steps in the society to defend the rights of women and to prevent violence against them. The aim of the study was to know the obstacles that prevent the women from exercising their rights, and the ways of their active participation in the family and society on equal footing with men.

The study was conducted in five governorates: Damascus, Damascus Rural Areas, Sweida, Deir Ezzor, Lattakia. The field study was made, and the forms (questionnaires) were returned during July, August and September 2004. The study covered women in the five governorates within the age bracket of 25 to 45 years in order to seek the opinion of women with life experience. The study dealt with previous studies on family violence and women’s rights in general, where we defined the family violence as being: “A pattern of aggressive behaviour resulting from the presence of unequal relations of force within the family”. This is evidence of the fact that women are exposed to violence and that their rights are being disparaged just because they are not equal to men in our society.

The study tackled the relation of the Syrian law with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women and how the Syrian reservations on some clauses made the application of the Convention face numerous difficulties in practice. The study adopted a set of assumptions, on which were based the questions in the form. After conducting the research, we adopted research outputs to connect numerous variables in order to attain the results of the study, such as the connection between the women’s education, their work and their exposure to violence.

I- Previous Studies

Haidar Al-Basri , in his study “Family Violence, 2001” views that there are motives behind violence: subjective from within the person, economic and social motives emanating from customs and traditions. All these are related to the societal culture.

Leila Abdul-Wahab, in her study “Family Violence – the Crime and Violence against Women, 2000”, concludes that the phenomenon of violence against women expresses a drawback and struggle between the men and women within the family in the light of unequal relations of force. It also reflects the severe socio-economic contradiction that dominates the society, its relations and establishments. This agrees with Engels’ theory about the duality of oppression and exploitation facing women throughout history. Accordingly, Leila Abdul-Wahab found out that the economic causes of domestic violence represent 45.6% of the causes of violence in the family; and that this violence is linked to the profession whereby violence decreases in the upper professions in terms of culprit and victim, and increases in the lower professions and within the marginalized segment of the society.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) made no explicit mention of protecting Women from Violence. However, the United Nations, in 1993, issued a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. But violence remained within the family as an internal affair, particularly in the Arab countries, including Syria. Some statistics estimate the declared cases of domestic violence at one case out of 250 cases. Hence the difficulty in attaining information in our research.

The title of the research is “The Rights of Women and Family Violence”, because violence in its forms: “Women do not take part in politics, are not elected, are deprived of inheritance, are deprived of education...”, all of them are linked to the fact that the woman does not know her rights and these rights do not reach her, thus she is exposed to violence in her life.

In 2004, the Syrian Ministry of Labor & Social Affairs conducted a research about gender in its establishments. The research showed that 25.5% of the workers at the Ministry consider that there is a discrimination between males and females in the nominations for high administrative positions; that 51.7% of the men share in the domestic chores against 19.7% and sometimes 28% who do not share. In answer to a question posed to both males and females “Do you believe that the woman is capable of management and planning?”, about 40% answered in the negative.

After Egypt signed the CEDAW in 1981, the door was open to study the status of the Egyptian woman and discuss her rights of childbearing and nationality. Studies appeared about the common violation in Egypt, namely the circumcision of females, such as “Female circumcision – A social study, Souad Othman, 1998”. It is a study that coupled between the social and anthropological approach. It relied on the methods of comparative quantitative analysis besides the qualitative analysis. A questionnaire was applied to 192 female university students who were circumcised. The roots of this phenomenon were studied.

Malak Zaalouk from Egypt too found in 1989 in a study about the women’s work that women suffered from job isolation, job discrimination and the conflicting roles at home, which impacted on their productivity and social participation on the job.

American and European studies prove that domestic violence was not put for discussion prior to 1970. Often, women subjected to beating were seen as having committed some thing that led to their beating, that is being accused falsely. The European social work institutions were criticized for their inability to meet the claims of the beaten women. In a study (Dobash, 1979), the social workers were convinced that violence was a natural part of marriage and must be accepted as is, primarily to protect marriage at whatever cost and for the sake of the children, because women are convinced that the children will be homeless if they leave home.

In the USA a study by Fran in 2003 was conducted by mail on the social specialists. The result showed that the specialists failed in dealing with women subjected to violence, and even in laying down a work plan on issues of this kind. The specialists stated that 92% of them dealt with beaten women.

II. Research Methodology

The sample social survey was adopted in conducting the research. The cluster sample method was used to select the governorates in which the research was carried out. Each governorate was considered a separate cluster. A class sample was selected from each governorate. The governorate was divided into three classes: urban, rural, random areas. A sample of women was chosen of 25-45 years of age of each class using the method of deliberate sample.

We relied on the branches of the Family Planning Society to prepare for the research in the local community and to train the female social workers in each governorate.

