

**Diplomacy:
The Future is Female**

**INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AS EVIDENCE OF
WIDESPREAD GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB
REGION**

Lina Abirafeh

INTRODUCTION

The Arab region is a diverse grouping of 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite a range of economic, political, and security configurations, the one commonality is the region's poor standing in terms of gender equality, ranking lowest in the world on both the 2018 Global Gender Gap Report and the Women, Peace, and Security Index.¹

The World Economic Forum (WEF) found that, despite progress in closing the gender gap across the region in 2018, it nonetheless remains the world's least gender-equal region.² It will take the Middle East and North African economies "153 years to close the gender gap at the current rate of change," the report stated.³ While Tunisia topped the region for gender equality, ranking 119 globally; the UAE ranked 121 with the gender gap closed at 64.2 percent;⁴ Saudi Arabia ranked 141 with a 59 percent gender gap rate, showing "modest progress," with improvement in wage equality and women's labor force participation; and Lebanon ranks third to last in the region, ahead of only Syria and Yemen. As such, social indicators are not promising – and not progressing. Patriarchal societies, growing conservative movements, and lack of political will to advance and achieve gender equality together are building a foundation to foment a backlash against women's rights and freedoms.

Gender inequality exists in many forms and can be found in the realms of health, education, economics, and politics. However, gender-based violence remains the most egregious manifestation of inequality and entrenched patriarchy in the region. No country is immune to gender-based violence; one in three women and girls worldwide will experience some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime.⁵ The Arab region is no exception. Ending gender-based violence has proved to be an intractable human rights challenge partially due to its prevalence across all socio-economic and cultural groups. This violence takes many forms – sexual, physical, emotional and economic. Globally, intimate partner violence is the most common form of gender-based violence.⁶

Labeling gender-based violence when it occurs remains a challenge. An inability to identify it makes it extremely difficult to legislate against and

eradicate. For instance, in many countries worldwide, sexual harassment, marital rape, and coerced sex are not considered violence. This is not to mention verbal harassment, which is also not considered a violation of women's rights and bodily integrity.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB REGION

In the Arab world, violence against women exists in multiple forms. Intimate partner violence is the most common and least reported, affecting more than 30 percent of women in the region.⁷ Similarly to other parts of the world, in the Arab region, intimate partner violence is often not labeled as such. When it is, social stigma and family and community pressures keep women from reporting it.

Most Arab countries lack adequate gender policies and provisions in their constitutional and legal frameworks. Women are not protected against marital rape, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence. When protective and preventative legislation does exist, it is often not fully applied.⁸

Addressing gender-based violence in the region is dramatically impeded by contexts of conflict and protracted crises – undoubtedly more dangerous for women and girls.⁹ Existing vulnerabilities and inequalities are exacerbated, and women are deliberately targeted.¹⁰ Gender-based violence increases in such settings because communities are disrupted, populations are moving, and there are no systems of protection or support.

Around the Arab world, the myriad competing and long-running conflicts, from Syria to Yemen, show no signs of abating. As insecurity increases and opportunities to make a living decrease, women are increasingly resorting to riskier sources of income, such as trafficking and prostitution.¹¹ In the informal sector, women are exposed to a range of abuses and no protection.

Preventing gender-based violence and caring for survivors is a challenge across the world. But in emergency situations, the problem is amplified. For instance, in Yemen, the UN reports that women are at even greater risk of gender-based violence than they were before the current conflict began. In countries that host Syrian refugees, child marriage is increasing as a response to the ongoing crisis.¹² One in seven girls is married as a child, with the highest rates in Mauritania, Sudan, and Yemen.¹³

Challenges to addressing gender-based violence remain great. Services and support are scarce in contexts of ongoing insecurity. Such conflicts are increasingly regional, rather than national in nature, and solutions need

to move beyond borders. Religious fundamentalism continues to restrict women's freedom and condone abuse.¹⁴ Funding is woefully limited¹⁵ and short-term,¹⁶ despite the long-term nature of emergencies.¹⁷

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: A GLOBAL EPIDEMIC

Emergency contexts aside, home remains the most dangerous place for women. This is contrary to perceptions that home is a safe space. In fact, the home can be considered another emergency for women. A recent report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) revealed that most female homicide victims worldwide are killed by partners or family.¹⁸ In 2017, approximately 87,000 women were killed around the world, and 58 percent of these homicides were committed by intimate partners or family members.¹⁹ This amounts to some six women per hour being killed by people they know well. With these figures in mind, it is clear that intimate partner violence is pervasive and thus challenging to address.

