

## On Combating Violence Against Women:

# The Performance of Lebanese Non-Governmental Organizations

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As international conferences and conventions gave a public concern for domestic violence, the "domestic inviolability" pretext of our patriarchal society has become an ineffective cover for domestic violence against women. Although Lebanon, at the beginning and like other patriarchal societies, exhibited much indignation and obstinacy when charged with domestic family violence in general, and domestic violence against women in particular, well-publicized incidents soon occurred, undermining the legitimacy of both indignation and obstinacy, and rendering open to question the halo of sanctity enveloping the family in such societies. These incidents received media, and particularly television, exposure. Granted, media exposure of such events was driven by the need for sensationalist coverage, presenting these incidents as very rare and as consequences of exceptional conditions, but media coverage, nevertheless, enabled women to realize what they had been forbidden to realize: that suffering was not the fate of all females, that they could publicize their feelings of pain and report their aggressors. This media exposure also prompted those in contact with possible women victims to become aware of violence against women in its overt as well as covert manifestations.

Such progress happened in a relatively short time. Today, attention to the issue of violence against women goes beyond criminal practices to encompass daily practices as becomes evident in surveys, studies, and reports by doctors, researchers, social workers, and university students in different faculties (journalism, health, sociology, psychology, etc.). Nowadays,

the set of signs indicating violence is expanding to include the physical, psychological, legal, economic, and social dimensions of violence in all its forms.

In Lebanese society, and under the rule of a regime of a multi-sect structure, each of the separate groups is led to take matters into its own hands. As such, many types of organizations were founded, and these continue to respond to new social needs and to play a main, and often pioneering role in expressing those needs. These organizations began forming prior to the founding of modern Lebanon and took on different forms during the past hundred years. The founding of the modern Lebanese state did not undermine the role of these organizations; on the contrary, the problems confronting the country's progress constituted a *raison d'être* for these organizations' continuity and prosperity.

How do these organizations, which are non-governmental and which (as we here claim) are the first to sense social issues and address them, regard violence against women? Do they face it? What are their strategies for facing violence, and how do they implement these methods?

This paper profiles two non-governmental organizations on opposite sides of a bipolar continuum. One is a religious Muslim organization, and the other is civic and secular. They share the same coordinates of time and place (i.e. Lebanon today) but adopt opposite approaches to violence against women. The first organization craves to restore the first Islamic era and

anchors its performance in a historic cultural background of handling women's issues in general, and violence against women in specific. In contrast, the second organization views itself within a global context, from which it directly derives its reference frameworks and performance methodology (after adapting these frameworks to local social culture). Unlike the first organization, the second is futuristic; i.e., it is most probably based on a model to which non-governmental organizations in Lebanon increasingly aspire to reach.

**Najat Social Organization (Islamic)**

This is an organization with female-only members. It is based on Islamic thought, solidly affiliated to the Sunni Moslem "Jamaa Islamiyya" group, and consists of Sunni Muslim women who abide by the legal (religiously decreed) Muslim attire.

The Organization's headquarters are in Beirut, but the Najat is active in various Lebanese regions and among women of all groups (students, workers, housewives, etc.). It provides welfare services to needy Sunni Muslims, particularly on religious occasions, but it is primarily interested in raising women's awareness of Islamic religious affairs and in urging them to get involved in the public domain, both in religious and social affairs.

The organization holds general and specialized lessons and educational lectures, works to eradicate illiteracy, and teaches the Koran. It also hopes to establish training centers for upgrading the skills of mothers in their community by teaching them sewing, household management, and basic sanitation principles.

The Organization publishes a 36-page monthly journal (more than 80 issues have already been published) that expresses its attitudes and relates its activities. In particular, the journal provides a forum for exchange and debate among organization members and their male and female readers, on issues specifically related to women such as polygamy, divorce, domestic violence, marital relationships, spinsterhood, media exploitation of the female body, obedience and tribulation, socialization and friendship between the sexes, wearing the veil, men's guardianship over women (al-quwama), female role models, etc.