Assumptions of the Study:

They proceeded from the purpose of the research, namely to know the women's problems, to what extent they know their rights, the kind of violence applied to them: the study dealt with numerous variables in order to link between the woman's state of affairs (her status, education, work and environment...) and the different stances she adopts and how she deals with violence.

There are so many assumptions, such as:

- The relation between the educational level and the desire of being a male. The corresponding question is "Do you wish to have been a male?"
- The relation between the work of the respondent (her age, number of children, and to what extent she is exposed to violence).
- The relation of the work of the respondent and her age with knowing her rights.
- The relation of the work of the respondent and informing her about the place she would resort to in case she is beaten.
- The husband's education and work and its relation with the kind of violence to which the woman is exposed.

Design of the Questionnaire:

It proceeds from, and relies on, the assumptions, but the name of the respondent is not written, so that she would feel safer in view of the particularity of the phenomenon of violence in the family. The questionnaire included the following axes:

1. General and personal information (including the respondent's educational level and her family).
2. Social and living information (including the respondent's relation with the work force).
3. Information about the respondent's attitudes and views.
4. Information about abortion.
5. Information about the violence she is facing.

The questions relied as much as possible on the choices that enable the research team to use the automatic.... Open questions and comments were used for the qualitative analysis.

Training the female researchers:

Training lasted three days for each governorate in order to standardize the Understanding of the questions by the researcher, to deal with the respondents easily to obtain as much information as possible. The training included playing of roles to determine the different reactions on the part of respondent. We stressed on meeting the respondent alone.

III. Quantitative Analysis:

The number of sample units –actual respondents – was 1002 females distributed on the five governorates, of whom 72.5% were married, 19.8% were single, 3.9% were divorced. The sample included 3.9% widows, 65.7% housewives, and 30.6% employees.

The indicators drawn from the field research shows that the respondent's educational level is proportionately affected by the rise of the educational level of the father or mother.

In the questions related to the personal, cultural, and socio-economic information in the sample, and the women's attitudes vis-à-vis the issues of equality, marriage and violence, we concluded in general that the rise of the educational level of the woman and her family enables her to attain her rights and to take the best decisions about her life. The choice of knowing the fiance before marriage was approved by 50% of the illiterate females, 54% at the primary education level, and 72% at the university level. The higher the educational level the higher the rates. But the high rates indicate a general awareness of the choice, better than the old way of marriage through the matchmaker, or through the family only.

In the overall sample, the higher the educational level of the respondent is, she would stress, when asked about the appropriate educational level of the woman, that the woman is entitled to attain the highest level. This is also influenced by the status and work of the respondent's family: 83% of the female employees favour that the woman should attain the highest educational level possible,

-- In the governorates of Sweida and Deir Ezzor, the problem of the non-inheritance of land by women emerged. The university graduates know that the woman has the right to inherit the land, but they also know that the she does not inherit because of the prevailing customs and traditions.

-- The woman's awareness of her rights is linked to her education and work: 100% of the university graduates know the woman's right to be nominates for elections, compared to 60% among the illiterate women. 91% of the employees know the woman's right to inherit land because they are in contact with the regulations and laws.

In answer to a question if the woman can assume a leading role, 62% of the illiterates said that a woman working in an establishment of both sexes cannot assume such a role. In the overall sample, 72% answered in the positive and 28% answered in the negative. This generally indicates lack of self-confidence on the part of about one third of the sample.

About the respondent's age on the day the marriage contract was drawn up, the average age of the marriage in the overall sample was between 15 and 19 years, which is early for a wife. In Damascus and its countryside, 47 girls married at the age of 10 to 14 years. In the overall sample, this figure was 71 girls or 9%.

- In the overall sample, the most frequent violence against the woman was the imposition of the husband's viewpoint on the wife at all levels of the wife's and husband's work. The highest rate among the female workers was 37%, because their status is linked to their low educational level. Among the female employees, the rate was 6%, because of her higher educational level, hence, her viewpoint deserves attention.
- In answer to question as to whom the woman would resort in case she is subjected to violence, 57% said they would resort to their families. This shows that the issues related to violence are still being solved within the family or are not publicized. 26% of the sample said they would resort to no one. This is a large percentage. 0.6 % said they resort to the police, and 0.1% said they resort to the physician. At the various educational levels, women facing violence would resort to their folks.
- In the overall sample, 54% of the respondents believe that the primary cause for man's violence against the woman is that she differs with his opinion. This expresses man's desire to subject the woman to his sovereignty. The second cause is the interference of the family (25%), the woman's sterility (7%), and alcoholism (5%).
- What about the reason for the women subjected to violence not seeking divorce? 57% said it is because they are keen on their children's interests. This was the principal reason in all governorates. We brought up other reasons, but were insignificant, such as how the society looks at the divorcee (10%), the difficulty of returning to one's family (\$%), non-existence of a provider (3^). In general, the woman does not seek divorce because there is no place to resort to with her children. This is directly related to the number of children, and inversely to the woman's age. Generally, the divorcee finds it difficult to return to her folks because our society holds the wife responsible for the failure of the marriage and asks her to sacrifice more than man for the sake of the continuity of the marriage.