Furthermore, the existence and threat of such violence is a direct result of women's unequal status at home and in society. To illustrate this point, UNODC Executive Director Yury Fedotov said: "While the vast majority of homicide victims are men, women continue to pay the highest price as a result of gender inequality, discrimination, and negative stereotypes. They are also the most likely to be killed by intimate partners and family."²⁰ These findings are in line with oft-cited World Health Organization statistics, which show that almost one third (30 percent) of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner.²¹

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE ACROSS THE REGION: EVER PREVALENT, WELL HIDDEN

In the Arab region, it is estimated that 37 percent of women have suffered intimate partner violence (IPV).²² For example, the UN reported 40 murders of women and 163 cases of self-immolation in Iraqi Kurdistan in a six-month period alone;²³ in Egypt, 33 percent of women experience physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime and 7 percent experience sexual violence; in Jordan, 21 percent experienced IPV and 8 percent had been subjected to sexual violence; and in Tunisia, 20 percent of women suffer IPV and 14 percent of women experience sexual violence.²⁴

Honor killings are also prevalent in many Arab countries, which have largely failed to amend relevant laws. Jordan has the highest known rate of

occurrence in the region, with a 53 percent increase in honor killings in 2016 alone.²⁵ While acknowledging that real figures are likely to be higher in Syria, the in 2014, UN also reported there are between 300 and 400 cases of honor killings in Syria annually.²⁶ Data on honor killings are scarce, as such crimes often go unrecorded and unreported. Nevertheless, studies indicate that honor killing is still common practice in the region. When perpetrated in rural areas, honor killings are particularly difficult to record. Fortunately, efforts have been made to reveal the scope of this problem in several countries.²⁷

LEGISLATION: NOTABLY ABSENT, OR WILLFULLY NEGLECTED

In terms of legislation, the Arab region has fewer laws protecting women from intimate partner violence than any region in the world.²⁸ Rapists are often shown leniency or even acquitted in the Arab region if they marry their victims.

However, some progress has been made in terms of legislation in the Arab region, including the recent repeal of the rape marriage Article 522 of the Penal Code of Lebanon and Article 308 in Jordan;²⁹ and the passage of the pioneering Tunisian Domestic Violence Bill, which recognized domestic violence for the first time and places a responsibility on the state to act in situations previously considered part of the private sphere.³⁰ According to a 2010 study by the National Family and Population Office of Tunisia, 47.6 percent of women between the ages of eighteen and sixty-four have been victims of at least one form of violence in their lifetime, giving this law the potential to have a significant impact.³¹ Lebanon's Law 293 on the Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence covers all four forms of violence against women (i.e., physical, sexual, emotional, and economic) and yet has serious omissions, as will be addressed below.³²

RISK FACTORS AND JUSTIFYING ABUSE

Many global and regional studies have identified risk factors for intimate partner violence. While these are worth noting, it is critical to state that responsibility for all forms of violence lies entirely in the hands of the perpetrator, never the survivor.

Studies reveal that disagreements on household issues, disputes with in-laws, refusal to comply with the demanding and controlling behavior of husbands, refusal to have sex, or even wanting sex, are all justifications for abuse.³³ Additionally, rural women are at greater risk, according to studies

conducted in both Egypt and Syria.³⁴

Lack of financial support is also a common thread. For instance, Egyptian women who do not engage in paid labor are twice as likely to be beaten as those who do engage in paid labor.³⁵ In one Syrian city, wealthier women report lower levels of IPV than those with lower economic means.³⁶ Economic hardship, measured in terms of income and household living arrangements, was also shown to be more common and more acute among those in violent relationships than among those who were in nonviolent relationships.³⁷

Age is also a factor, with the frequency of violence being greater among those under age 30 compared with those over 30.³⁸ In Egypt, the proportion of ever-married women beaten during pregnancy declines with age, from 40 percent of women ages 15 to 19 to 26 percent of those aged 40 to 49.³⁹ On the other hand, the percentage of women who reported being beaten more or as frequently during pregnancy rises with age.⁴⁰ Additionally, attitudes varied more by the level of education than any other background characteristic, with less educated women more likely to justify wife abuse.

