

A look at violence against women in Iran

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Almost half the population of the planet are women. However, we have long witnessed that their rights have been violated in different ways and they have been subjected to lack of care and affection. Since women traditionally have occupied an important position in the institution of the family, in particular in relation to the education of children, violence against women can be a cause of stress and irreparable mental and social damage among other members of the family.<sup>1</sup>

'Violence against women is without a doubt one of the topics that falls under the protection of civil and political rights. However, the manner in which this concept has been developed by various supervisory bodies points to the fact that the issue of violence against women may guarantee social dimensions that relate to matters regarding the protection of economic and social rights.'<sup>2</sup> In addition, Amnesty International has clearly identified women's rights as human rights and UNICEF has recognised violence against women and girls as the most common form of human rights violation around the world.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the importance of this subject, in this article effort has been made to define violence against women, identify its various forms and examine the characteristics of each within the context of Iran.

**Definition**

In the first article of the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, violence has been defined as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.' There are many categories of forms of violence, but in general they are as follows:

1. Physical violence: This type of violence includes any anti-social behaviour such as beating, torture and murder. 'Physical or bodily violence includes any mistreatment such as pushing, kicking, battery, pulling hair, burning, whipping, damaging objects and furniture, in particular items that women may be specially attached to, harassment and harm such as repeatedly disrupting women's sleep in the middle of the night, repeated phone calls, spying on and stalking women, different threats such as intimidating letters, verbal or armed threats, threatening to harm others related to women such as children or relatives, killing pets and finally pretending to kill or killing victims.'<sup>4</sup> One of the most obvious forms of this type of violence in Iran includes 'honour' killings that have occurred repeatedly over the past years, reports of which are published in pages of newspapers. We will refer to a few instances: 'A 46 year old man suspected and stabbed his temporary wife of only 15 years of age and killed the man who was speaking with her on the street with repeated knife stabbings. Branch 71 of the Tehran Court sentenced him to pay the blood money due to the reasoning that he had assumed the victim deserved to die.'<sup>5</sup> 'In Gorgan a man suspicious of his 28 year old wife murdered her by pouring acid on her in front of her child.'<sup>6</sup>
2. Sexual violence: Sexual violence ranges from touching (sexual assault) to rape. This type of violence in the family or marriage can take the form of sexual intercourse between a wife and husband, or among close family members, or outside the family unit by an unknown suspect. With regard to cases involving the family unit, in Iran, marital relationships can involve a high degree of violence, which is deemed as natural and goes unnoticed. Iranian laws that oblige women to provide sex to their husband at demand, legalise, promote and are sexual violence. But when we address the issue of incest, Iranians strongly condemn and discourage this practice. This is why in cases involving incest, with very few exceptions, families hide the incident in order to preserve their honour. Therefore it is not possible to find accurate statistics of such incidents. However, when rape is carried out by a stranger, it is widely reflected in media and the entire population demands the most severe form of punishment for the violator.<sup>7</sup> Article 1105 of the Civil Code of Iran states: 'In relations between husband and wife; the position of the head of the family is the exclusive right of the husband.'<sup>8</sup> We know that the foundation and basis of the family must be on mutual

<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Eshraghi, "A sociological look at violence against women" Open University Journal – Shooshtar Branch, No. 2 (Winter 2005) p. 96

<sup>2</sup> Katrina Frostel, Martin Sheen, Mahrou Ghadiri, "Women: Economic, Social and Cultural rights, Majd, Second print (Winter 2012) p. 342

<sup>3</sup> Raza Gharachourlou, "Analysis of violence against women with emphasis on violence against women in Iran and report by UNSR Yakin Ertuk" Vekalat, No. 31 & 32 (December 2006), p. 31

<sup>4</sup> Shahla Ezazi, Sociology of Family, (Tehran: Roshangaran Publishing and Women's Studies, third print, 2003) p, 209.

<sup>5</sup> Etemad Newspaper, 30 October 2009, quoting Parvin Bakhtiarnejad, "Silent Tragedy", published on Madreseh Feministi site, pp. 9 & 10

<sup>6</sup> Etemad Newspaper, 17 June 2009, quoting Parvin Bakhtiarnejad, p. 12

<sup>7</sup> Alieh Shekarbeigi and Negar Khazan, Analysis of studies on violence against women in Iran over the past three decades, Iran Government's Women's website, August 2016, [www.women.gov.ir](http://www.women.gov.ir)

<sup>8</sup> The Civil Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran via <http://www.alaviandassociates.com/documents/civilcode.pdf>

feelings and a spirit of collaboration between the husband and wife but such an article can strengthen a sense of the husband prioritising their own needs, turning a loving relationship between two partners into a relationship involving a superior and an inferior. There are enforcement measures for the inferior party (wife) who may be defiant and uncooperative. This includes Article 1108 of the Civil Code, which states: 'If the wife refuses to fulfil the duties of a wife without legitimate excuse, she will not be entitled to the cost of maintenance.'<sup>9</sup> Supported by this law, men can resort to violence to force women to satisfy their sexual urges. This enforcement measure can be a powerful protection for men who consider rape as their legal right and engage in sexual violence against their own wife. Furthermore, in many cases a wife's refusal to engage in sexual activity at the demand of her husband can be accompanied by physical violence and beating.<sup>10</sup>