IV- Qualitative Analysis:

After the data of the open questions in the study were tabled manually, the qualitative analysis examined the respondent's trends towards the woman's issues and logic without offered options, as well as the respondents' comments on some questions.

- Regarding question 12 in the questionnaire as to why do you wish to be a male?

A. In question 11, 72% prefer their current status (femininity) vs 28% who prefer to be males. In the 72% there is a misleading quantity because some of the respondents understood question 11 as being an objection to God's creation. That is why we read some comments of the questionnaire such as (God's will), (that is my lot). A married woman refused to be a male because she wants to be a mother and give birth, believing that this is her mission.

B. In the 28% who wished to be male, their first reason was that man enjoys more freedom in the different aspects of life. The phrase "the woman is oppressed" was repeated ten times, which indicates a high sense of injustice, or the phrase "the society is a male society".

The wish for the woman to be male was higher among the divorcees because the impact of divorce on women is totally different than that of man... One woman said she is beaten by her husband almost daily and does not seek divorce because being divorced thrown out of her house is more difficult than facing violence and suffering in her house.

- Regarding question 30 about abortion:

A- The respondents avoided revealing the place of the abortion, but of those who revealed 58 said that the abortion was performed in the clinic of a female or male doctor, 54 in a public or private hospital, 35 at home by a certified midwife, or with the help of neighbours.

B. Despite the privacy and secrecy of abortion in our society, the data in the questionnaire indicated that two cases in Damascus and one in Lattakia were due to fear of giving birth to a girl! Four cases in Deir Ezzor due to severe beating by the husband. For instance, we found two cases, one in Lattakia and the other in Deir Ezzor where quarrel with the husband and the mother-in-law respectively led to abortion.

B. Normal causes for abortion, such as fatigue or carrying heavy objects, were repeatedly stated in the sample. But they show that the many domestic tiresome chores do not pity the mother even during her pregnancy.

- Concerning question 36 dealing with the respondent's opinion about the matters that promote her rights and protect her from harm, the women stated demands as per the following order:
 1. Learning: 600 checkmarks on the questionnaire.
 2. Work: 186 checkmarks
 3. Pleasing the husband and satisfying his requirements: 79 checkmarks
 4. Strong personality of the woman: 66 checkpoints
 5. Woman's economic independence: 65 checkmarks

The big difference of education is indicative of the great attention the respondents give to education. But linking it sometimes to the work is proof that education is a means of obtaining work and independence in the decision and equality with man who takes the economic decision in the family. It is a requirement linked to the low educational levels in which case which the husband would be the source of his wife's knowledge. The woman's logic would thus be: The more you satisfy the master, the more grants you will get.

C. In the study , 14 cases answered Question 36 saying that (women enjoy their rights and are satisfied with their lives...) This answer shows that the woman is either satisfied with her destiny, or is afraid of saying something that would vex and anger the husband, and does not trust the group posing the question to her.

A comparison was made with data from different countries of the world about family violence. The Population Report of the year 1999 mentions that;

- In Bangladesh, 68% of the women do not find someone to divulge to him the violence they are exposed to, and 38% divulge to their families. This is consistent with our study about to whom the woman would resort in case she is exposed to violence.
 - In Cambodia, 24% find no one to speak to, 1% complain to the police, 33% resort to friends, 22% to the families.
 - In Egypt, data of 1996), 47% do not trust anyone, 3% complain to the police (this almost close to that of Syria, since in both countries the family is considered an internal affair).
 - In the United Kingdom, 38% find no one to speak to, 22% resort to the police (it is a high percentage compared to the developing countries)), 46% resort to friends, 31% resort to the family).

These are data taken from countries that have different social and cultural environments showing the difference in addressing issues of family violence among the countries.

V. Proposals

The study concluded by advancing a set of proposals that rely on the pooling of local and government efforts to enable the woman's decision, especially the continuous media awareness about the woman's rights, such as.

- Establishing centers for women exposed to violence in Syria.
- Modify the laws to eliminate any discrimination against women, and establish a standing committee for this purpose.
- Continuous media advocacy about woman's rights.
- International conventions signed by Syria should be binding on the Syrian civil laws.

- Include in the school curricula the principle of equal rights and duties among both sexes.

The study tried to have access to difficult information, because the historical oppression of women and their societal suffering require continuous researches and greater efforts so that women may fulfil their role on equal footing with men in making Syria's civilized future.