In the Arab region, IPV is often not reported or is hidden by victims because they fear isolation or being shunned.⁴¹ A major concern regarding IPV and other forms of violence against women in this region is that many women have been conditioned to believe the violence is not only justified but also is their fault. Women face high rates of violence from their intimate partners and a culture that tends to tolerate this problem all too readily.

The lack of social services and legal assistance available for victims further complicate addressing IPV in the region. For example, although different reasons are behind the prevalence of domestic violence in Lebanon, some key factors are the social acceptance of such behavior, the patriarchal nature of the Lebanese society, and the lack of support and financial resources provided to women in this region.

CONSEQUENCES OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: SEVERE, AND OFTEN FATAL

All forms of gender-based violence have great consequences, not only for women's physical and emotional health, but also for their families, the community, and the country at large.

It is the woman who suffers first and foremost. As one example, data from a 1995 Egyptian survey show that, compared to women who are not abused by their husbands, battered women are more likely to have unwanted or mistimed pregnancies, to commence antenatal care later (or

not at all), and to terminate a pregnancy.⁴² For example, infant and child mortality rates for children born to abused mothers are significantly higher compared to those for children of non-abused mothers.⁴³ Other studies have found that pregnant women who are abused enter antenatal care at a later time. They are also more likely to be hospitalized before delivery, suffer from premature labor, and deliver by Cesarean section.⁴⁴ A study of Saudi women additionally found a higher risk of abruptio-placenta, fetal distress, and preterm birth among abused pregnant women than among their non-abused counterparts.⁴⁵

Violence is expensive, with survivors often paying for their own health care and legal expenses. These costs have implications for communities and for the state. Trauma results in a loss of productivity, which affects economic growth and overall development. For example, in Morocco, it is estimated that intimate partner violence costs the justice system \$6.7 million annually.⁴⁶ In Egypt, the cost of the violence women and their families experienced in 2015 was estimated to cost at least \$208 million and possibly up to \$780 million.⁴⁷ The total direct and indirect costs of gender-based violence for countries are estimated to be as high as one to two percent of Gross National Product.⁴⁸ At the global level, this amounts to millions of dollars. These figures regarding the societal costs of violence are now used more frequently with country governments to galvanize action.

ARAB COUNTRY EXAMPLES: WIDE PREVALENCE

Saudi Arabia

The WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women found that, in Saudi Arabia, 21 percent of ever-married women over the age of fifteen had experienced physical intimate partner violence. A total of 2301 women participated in the 2014 survey with a response rate of 81 percent. Saudi women comprised 58 percent of the sample, while expatriate women made up 42 percent of the population. The study found that abused women were significantly more likely to report body self-hatred, food addiction, and hopelessness.⁴⁹ Existing studies show a link between number of children and the likelihood of abuse.⁵⁰ This is in line with global findings that link large family size to low education levels and poor household economic status.

Jordan

In Jordan, not only is intimate partner violence prevalent, but acceptance of this abuse is disturbingly common. A study revealed that 87 percent of ever-married women of childbearing age agreed with at least one justification of physical abuse. Overall, 83 percent of respondents felt that betraying one's husband gave him the right to use violence against his wife.⁵¹ Another study reinforced these findings, demonstrating that close to 90 percent of women interviewed had reported a form of abuse in the past year.⁵² Of these women, 47 percent reported emotional abuse, and approximately 20 percent reported being beaten. Another study found that 97 percent of married women reported spouses exhibiting controlling behavior, including psychological violence, physical violence, and sexual violence.⁵³ Another study revealed that 19 percent of pregnant women frequenting health centers were subject to physical violence, and that 11 percent of these women had experienced physical violence during pregnancy.⁵⁴

As such, Jordan presents an extremely difficult landscape, with many risk factors that increase women's vulnerabilities to IPV. These include living in rural areas, low educational attainment, and low socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵⁵ Furthermore, women are unlikely to leave abusive homes due to fear of social stigma, financial dependence, lack of family support, and children.⁵⁶

Palestinian Refugees

Palestinian refugees in Jordan also experience a high incidence of violence. A family survey of 2,590 families in a refugee camp revealed that nearly 50 percent of women have experienced IPV. Interestingly, the percentage of men who admitted to beating their wives is *higher* than the percentage of women who admitted to having been beaten, at 49 percent compared with 43 percent. This is likely due to stigma as well as fear of further violence. Syrian women in Jordan have similar challenges. This is compounded by the fact that many Syrian women are not aware of services available for survivors of gender-based violence. A survey in 2013 showed that 83 percent of Syrian women were not aware of any services or support available to them.⁵⁷