3. Sexual harassment: There is no clear and exact definition for this type of violence but in general any type of attention to the body of a woman against her consent or wishes, that has sexual undertones, is considered as sexual harassment. Such acts of violence may happen at work, in public, or by male members of one's family. Examples include: disturbing calls, derogatory comments by men on streets, and other such actions. In Iran, as may be the case in other countries, when a woman encounters such harassment, she is victimised and blamed for it happening.
4. Mental violence: This type of violence is any action that damages a woman's trust, honour and dignity.<sup>11</sup> This includes 'verbal and emotional abuse including humiliation in public, belittling physical appearance and condition, abusive language and terminologies that result in loss of self-confidence and imbalance in mental well-being, hallucinations and a tendency to commit suicide.'<sup>12</sup>
5. Financial violence: In many parts of the world women are considered as a free labourer at home caring for their families without any compensation and for this reason they are entirely economically dependent on the male members in their family. At times, in order to access their most fundamental needs to survive, if the men refuse to assist, then they face challenges. This phenomenon is prevalent throughout Iran. We can enumerate the causes of this type of violence in our country:
  - Denial of the right to education, vocational training, and job creation
  - Lack of access to equal opportunities in training
  - Legal barriers to inheritance which deprive women from accessing their share of freehold land ownership
  - Following divorce (after years of living with her husband) women have no right to the assets accumulated during their time together, and under Iranian laws she is not a co-owner of her husband's assets
  - Legal permits for polygamy cause difficulties in women's financial lives, as the husband's finances are divided between them, including his assets after his death
  - Lack of job security following maternity leave
  - Less pay for equal work
  - A husband has the cultural and legal right to deny his wife the right to work
  - Although women are accorded dowries and fair remuneration, as divorce is the exclusive right of a man, many are forced to sacrifice their financial rights and are left with no resources
  - Since women are not considered as co-owners of marital assets, professional women who spend their earnings on their families, following divorce or the death of their husband, are left in poverty and

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. insurmountable challenges in their old age.

<sup>10</sup> Maedeh Ghaderi, Islamic Republic Civil Rights and Women's Rights in Iran published in Shadi Sadr, Tahiri Danesh (Ed.), Iran Human Rights Review: Violence, Foreign Policy Centre, January 2014, [http://www.ihrr.org/ihrr\\_article/violence-en\\_islamic-republic-civil-rights-and-womens-rights-in-iran/](http://www.ihrr.org/ihrr_article/violence-en_islamic-republic-civil-rights-and-womens-rights-in-iran/)

<sup>11</sup> Alieh Shekarbeigi and Negar Khazan in Maedeh Ghaderi, Islamic Republic Civil Rights and Women's Rights in Iran published in Shadi Sadr, Tahiri Danesh (Ed.), Iran Human Rights Review: Violence, Foreign Policy Centre, January 2014, [http://www.ihrr.org/ihrr\\_article/violence-en\\_islamic-republic-civil-rights-and-womens-rights-in-iran/](http://www.ihrr.org/ihrr_article/violence-en_islamic-republic-civil-rights-and-womens-rights-in-iran/)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

6. Political violence: This is a type of violence when women's human rights are not reflected in national laws resulting in policies and cultural programmes that do not advance equal rights for women and men. In Iran where there is a religious government in place, the authorities easily justify this type of violence. Examples demonstrating this assertion include the 'promotion of virtue and prevention of vice', an Islamic concept to promote a religious way of life, personal preferences in implementation of laws, an emphasis on the domestic role of women and gender-based segregation.<sup>13</sup> In recent years following an increase in the summer air temperature and the thinning of women's clothing, the security forces implemented a special plan to counter the improper wearing of the hijab. In March 2005 the High Cultural Council passed a resolution entitled 'Strategies and solutions to develop the culture of chastity'. Based on this resolution security forces were charged with a series of enforcements known as 'Guidance Patrol'. Police cars with emblems of Guidance Patrol roam through important streets, squares, promenades, cinemas, shopping centres, arcades and similar spots where women whose hijabs are not deemed appropriate in accordance with their views are arrested.<sup>14</sup> Likewise the Islamic Republic Penal Code offers no protection to women who are victims of physical violence. Unequal blood money laws pertaining to women and men is a measure that results in violence against women.<sup>15</sup>

### **Areas of violence against women**

Violence against women happens in private or public. Violence in private involves all forms of violence that happen within the institution of the family and are categorised as domestic violence.<sup>16</sup> Until recently the prevalent view was that because of close, loving ties between members, the family is the best context for living.

Whenever a report about domestic violence and abuse was put forward, the general assumption was that it is only a few families, especially those from the lower cultural class, facing financial problems, or facing critical periods such as going through the process of divorce, who might engage in wrong or violent treatment of their family members.

