



Silence over Justice: An Epidemiology of unreported Cases of Violence against Women in Morocco

Shabista Naz

Ph.D., Independent Researcher, Freelancer, and Educationist.
shabistanaz1@gmail.com

Abstract —

Since the Moudawana's reform (2004), several legal safeguards have been introduced to provide justice to women survivors of violence in Morocco. However, recent statistics show that legal measures have had little impact on reducing these crimes. The Moroccan National Survey on Violence against Women (2019) found that only three out of a hundred women survivors of sexual abuse seek legal justice and report the crime.

The data made it apparent that the existing legal safeguards are insufficient in breaking the silence of women survivors of violence. Hence, the present paper tries to draw attention to a different and often less discussed dimension of socio-psychological norms and behaviors of Moroccan society (power imbalance between men and women, fear of retaliation, victim-blaming/shaming attitudes, and family pressure, among others) which largely dictates the muted response of women survivors of domestic abuse.

The present paper further argues that addressing the socio-psychological issues as a priority, along with the formulation and implementation of legal measures, would provide voice to the voiceless. Furthermore, prioritising the socio-psychological aspect would encourage more women to report and seek legal help against incidents of violence.

Keywords— *Silence, unreported cases of violence, socio-psychological norms, gender biases, inequality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, violence against women has become ubiquitous and an epidemic across the globe. In Morocco, it is estimated that eight out of every ten women have been subjected to at least one or the other form of violence in their lifetime [1]. According to the Moroccan National survey on violence against women (2019), 6.4 million women were survivors of violence, of which 12.9% faced physical assault, and 13.8% were affected by cyberviolence [2]. The alarming rate of violence against women drove women's rights activists to demand strict legal safeguards against gender-based crimes. Their mobilization and activism resulted in the formulation of Law 103-13 on the elimination of Violence against



Women (VAW), which went into effect in February 2018.

According to the legislation, “any act based on gender discrimination that entails physical, psychological, sexual, and economic harm to women” will be considered a form of violence. The significance of Law 103-13 lies in its acknowledgment and criminalisation of some forms of domestic abuse perpetrated by husbands and families. To receive protection, survivors must seek criminal prosecution. However, the ambiguity in the definition of domestic violence is one of the most glaring shortcomings of the new law. In the absence of a clear description of the nature of the crime perpetrated against women, it is impossible for survivors to seek legal assistance.

According to the latest data on crime against women, only three percent of Moroccan women who experienced conjugal violence reported to the police about the incidence. Hence, it is evident from the statistics that legal measures are not sufficient to contain VAW, particularly in cases of domestic violence.

The under-reporting of cases of violence by women is a multidimensional issue. The socio-

psychological norms and behaviours of society shape individuals’ attitudes significantly. Thus, violence against women should be considered a systemic social problem requiring prompt attention and response. The nature and pattern of abuse of women inform us that most incidents of domestic violence are committed by men. However, in some cases, elderly women within a family also use violence against young women. Violence committed by an intimate partner within the confines of the home is hidden and concealed. Despite its rampant prevalence, the issue of domestic abuse elicits a muted response from both society and its survivors. Therefore, more investigation into why domestic violence survivors often remain silent is warranted. The decision of survivors to report or remain silent depends on the type and nature of the assault and their relationship with the perpetrator. Compared to physical/sexual/psychological/economic abuse inflicted by an intimate partner (spouse) in their houses, the reporting of physical/sexual crimes that occur in public settings and are committed by strangers remains higher. During the state-imposed national lockdown on

COVID-19, several women's organisations that work for gender rights reported that their helpline services were inundated with calls from women seeking assistance. In contrast, government agencies reported that only a small number of women filed complaints during this time [3]. It is significant to highlight that most of the women who contacted the NGOs for assistance were victims of domestic violence but opted not to report their abusers to the police.

The present research addresses the issue of gender-based violence primarily in the case of Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in physical/sexual/psychological, and economic forms as defined by VAW Law 103-13. This research employs the "Social norm theory" to comprehend the silence of women who have survived IPV. Social norm theory, which is a component of social psychology, asserts that social standards have a significant impact on human behaviour. Social norms are collective expectations of acceptable behaviour that are derived from context and society [4]. The social norm theory defines social norms as the two different kinds of beliefs.