Tunisia

In 2010, the Tunisian National Board for Family and Population conducted a survey on the prevalence of intimate partner violence. This revealed that 48 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 64 had

experienced at least one episode of intimate partner violence.⁵⁸

The Ministry of Women and Family Affairs responded with a draft bill in 2014 condemning and criminalizing domestic violence. The draft law was approved in 2016 and implemented in 2017, with mixed results. The bill prohibits all forms of violence against women (i.e., physical, psychological, sexual or economic), and violations can result in either imprisonment or financial penalties.⁵⁹

Morocco

A survey conducted by the Moroccan High Commission for Planning in 2009 found that 63 percent of women aged 18-65 experienced intimate partner violence.⁶⁰ In response, the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development, and the Ministry of Justice and Liberties drafted a law in 2013.⁶¹ This law includes protective measures against intimate partner violence, such as forbidding the perpetrator from having contact with the victim. However, it does not reflect other aspects of spousal abuse, like marital rape. Ultimately, the bill passed in 2016 but did not go into effect until 2018. In addition, Article 475 of the Penal Code, which allowed rapists to avoid prosecution if they married their victims, was repealed in 2014 following the suicide of a woman who was forced to marry her rapist.⁶²

Iraq

In Iraq, all forms of violence have increased as a result of prolonged violence and insecurity. It is therefore no surprise that the rate of sexual violence increased dramatically after each offensive by the Islamic State. Additionally, the group captured women – particularly Yazidi women – to be used as sex slaves. Rape has often been used as a weapon during of war and has been exploited by ISIS and other power holders in the region as a means of control. Refugees, like those fleeing the almost six-year conflict in Syria, and other vulnerable members of society often experience – or are at risk of – sexual abuse.⁶³

Egypt

A survey in 2013 conducted by UN Women found that 99 percent of women and girls in Egypt reported having experienced some form of sexual harassment.⁶⁴ Further, 86 percent of ever-married women believed that husbands were sometimes justified in beating their wives, with the most commonly specified reason (70 percent) being the refusal of sexual

intercourse. Surprisingly, attitudes varied little by age. The youngest women surveyed (15 to 19 years old) and those living in rural areas were slightly more likely to condone such abuse.⁶⁵

In 2005, the Demographic and Health Survey found prevalence rates of IPV to be as high as 47 percent.⁶⁶ Around the same time, a survey of female and male participants revealed that 30 percent of men admitted to having committed violence against their wives, and 41 percent of women reported being victims of IPV.⁶⁷ This is worth noting largely because men who *admit* to committing such violence are still not representative of those who perpetrate but fail to admit.

Egyptian women's lives are at risk due to IPV. A review of newspaper reports revealed that such murders take place because men doubt the fidelity of their wives and partners – often making false accusations. In 41 percent of such cases, the murderer was the husband.⁶⁸ Women in rural areas continue to suffer more than their urban sisters. A 2007 survey of rural Egypt revealed that 22 percent of women report that beatings can occur without any reason.⁶⁹

CASE STUDY: LEBANON, A COMPLEX PICTURE

In Lebanon, the landscape is extremely challenging. Many Lebanese women and men feel that women are already in possession of their full rights, but this is far from reality. Women's right to health is particularly at risk. The healthcare system is highly fragmented and underregulated, and women and girls in rural areas are adversely affected by limited and poor services. The long-running Syria conflict has placed considerable stress on already fragile health services.⁷⁰

Gender-based violence prevention and response is one of the primary objectives of the National Strategy for Women in Lebanon.⁷¹ But unfortunately, the Lebanese legal system does not monitor violations of gender equality. While the Lebanese legal system does include some protections against gender-based violence, consistent and equal enforcement of such laws is sorely lacking. Lebanon is also a destination for human trafficking⁷² and forced labor,⁷³ with female migrant domestic workers at significant risk.⁷⁴

In 2011, Parliament annulled article 562 of the Penal Code, which mitigated the sentence of people who claim they killed or injured their wife, daughter, or other relative to protect the family 'honor.'⁷⁵ Article 5 of the Lebanese Civil Code, which guarantees legal protections against trafficking, was adopted in 2011. However, even when laws are in place to protect women

and prevent violence, incidents continue with relative impunity.

