

On the Characteristics of Patriarchal Societies, Gender Inequality, and Wife Abuse: The Case of Palestinian Society

Muhammad M. Haj-Yahia¹

Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been increased public, academic, and professional interest in the problem of wife abuse. As a result, the myth of "harmonious marriage" or "harmony in the family" has been shattered, thus challenging the superficial image of a constantly harmonious family and the argument that a "healthy family" is a family without conflict. Professional activities in the field (intervention, treatment, deterrence, etc.) and empirical research findings have revealed that conflicts between couples in marriage, as in other social systems, are inevitable since they are an integral and built-in part of those systems. Women's movements in general and the feminist movement in particular, as well as human rights movements, social equality movements, anti-war movements, and academic scholars and professional practitioners in various disciplines, have all contributed substantially to exposing the problem of wife abuse – a problem that was underestimated in the past – as well as to debunking the myth that conflicts in healthy families and between spouses do not exist.

In this article, I will attempt to show that the patriarchal structure of Palestinian society in Israel, as in all patriarchal and traditional societies, as well as gender inequality, which is a product of that structure, is deeply rooted. Concomitantly, the patriarchal structure and gender inequality limit even the willingness of people and agencies in those societies to help women who fall victim to domestic violence.² My main contention is that gender inequality and sexism in Palestinian society in Israel generate violence, and that men use violence against their intimate partners in order to maintain and reinforce their status in the family, and in order to attain and preserve all of the privileges that the patriarchal society accords them as males. Additionally, I argue that the patriarchal structure of Palestinian society limits possibilities for providing appropriate services to battered women and their children that will satisfy their need for physical safety and emotional security, as well as for their general well-being.

In this article, I will focus on the relationship between the patriarchal structure of Palestinian society in Israel, gender inequality and wife abuse. In so doing, I am not denying the state of Israel's role both in allowing the conditions in which patriarchy can thrive to endure by not addressing the problem of gender inequality among the Palestinian minority seriously, and in failing to ensure the provision of suitable, adequate and just treatment for the victims of wife abuse, as it is obliged to do under domestic and international law.

Violence against women doubtlessly constitutes a violation of their basic human rights. Gender inequality in patriarchal societies such as Palestinian society is rooted in the economic, social, religious, political, and educational structure of society, as well as that of the state. It is conceivable that groups or individuals in the society will prefer egalitarian relationships between men and women, which are alien to patriarchal ideology. However, the limitation of that preference to a few groups and institutions within Palestinian society, and its not being assimilated into the social, political, economic, legal, religious, or

¹ Associate Professor at the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and a member of the Board of Directors, Adalah.

² Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 1992.

educational structure of society will allow men's control over women to prevail and wife abuse to persist as a result. At the same time, the violation of women's basic rights will go on and the possibilities for responding to the needs of victims of domestic violence remain limited.

Patriarchy and Inequality in Palestinian Society in Israel as a Risk Factor for Wife Abuse and an Obstacle for the Prevention and Treatment of the Problem

According to the conceptual framework developed by Straus,³ there are at least eight dimensions that should be taken into consideration to explain how a patriarchal social structure generates wide-scale wife abuse, and prevents and hinders the provision of appropriate assistance to battered women. I will apply this conceptual framework in an attempt to develop my argument regarding the impact of patriarchal structure on wife abuse in the context of Palestinian society in Israel.

1. Protecting the authority of men: The patriarchal structure of the Palestinian family and society gives men considerable authority and protects them. In my opinion, Palestinian society grants men power in the family sphere as well as in the public sphere, and uses various means to safeguard it. Toward that end, in Palestinian society – as in all patriarchal societies – men are considered to have an advantage in resources, and perceived as enjoying superior personal characteristics, as well as skills and abilities that are supposedly possessed exclusively by men, including intelligence, wisdom, discretion, knowledge, professional prestige, the ability to make a living, etc. Accordingly, society expects men to be more achievement-driven and competitive than women, and to be better able to fulfill themselves. Men are also expected to be more dominant than women, and above all to dominate them.⁴ Consequently, many Palestinian men tend to believe that any threat to their inherent male superiority or to what they and society perceive as male privileges justifies the use of force and violence. In their view, this is a way of “rehabilitating” the status of the male.⁵

Essentially, my research on the topic has shown that the more men hold patriarchal beliefs (e.g., sexism, negative attitudes toward women, inegalitarian expectations of men and women in society and the family), the more they justify violence against women, and the greater their tendency to believe that the woman is to blame for her husband's violence against her.⁶ Moreover, such men tend to perceive wife-beating as a personal issue that should be kept within the family, and oppose any involvement of bodies outside of the family (formal and informal) in the relationship between violent husbands and battered wives. Of course, such involvement is needed in order to protect and support the battered woman and in order to treat and punish the violent husband.⁷ Furthermore, the findings indicate that in Palestinian society in Israel, as in other patriarchal societies, men who beat their wives tend to have patriarchal beliefs: they justify gender inequality in general and in marital relations in particular, and they maintain a negative and traditional attitude toward women.⁸

³ Straus, 1980.