1. Descriptive norms: People's perceptions of what other people would generally do in a particular circumstance.

2. Injunctive norms: People's beliefs about what other people expect of them.

Individuals' attitudes can be substantially shaped by a combination of two important elements: a person's gender and culture. Both of these influence attitude formation at various levels: individual, organisational, and community levels. The gender difference within a family is one of the most constant indicators of attitudes toward violence against women. The views that favour abusive behaviour against women are consistently predicted by gender. Existing work in this area highlights the prevalence of gender discriminatory attitudes across the globe as a signifier of different forms of violence including, domestic abuse, and sexual assault against women. Generally, men and, to a lesser extent, women, concur with the idea of the acceptability of violence against women. This generates victim blaming attitude, a lack of empathy for the survivors of abuse, and downplays the



seriousness, appropriateness, or harm of the associated behaviours that constitute gender-based violence. Some research indicates that socio-economic variables (education, occupation, toxic habits, and age) play a significant role in the creation of gender-discriminatory attitudes that contribute to the higher rates of violence against women [5].

II. DOMESTIC/INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)

In Morocco, as in many other Middle Eastern and North African countries, domestic violence is considered a trivial personal matter shaped by the prevalent belief in family values and honour. Women are compelled to keep the subject of domestic abuse a private family affair due to factors such as familial reputation, cultural expectations, and misguided religious views that equate shame with the occurrence of violence. In traditional Arab culture, the constant power struggle within a marital relationship exacerbated the problem of domestic violence. Tacit rules and beliefs based on the defence of family honour, husband's right to use violence, and victim shaming and blaming both

prescribe and proscribe the acceptability of domestic violence in families and communities. The social norm in Moroccan society that views violence as an acceptable method of discipline [6] prevents women from speaking out and compels them to remain silent about their victimisation. Hence, it is not surprising that the new VAW Law 103-13 failed to clearly define domestic violence and also missed out on addressing the subject of marital rape, despite the persistent demands of women's rights advocates.

III. ATTITUDE FORMATION

Attitude plays a fundamental and causal role in the persistence of gender discrimination. The use of violence, both at the individual and community level, is consistently linked to the adoption of beliefs and values that justify violence. For instance, men who grew up in traditional families often endorse misogynistic attitudes and are more likely to practice marital violence [7].

Multiple social dynamics operating at different echelons of society interact to shape people's perspectives on

violence against women. Experiences with or exposure to abusive behaviour, as well as age and development, dictates individual's conception of gender-based violence. Participation in violence-supportive contexts shapes outlook at the organisational level. Engagement in informal peer groups and association impact at the community level. Sociocultural factors such as pornography, other media, educational initiatives, and social movements affect societal attitudes towards violence against women. Furthermore, the attitude of individuals and their response to acts of brutality are shaped by the power disparity between men and women as a result of gender and culture.

One of the major intergenerational transmission pathways for attitude formation is the individual experience of or exposure to violence. There is substantial evidence that children who either witness or experience such violence are more likely as adults to hold beliefs that condone violence. Violence against women is embedded and connected with the patriarchal social attitude, which is guided by gender and sexuality. To put it simply, norms of gender and sexuality play a significant role in determining how we

evaluate cases of violence against women. For instance, perception regarding men's undisputed authority in their homes as well as in intimate relationships, justification of men's enforcement of dominance even through physical reprimand, acceptance of men's irrational sexual urges, brandishing women as deceitful and malicious, and conceptualisation of marriage as a guarantor of sexual consent. All of these contribute to perceptions of the legitimacy of men's violence toward intimate partners.

Along with gender and culture, the role of media narratives in attitude formation is significant. In 2016, Morocco's state Channel 2M, the TV show 'Sabahiyat' presented a beauty tutorial on how battered women might conceal their injuries with makeup and keep on with their everyday lives, sparked an outcry about the issue of indifference in cases of domestic violence [8]. However, following widespread criticism, the channel issued an apology and removed the clip from its channel.

A further important function of media narrative is that it can serve as both a facilitator and a barrier to victim-blaming attitudes. The media can



switch its narrative-building strategy from one that is victim-centric to one that places responsibility on the offender. For instance, instead of asking what went wrong, the media should begin to examine the agency of offenders and what, if anything, the abuser could have done differently. Holding perpetrators accountable for their actions would be immensely useful in altering passive mindsets. By changing the way the narrative is constructed, the focus would no longer be solely on showing sympathy for the victims, but on putting the aggressive attitude of the offenders in question. Most importantly, break away from the existing norm of covering up the offender's crime with weak justifications.

IV. VICTIM BLAMING

The patriarchal attitude in all traditional societies fosters victim blaming. The upshot is that women continue to shoulder the burden of blame and remorse, both from others and within themselves. In the majority of Muslim/traditional societies, family values define men's responsibilities and rights over women. Individualistic self-concepts have not made much inroads

until now in these societies. Nonetheless, few urban, western-oriented youths are challenging the prevailing standards.