Najat Social Organization has an image of itself as "open-minded", evidencing that image with its membership in the "Lebanese Women Council" (which

brings together all types of women's groups and non-governmental organizations) and its participation in this Council's general assemblies and in some of its activities.

How does the Organization deal with violence against women?

To begin with, we should state that violence, according to this Organization, is mainly physical and involves brutal beating intending harm and injuring or disfiguring the face. Light beating of other parts of the body, aimed at merely "humiliating" and not injuring, is permissible by virtue of men's guardianship over women (al-quwama), similar to a mother's guardianship over her children, whereby occasional beating intending humiliation is a viable educational method. This is particularly so since the Koran frankly mentions such beating as an allowed method of treating disobedient women. Najat leaders do not accept the definitions of violence adopted by other working non-governmental organizations in this domain; Najat instead defines violence as solely "physical" though some of its young leaders do describe some forms of humiliation, dishonorable labeling, censure, cursing, restriction, subjugation, and compulsion to action as a form of "psychological violence" even more harmful than physical violence.

*Violent attitudes and practices towards women are entrenched in the public consciousness*

Aside from criminal cases that require police and legal intervention, Najat spokeswomen believe that physical aggression in the home is primarily the woman's fault and only secondarily the man's fault, and that thus, women must face violence via two strategies:

- Through prevention: By adapting to the man's God-given temperament, avoiding raising him to anger or creating problems by being too demanding, rebelling against his will, or speaking to him inappropriately, for women are often 'capable, sly beings' with great cunning and can thus use trickery (emotion or wit) to reach their goals rather than direct confrontation, which leads to violence.

- Through acceptance of her lot: Disregarding the man's violence as long as he provides her with food, shelter, and clothing and does not force her to disobey God's Word. The organization believes that a woman in this case should instead be discreet and accept her lot in order to protect her family, thanking God that she is not forbidden to worship Him, and should accept her earthly God-given situation while awaiting the fruits of Heaven.

The Organization addresses men through its public channels, such as its journal, and through personal contact should the need arise, to convince husbands to use their guardianship over their wives with mercy, and to remember that women too are human beings honored by God and should not be brutalized.

Other actions such as arbitrary divorce, denial of custody over children, reduction of allowance, and other injurious practices following divorce and second marriages (or constant threat of them), in addition to yet other practices of psychological violence and legal aggression, are all objects of complaint by women readers but are not considered acts of violence by the Najat Organization. These issues exist only as topics of debate, that sometimes extend over several issues of the above-mentioned monthly journal, between women, men, and religious figures, reflecting a certain intellectual vitality and openness. Participants in this debate base their arguments on the Koran and on Prophet Mohamed's life as well as on the realities of contemporary life. The solution resides, according to all these participants, in returning to the fundamental laws of Islam, which are constantly being violated. Perhaps the best example of such violation, as Najat leaders themselves admit, is the performance of legal Islamic courts. Muslims should work to restructure these courts so as to guarantee the application of Islamic Law (Shariaa), which honors Woman and guarantees her rights no matter what her status: a daughter free in her basic choices when her father is alive, his inheritor when he dies, whether a single wife or one of several, a divorced woman whether a mother or not, a widow, or a holder of special funds. All of the rights given to women in these situations are currently being violated due to malpractice in Shariaa implementation.

However, the task of restructuring legal courts, which may require the appointment of women and not only men, ranks low on the Organization's agenda of priorities, so much so that its members and target groups do not find it necessary to give the matter its due consideration despite their realization of this matter's effectiveness not only in alleviating the suppression of women but also in effecting Islamic justice and demonstrating its recognition of women and their rights.