⁴ Gerber, 1995.

⁵ Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Haj-Yahia, 2003; Haj-Yahia, 2005.

⁶ Haj-Yahia, 2003; Haj-Yahia, 2005.

⁷ Haj-Yahia, 2002a,b; Haj-Yahia, 2003; Haj-Yahia, 2005.

⁸ Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Haj-Yahia, 2003; Haj-Yahia, 2005; Smith, 1990; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996.

2. Compulsive masculinity: Palestinian society in Israel, like other patriarchal societies in the world, tends to encourage socialization and education for compulsive masculinity.⁹ From a very young age, boys are educated to preserve their masculinity and are ashamed of behavior that society perceives to be feminine or childish. As a result, boys begin developing hostility toward girls and women, and they learn to compulsively hold on to their masculinity. Their hostility toward women is accompanied by a strong desire to oppress and humiliate them, to view them as inferiors, and to treat them aggressively.¹⁰ These beliefs often underlie certain attitudes toward battered women in society (i.e., the belief that they are rebellious, wanton, disobedient, provocative, etc.), and even influence the way that many professionals in Arab locales treat women who are victims of domestic violence. In many cases, the attitudes of professionals and society toward battered women impede the provision of assistance, support, and protection to battered women and their children.¹¹

3. Economic constraints and discrimination against women: Women are subject to economic constraints and discrimination, which are usually imposed on them to a greater degree than men, both within and outside of the family. The inegalitarian economic and occupational structure of patriarchal societies, including Palestinian society in Israel, leaves women with very few alternatives. In general, the objective and perceived status of occupations and jobs open to women are inferior to those available to men. For this and other reasons, in many cases Palestinian women earn less than men who are employed in the same jobs. Without having access to "good" jobs, women will continue to be economically dependent on their spouses or partners. Economic dependence is one of the factors that force battered women to continue living with a violent spouse. For them, divorce or separation means poverty.¹²

4. Women bear the burden of child rearing: In Palestinian society, women usually, if not always, bear the burden of raising children. Neither society nor the state assists women in coping with this burden, providing them with extremely limited financial support and daycare services for children. The unequal division of occupations, jobs, and tasks in Palestinian society places the responsibility of child rearing squarely on the woman's shoulders. At the same time, society does not offer any financial rewards to women for taking care of children (not to mention the lack of moral and social appreciation for fulfilling this essential task). Therefore, working women – who earn less than their male counterparts in any case – are forced to bear the cost of daycare, in addition to other expenses. In other words, occupational discrimination, lack of support for childcare and insufficient assistance with childcare – from formal sources or from the spouse – force women to stay married even if they are victims of abuse at the hands of their spouses.

5. The single-parent family myth and the negative attitude to divorce: Another cultural norm that maintains women's submissiveness and inferiority is reflected in the attitude that children cannot be raised in an appropriate and healthy way by one parent, and all the more so if the mother raises them alone, without a father. It is well known that in cases of divorce and in single-parent families in general, the children usually live with the mother and not with the father. Cultural norms oppose divorce and encourage women who want children to live with and stay married to their husband. Although scholars and experts have debated the impact of life without a father on the development of children,

⁹ Gerber, 1995.

¹⁰ Walby, 1990.

¹¹ United Nations, 1989.

¹² Gerber, 1995.

there is considerable research evidence to indicate that life with a violent father harms the child's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral development, not to mention the destructive impact of wife abuse on the woman herself and her ability to function as a mother.¹³ Nonetheless, the prevalence of the widespread belief that children's development is optimal in a home with two parents causes women to feel that they have no choice but to continue living with their husband, even if he is violent. Thus, battered wives are hesitant to initiate divorce procedures and feel an obligation to "attach themselves" to a man because they fear the reactions of society. They are ostracized if they live without a man and face the threat of poverty. Unfortunately, then, the idea that fathers play an important role in the normal development of children, even violent fathers, as well as the lack of support for battered women and the social pressure exerted on them to preserve their marriage and family at any price, cause many battered women to continue living with their abusive partner.