For many years, activists lobbied to pass the Law on Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence. In 2014, Law 293 was adopted by the Lebanese Parliament, but this new law failed to recognize marital rape as an offense. In August 2017, Parliament abolished article 522 of the penal code that had allowed prosecutors to drop charges against a rapist if he married his victim. This is a significant step forward for women's rights and a testament to the activists who have long campaigned to overturn this archaic legal loophole, which violated human rights and compounded the trauma of survivors. Additionally, in 2017, the Council of Ministers approved the first draft law to criminalize sexual harassment in public places and in the workplace. At the time of writing, this remains in draft form.⁷⁶

Lebanese women are denied basic rights due to personal status codes. This is the most egregious manifestation of the country's entrenched patriarchy. Personal status codes, bound by Article 9 of the Constitution, endorse inequality between spouses and openly discriminate against women in all aspects of their lives. Religious authorities take precedence over civil law in relation to marriage laws. Personal status law, which covers matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, has precedence where there is conflict between the two laws in cases of marital rape and other abuses.⁷⁷

In Lebanon, reform efforts face unique challenges due to the diversity of its 15 separate personal status laws for the country's various officially-recognized religious communities, of which there are 18 in total.⁷⁸ This leads to discrimination between Lebanese women from different religions and impacts many aspects of their legal, social, and economic life. As a result, women's bodies and lives are regulated by the different religious courts in the country.

For refugee women in Lebanon, the situation is even more severe. Syrian women refugees have been subjected to intimate partner violence, early marriage, and forced into survival sex upon arrival in Lebanon. Women reported that IPV has increased since their arrival in Lebanon, due to amplified insecurities and vulnerabilities.⁷⁹ The child marriage rate is high among refugees.⁸⁰ This is often framed as a form of protection for girls, out of fear of sexual violence, and as a way to ensure their virginity and thereby preserve the "family honor." Early marriage also serves to decrease the economic burden on Syrian families whose livelihoods are already stretched beyond capacity.⁸¹ While no law exists against child marriage in Lebanon, the National Commission for Lebanese Women⁸² drafted a law for parliament to

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regulate religious marriage among minors (children under the age of 18) by demanding the consent of a civil judge as well as a religious leader.⁸³

While government and UN actors have drafted a strategy on violence against women, presented in February 2019, there is much more work to be done to reform the legal and political climate to improve the lives of women and girls.⁸⁴ Gender-based violence is the most obvious manifestation of gender inequality in Lebanon.

STRATEGIES AND THE NEED FOR ACTION

There is a wide range of global guidance, goals, declarations, and conventions touching on gender equality, ranging from the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979 to the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals.⁸⁵ Over recent decades, this field has evolved such that there is now general agreement on what must be done. It is beyond dispute that gender-based violence must be prevented to whatever extent possible. When it happens, there needs to be clarity on what constitutes an appropriate response. Those who work to help survivors should coordinate their work and share information.⁸⁶ Approaches must be based on human rights⁸⁷ and focused on the survivor at all times – her safety and her wishes.⁸⁸

Work must include education and awareness-raising efforts that promote gender equality.⁸⁹ Communities must be engaged in all activities from the onset – and the engagement of men and boys is particularly important.⁹⁰ Strategies to reduce risks include guaranteeing safe access to shelter and other basic needs.⁹¹ Adequate lighting in unsafe areas, security patrols, and livelihood support is also critical.⁹²

Survivors must have access to a full range of care, support, and services: health care, psychological support, police and security support, legal aid, access to justice, reintegration, and financial support. Economic empowerment and the ability to participate in financial decision-making at the household level are factors that can decrease the likelihood of women experiencing intimate partner violence. The reverse is also true: women who lack economic means and the ability for financial independence are at greater risk of IPV.⁹³

In Lebanon and around the Arab region, there is still a great deal of work to do to end the scourge of gender-based violence, particularly the most hidden form of violence, that in the home. Evidence and information abound. What is needed now are resources and action.

Dr. Lina Abirafeh is the Executive Director of the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University. Her background is in gender-based violence prevention and response in development and humanitarian contexts. She has over 20 years' field experience, having worked extensively in Afghanistan, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among others. She completed her doctorate from the London School of Economics and was listed in the Gender Equality Top 100: The Most Influential People in Global Policy for 2018 and 2019.

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