That is the way Najat addresses physical and psychological violence and the wrongs and subjugation from which women - in its milieu tend - to complain. As for

general incidents of violence that strike women not belonging to the Organization's religious sect, Najat does not find reason to discuss them, and if it does so, the language becomes very general and vague (by evading, for example, the expression "rape" and replacing it with three periods) and casts blame on the government for not protecting the abused and not punishing abusers.

Najat Social Organization does not address violence against women in specific because it views itself "not as a women's organization", for its aims and purposes center around organizing society and ensuring its Islamic orientations in accordance with the visions of the "Jamaa Islamiyaa" group. As such, women are asked to work in the Organization not to ensure the victory of women but rather that of Islam. Women's motives in joining the organization vary but all share a common characteristic: each of these women is related to one or more male members of the "Jamaa Islamiyya" group. Sisterhood in this women's organization is established through the brotherhood of these men; perhaps the extent to which such women succumb to the will of their male relatives makes them less attentive to the pleas of abused women from their direct milieu who publicly seek their help on the pages of the Najat's above-mentioned publication.

Najat members' criticism of abused women's male abusers does not go beyond being a cathartic means of helping them vent their suffering. This venting is bounded by a well-defined ceiling expressed in a consistently recurrent theme, in both oral and written discussion, as follows: that women must obey men, that this is part of the worship of God, and that women's disobedience of men is one of western culture's manifestations of corruption, which has struck men in their manhood, prior to striking women, and thus allowed women to disobey men and to disobey God equally.

The Najat Organization refuses approaches to women's issues that are adopted by other Lebanese NGOs, under the pretext that these approaches are sponsored by the West, a West that "is invading us with its sinful values and traditions". Effective confrontation of violence against women, in the agenda of Najat Social Organization, is thus postponed as long as its women members remain operative under male guardianship (*quwama*) and as long as they continue to believe that obeying men is part and parcel of religious practice and righteousness.

*The Arab  
Court broke  
the silence that  
surrounds violence  
against women*

### **Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women**

The “Arab Hearing Session” for physically abused women paved the way for what came to be known as “The Arab Court for Women”, held in Beirut in June 1995 in preparation for the Beijing Conference and what followed it - the founding of “The Permanent Arab Court for Combating Violence Against Women” in November 1996. These two occasions paved the way for founding “The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women” in March 1997. It was composed of women’s civic organizations, some with women-only members and others with mixed members and social workers from both sexes (around 15 organizations, among them the Lebanese Council for Women, which itself consists of tens of women’s organizations). All of these members hope to “unify their efforts to address the problem of violence against women specifically because women are the weaker group in a society where patriarchy prevails and where women are the victims of violent practices that have prevailed and that continue to prevail in the different types of wars in our country”.

In its foundational declaration, the council holds that “there is no way to solve the violence issue except by confronting it”. It thus calls on the government to be a fair arbitrator and the ultimate authority in protecting women, especially legally. It also holds that confronting violence against women is achieved not only by legal reform, but also by diligent work on the level of local communities in order to undermine the misconceptions they harbor vis-à-vis women.

How does this organization address violence against women? Why does it choose the methods it does, and how does it apply them?

Inherent in the multifaceted definition of violence adopted by the council are the corresponding multifarious functions it is required to perform. This definition identifies violence as “physical or psychological attack inflicted by one party, (material or moral), upon another”. However, the manifestations of such violence are difficult to discern “because they have been part and parcel of our culture and their justification internalized in such a way as to delude our awareness and faculty of observation”. The Council’s performance during its short history has been constricted to identifying, specifying, and categorizing these manifestations whether in the complaints of more than 150 cases of abused

women who sought this Council’s headquarters for help, or in the context of the few public “battles” that it fought in defense of some women who suffered different types of violence.

In addition to defining violence as causing direct physical abuse to the other party, the Council’s perspective views the following as manifestations of violence: physical confinement, social defamation (by instigating the crowd via activating their traditional conceptions and criteria), economic abuse (where the abused is denied her material rights, whether money or inheritance), intellectual abuse (where the expression of ideas is prohibited, silence is forced, and the proclamation of an attitude opposite to the woman’s own is imposed), or finally civil and religious legislations instigating and perpetuating discrimination against women .