6. Traditional beliefs about the woman's role as wife and mother: The roles of wife and mother are the most important roles assigned to women in Palestinian society, as in other traditional and patriarchal societies in the world. According to this belief, a woman cannot be "whole, real, and successful" unless she is married. By contrast, men have the option of choosing how much they want to invest in the role of husband and father. Of course, the choice depends on his interests and on how he perceives his own strengths and abilities, as well as on the economic, occupational, political, and cultural or religious context in which he lives. Generally, patriarchal societies are more tolerant and lenient toward men who neglect their role as husband than they are toward women who neglect their role as wife. Moreover, the stigma of being a bachelor or divorced man is not nearly as strong as that of being an unmarried woman who lives alone with her children. Such women are perceived as failing to live up to traditional expectations of them as a wife, mother and woman. Because they are dependent on conservative and traditional beliefs as the basis for establishing a "respectable" status in society, it is difficult for these women to resist violence against them. In this situation, the Palestinian woman feels forced to continue tolerating her husband's violence and has difficulty in terminating her marriage.

7. Negative self-image: The patriarchal, inegalitarian, and sexist structure of Palestinian society in Israel, as in other patriarchal and traditional societies, poses a risk – or at least a potential risk – of fostering a negative self-image among women (parallel to the potential for men to use violence as a means of protecting their "rights" when they feel that their privileges are being threatened). This threat to the woman's self-image can be attributed largely to society's emphasis on achievements and competitiveness, which are associated more with masculinity than femininity. The emphasis on these characteristics conveys a message to the woman that "it's not the end of the world if you give in to your husband who works so hard," "you have to support your husband in his business and help him fulfill his aspirations, even if you have to compromise your own aspirations," etc. These messages prevail not only in the private (personal and familial) sphere of Palestinian society, but also in the public sphere. They are reflected in the woman's inferior personal and family status, as well as – and perhaps primarily – in the economic, social, political, educational, cultural, and religious structure of Palestinian society in Israel as a whole. Of course, women have fewer opportunities than men in all of these spheres. A woman who opposes this normative system of norms and refuses to accept the harm to her self-image is perceived by many members of society, and particularly by her husband, as rebellious, defiant, selfish and condescending. These characteristics are

¹³ Onyskiw, 2003.

considered undesirable, and are even rejected in Palestinian society, as in other patriarchal societies and in the patriarchal structures of society.¹⁴ It is therefore not surprising that in a marital relationship in which the Palestinian woman has a more positive self-image and higher self-esteem than her husband, has an advantage in terms of education, resources, and skills, and is more accepted and established than him in certain social circles, she is usually at greater risk of being abused and battered by him than she would have been if her social, economic, educational, and political status were inferior to those of her husband.¹⁵

8. The patriarchal and masculine orientation in social welfare, health, mental health, and legal service systems in Israel: Not only can most cases of wife abuse be attributed to a patriarchal, inegalitarian social structure, but so also can the humiliating and accusatory treatment that battered women experience when they seek protection, counseling, guidance, support and economic and legal assistance can be attributed to that structure. At the other extreme, the lenient and tolerant treatment that violent husbands usually receive is noteworthy. We often hear of the humiliating treatment of battered women from the social, health, legal and other services, which is an outcome of the patriarchal ideology and masculine orientation of those services, even when those attitudes are expressed by women who work in those services. Such treatment causes many women in Palestinian society in Israel to ultimately develop feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, powerlessness and social and psychological isolation. Very few women seek assistance from those services, even victims of severe violence. This humiliating treatment is expressed in the initial assistance provided to battered women (e.g., medical treatment), which is often accompanied by moralizing and attempts to persuade the woman to return to her violent husband and preserve the family unit, as well as in a tendency to blame the woman for the violence against her and to display understanding and lenience toward the violent husband. These messages are conveyed to the woman throughout the process of receiving assistance. As mentioned, this all prevents many Palestinian women from approaching existing services for help, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence against them.¹⁶

Summary

I am under no illusions and am not arguing that a change in the patriarchal structure of Palestinian society and gender equality in the private and social spheres of that society will prevent wife abuse. I am sure that there are additional factors which cause wife abuse, as well as additional obstacles and conditions which prevent battered women from receiving appropriate services and assistance. Wife abuse is a multi-faceted problem with many dimensions. As such, it has numerous causes, including, of course, those which stem from or are perpetuated by state policies. Therefore, the solutions to the problem are diverse and do not derive exclusively from the patriarchal structure of society. Nonetheless, I have no doubt that a change in the patriarchal ideology and structure in Palestinian society in Israel would contribute substantially toward improving the image and status of women in society in general and in the family in particular, which in turn would alter women's expectations. This change would be reflected in many social spheres, including economic, educational, political, and religious fields, as well as in the status of women in each of these fields. In this way, it may be possible to improve the services provided to battered women and their children significantly, and enhance the assistance they receive.

¹⁴ Gerber, 1995.

¹⁵ Haj-Yahia, 2000.

¹⁶ Haj-Yahia, 2000, 2002b; United Nations, 1989.

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