Towards the end of the 1980s and during the early 1990's researchers began to study the reality of dynamics within the family unit. Contrary to their wrong assumptions, their findings pointed to the fact that there are families who may appear 'ideal' and normal but who suffer from violence among their members. Research on domestic violence began with a focus on physical violence against children, followed by wives facing physical abuse by their spouses, highlighting that this phenomenon affects all segments of society.

With regard to domestic violence, one of the barriers to research and access to information is the difficulty in conducting such research. In general, research about the interrelationships within the family unit is difficult as what happens behind closed doors is a personal and private matter, and there is no tendency to talk about it. In particular, violent and sexual mistreatments are seen as most private and the majority refuse to respond to questions about such matters. In most societies the assumption is that the family is a private unit and that society and government do not have the right to interfere in its affairs. Therefore, even when obvious, based on justifications such as giving in to the wants of a husband as a wife's duty, domestic violence is ignored and the victim is even deemed responsible for causing the abuse, expecting her to 'obey' and follow orders more closely. Within the family unit it is usually the stronger members who commit acts of violence against the weaker ones. It is because of physical, economic or social weakness that the victim becomes attached to the strong one and cannot end the cycle of violence. In many cases they are unaware of their social and human rights. When they decide to finally defend and protect their rights, a lack of support worsens their situation. Therefore, such victims stand in great need of government, societal and organisational assistance.<sup>17</sup>

In public, there is greater violence against women:

- Tradition and ritual: In many cases violence against women is explained based on non-religious traditions, ethnic and cultural practices.

<sup>13</sup> Alieh Shekarbeigi, Negar Khazan, "Analysis of studies on violence against women in Iran over the past three decades" Women's website at: [www.women.gov.ir](http://www.women.gov.ir) published on 22 August 2016

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Nasrin Afzali "The Islamic Republic, violence and oppression of women and forced hejab Laws" in Iran Human Rights Review by UK Foreign Policy Centre 2014 available online at: [http://www.ihrr.org/ihrr\\_article/violence-en\\_the-islamic-republic-violence-and-oppression-of-women-and-forced-hejab-laws/](http://www.ihrr.org/ihrr_article/violence-en_the-islamic-republic-violence-and-oppression-of-women-and-forced-hejab-laws/)

<sup>16</sup> Leila Alikarami "Unequal laws promote violence against women" Madreseh Feministi site at: <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article6200>

<sup>17</sup> Alieh Shekarbeigi, Negar Khazan, "Analysis of studies on violence against women in Iran over the past three decades" Women's website at: [www.women.gov.ir](http://www.women.gov.ir) published on 22 August 2016

- Oral and written culture: Idiomatic expressions and terminologies that are prevalent in Persian language encourage men to convey violence against women.
- Traditions and traditional explanations.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, research carried out in this field in Iran, especially statistical research, is highly limited. Based on the research carried out at the national level, 4 in 7 research participants have faced various types of domestic violence (45 instances). This means every woman has experienced an average of almost 7 instances of domestic violence in her married life. 23.5% of women in the study indicated that they have been affected by domestic violence since the inception of their marriage. 52.7% of all respondents expressed that since the start of their marriage, they have faced verbal abuse. Next is physical violence of the second type which 37.8% of Iranian women experience in their marriage. 72.3% of women said they continue to face social, mental and educational violence. 10.2% said they have been a victim of sexual and physical violence, which covers very few forms of violence. Following the announcement of such low statistics of sexual violence, Dr Ghazi Tabatabai added that in light of essential normative, conventional and sharia standards in Iranian culture and society, figuratively speaking, the low number can be due to self-censorship and propriety.<sup>19</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned in the body of the article, violence against women is a form of demonstrating power on the part of the strong against the weak, and those women who are either unaware of their rights or unable to stand up for themselves. In addition, the law, environment and culture of Iranian society results in violence against women based on omission, meaning lack of legal, moral and financial support, or through laws and cultural standards that force women to succumb to their circumstances. Therefore, the primary duty is on the shoulders of governments and responsible organisations to protect women by raising awareness at the level of the society in order to prevent such problems. This protection can be in the form of effective laws and enforcement measures regarding the prevention of violence or strengthening government organs involved with social services, among others.

In order to raise awareness the media can play an important role in improving societal perceptions regarding the position of women. Ultimately, plans must be made to put in place centres that can support victims of violence and assist them to return to their lives. Secondly, it is necessary to raise awareness amongst informed authorities such as social workers, women's rights activists and human rights activists, or anyone else who is concerned with equality of rights for women and men as an aspect of public life and society, to create NGOs and other organisations that will focus on this important matter. Therefore, a multi-pronged action over the long term by individuals, institutions and society at large is necessary in order to transform the current patriarchal culture into a culture of equality.

<sup>18</sup> Shahlā Ezazi, *Sociology of Family*, (Tehran: Roshangaran Publishing and Women's Studies, third print, 2003) pp, 199-202.

<sup>19</sup> Alieh Shekarbeigi, Negar Khazan, "Analysis of studies on violence against women in Iran over the past three decades" Women's website at: [www.women.gov.ir](http://www.women.gov.ir) published on 22 August 2016