*Physical aggression in the home is primarily the woman’s fault and only secondarily the man’s fault*

It is justifiable to describe public and private inclinations, behaviors, and societal structures as “violent” to the extent that they generate, permit, or conceal violence within their folds. Perhaps the most demonstrative examples of this phenomenon are the decrees of Article No. 562 of the Lebanese penal code, from which a man is almost excused for murder: “If a man witnesses his wife, daughter, or sister committing fornication or illegal forms of sexual intercourse, kills her or harms her unintentionally”, he is practically absolved of his murder. This law solves the fornication problem with the murder solution. The legal Article here is a justification for murder, enabling us to describe the law as violent and indict the way it “justifies” murder.

The Council’s primary mission lies within the path paved by the “Arab Court”, which “broke the silence” that surrounds violence against women. Since media was a main channel for breaking this silence, the Council resorted to the media conservatively and efficiently. This is because commercial media coverage is sometimes exceedingly provocative and exaggerated, and other times incomplete and shallow, thus, potentially harming the cause at large. Efforts to break the silence have thus taken many forms. In addition to utilizing visual media (films, documentaries, spots, talk shows), the Council’s Media Committee conducts campaigns to familiarize the public with the Council and its work, sensitize journalists and media to the topic, and spread awareness among school students, particularly by distributing a dual-purpose survey: to discover

the extent to which the violence phenomenon has spread, to raise awareness of its manifestations in one's direct milieu, particularly the familial one, and to call this abuse for what it is and reporting it for being a crime and not a normal occurrence.

On the legal level, the Council aims at spreading awareness of the legal texts that decree punishment for acts of violence and of those texts that oppress women's rights. The Council participates in campaigns to eradicate 'legal illiteracy' and urges the government (guardian of the law) to develop existing laws and create new ones that protect women from violence; it also urges the government to apply international conventions that prohibit discrimination and violence against women. The Council, through a special committee of judges and lawyers, also provides abused women with legal consultation services and judicial assistance.

The Council's Social Committee organizes public and private hearing sessions for abused women. It provides women with direct help that takes different forms though it remains lacking in response to actual demand.

Furthermore, the Council has an abused women's hotline and goes beyond that to provide counseling services and emotional support through specialists in the field – therapists and social counselors. Providing safe shelters for abused women remains an urgent necessity; the council seeks to found such shelters by appealing to the government through the Ministry of Social Affairs or through non-governmental organizations (such as clerical Christian organizations).

In the absence of local studies on familial violence, the Council undertakes documentation and research efforts that have yielded some publications, an effort that indicates the nature of the Council's work and development and that provides its members and friends with a methodological means of understanding the violence-related issues, with knowledge as a necessary condition for dealing with them.

The Council also participates in the ongoing "Women's Rights Campaign", held by the "Arab Women's Court" and aimed at breaking the silence regarding the legal injustice targeting Arab women, especially in the personal status code- the Family Law. In its primary phase, this campaign concentrates on laws related to divorce. Furthermore, the Council attends to emergency criminal incidents against women whether publicly, as in "the case of student Soleen", or privately away from media attention, as in the case of "Fatima the minor" convicted of murdering her neonatal offspring.

Expanding the significance of the concept of violence from direct physical and psychological violence to that which may incite it has led the council to undertake both diverse and specialized tasks. These tasks are diverse in the sense that they require specialization in varied areas of intervention comprising law, social services, medicine, media, public relations, research, etc. The need for specialization, however, is dictated by the methodology used to approach the issue. Anger, direct confrontation, group allegiance on the one hand, and emotional, legal, material, and psychological support of abused women on the other, are important actions. Yet, these are only circumstantial confrontations. Violent attitudes and practices towards women are entrenched in the public consciousness. Consequently, combating such violence means combating inherited beliefs that derive the "obviousness of their appropriateness" from religion, family education, law, politics, and economics, etc. and from all societal constructs that protect the dominant and traditional group's interests.