Domestic violence has always been considered a familial (non) issue in most traditional societies. Statements like "I could kill you, and no one would stop me" reflect the pervasive social silence surrounding the issue of violence against women. When someone says or implies that a sexual assault was the victim's fault, this is referred to as "victim blaming". Sometimes, the pervasive social attitudes toward victim-blaming make people feel safer and better. It frequently begins with the default question of what a woman could have done differently to prevent the violence from occurring. The practise is so common that it further permeates the victim-blaming society.

"You must have done something to trigger his fury," is another typical example of a victim-blaming mentality. Because of persistent social attitudes toward victim-blaming, it sometimes becomes a natural psychological response to the crime. Consideration of domestic violence as normal and the dismissal or justification of violence by referring to

it as destiny are two of the more subtle and covert ways that the culture of victim-blaming is promoted. It implies that people are to blame for what happens to them. The concept is based on the belief that we all deserve our outcomes and consequences.

Sometimes violence is justified in cause and effect (action/ reaction) form. The wife must have done something to deserve her husband's wrath and subsequent violent response. These justifications employed by the extended family and society shapes the survivor's perspective, and she begins to question herself, finds the act of violence to be the appropriate response, and chooses the path of silence. A fundamental cause of victim-blaming is a failure to empathise with the victims. In order to examine our attitudes and end the customary silence in domestic/IPV instances, we must reframe the way we look at both the offenders and victims. The tendency to blame victims is significantly influenced by a person's moral values. Moral values consist of two primary sets of values.

1. Binding values: tends to lean toward and favour a group's interest more than the individual's value.

2. Individualising values; promotes and favour individual morals and ethics.

Greater support for binding values encourages victim-blaming behaviour. They put the victim at fault or make suggestions about what the victim may have done differently.

V. SHAME

Victim blaming generates a sense of shame in survivors of violence. Shame is the excruciatingly painful perception that one is essentially flawed. It informs our consciousness of our inherent deficiency and unworthiness. Shame is a cultural response to being sexually abused. The shame associated with failing to report a crime stems from the stigma associated with admitting the wrongdoing. It induces doubts in oneself and starts a negative spiral of thoughts. Consequently, it becomes very challenging to disassociate oneself from the prevailing condition of self-blame and to generate the courage to take action. The psychological damage that can be caused by acts of sexual violence against women is considerable and it is magnified to a great extent when the

violent act is committed by an intimate partner [9]. Survivors of psychological, physical, and sexual violence often experience severe episodes of shame due to the prevalence of these types of violence and the rapidity with which the act is committed. When victims of intimate partner sexual abuse subjected to a high number of assaults over a period of time, they are less likely to seek assistance and experience negative consequences [10]. Therefore, a person's feelings of shame after experiencing sexual violence are not innate, but rather the product of cultural norms around gender roles and attitudes toward sexuality [11]. Social norms based on patriarchal notions of how men and women should behave in sexual relationships are the primary contributor to the stigma surrounding sexual violence in relationships. Shame has many different aspects and has an impact on survivors of IPV in many ways. Consequently, survivors of marital sexual abuse may feel too ashamed or traumatised to report the offence. Marital partners internalise the cultural-sexual obligation placed on women because of the expectation that the woman will make herself sexually available to her husband whenever he desires. This is supported

by the fact that many people view sexual violence (rape) differently when it is committed by a stranger in a public place rather than within the privacy of a home. Patriarchal interpretations of religion also contribute to the establishment of sexist attitudes.

VI. STRUCTURAL CONCERNS

The lack of financial independence, the need for housing, and the absence of child care all contribute to the intensification of the silent response of women survivors of domestic/IPV violence. Women who are financially dependent on their partners are more likely to experience domestic violence than women who are working or independent. There is a correlation between women's economic circumstances and their passive response to domestic/ IP violence. Multiple lines of evidence suggest that a woman's socio-economic situation is a crucial factor in how she reacts to being a victim of domestic abuse.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article proposes

that the silence of Moroccan victims of violence can be better understood as a socio-psychological effect of strong cultural traditions and social norms that condone violence and justify abuse in order to uphold rigid gender roles. Therefore, it is crucial to debunk gender stereotypes and conventional beliefs in order to abolish the harmful dynamics of violence against women.

Additionally, greater awareness of the definition and manifestations of violence, the availability of means to report the crime, and increased financial independence have the potential to transform society's and individuals' attitudes toward gender-based crimes. Violence-prevention initiatives should concentrate more on correcting people's views.

Furthermore, reframed media coverage of domestic abuse would facilitate condemnation of the notion of naturalised male aggression and the impunity it enjoys in established societal structures.

Domestic/IP violence would also be contained if male and female religious leaders include and impart gender equality within their positive religious doctrines.

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