Resisting these inherited, violence-generating beliefs requires tracing their effects, undermining them within the folds of these constructs (in law, education, and economy), and deconstructing them to specify the premises of discrimination and violence against women. Discrimination and violence are dictated by the continuity of patriarchal dominance, a dominance no longer compatible with contemporary cultural and social reality. The need to be in harmony with the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, which essentially involves adhering to human rights, is no longer a choice for these societies but rather an imposed necessity. This deconstruction aims at specifying the most appropriate entry points of intervention to resist discrimination and violence against women. The functions proposed for that resistance require specialization of tasks in accordance with the many specialized fields involved in the practice of discrimination and violence against women.

Even though the Council has only been operating for five years, it has actively participated in helping abused women. It continues to strive toward raising the governmental and social awareness that would put forth conditions that minimize violence against women. Through considering this task, it becomes clear that programs in this endeavor require the efforts of human rights activists as well as researchers and academicians. Success comes by capacity-building of the workers involved through training and sensitization, by constant documentation, evaluation and good management, by planning and testing, by mutual cooperation between the various parties involved, by openness to other organizations working on the same issue, and by building

coalitions that will create enough pressure to alter discriminatory policies and laws.

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We described above two non-governmental organizations' approaches to dealing with violence against women and the ideologies underlying them. The first, the Najat Social Organization, does not directly address violence but merely responds situationally to that violence's most crude manifestations and postpones dealing with the many modes of subjugation and suppression imposed on women. It appeals to what it dubs as women's "natural" capacity for sacrifice of her individuality (which is equivalent to tolerating the conditions of violence, subjugation, and suppression) for the sake of the group to which she is affiliated- "Jamaa Islamiya" - and thus calls on women to return to Islam and reject western civilization.

The second, the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women, is civic and is working to combat the visible aspects of violence and to reveal its invisible aspects in societal structures that conceal or justify such violence. As this organization seeks to break the silence, it aims at making violence and discrimination against women a public matter: that is, a matter belonging to the province of society and of the government (as a representative of society), and not the province of the family, the religious sect, or any of the other fundamentally patriarchal structures.

The approach of the first organization - The Najat - is a traditional approach to women's issues in the Arab world. Organization spokespeople, especially those of women organizations in the Arab world, have consistently announced that their work aims to elevate society as a whole and to serve its cause(s), and not women or their causes as a group or as individuals. Their societal roles - as dictated by the hegemonic patriarchal system - are highlighted at the expense of their "subjectivity", thus marginalizing their issues on the priority list of social movements and organizations. The lesson learnt from the Algerian women activists of the Algerian Revolution, which was widely acknowledged by feminists all over the world, seems to be wasted on our traditional women organizations. These continue to affiliate themselves with social and political forces that involve them in their causes, revolutions, struggles, and wars gauged to the vision of "their" men in control, strategized accord-

ing to their priorities and implemented according to their ways and methods.

As for today, we witness a transformation in women's activism in social work through the establishment of non-governmental organizations, some with women-only members and others that are mixed, carrying issues that concern women in general or particular groups of women. While women's traditional organizations previously proceeded from an ideology and attempted to perceive reality through that ideology, the new organizations tend to respond to actual realities limited by time and space and act on them in accordance with a frame of reference.

That frame of reference consists of a few premises relating to Human Rights proclamations, but mostly adhering to these realities, and deals with them at a pace and reach determined by the specific rhythm of our society and the conditions of its people.

Violence in Lebanon's not-so-distant memory is repulsive in all its forms; how so if its practiced within the family by one member against another? Combating it is hence justified in all cases. When a group of people act to achieve that, it receives support and allegiance from all groups (sects, regions, fanatic groups). When combating such violence collides with existing patriarchal societal structures, the

distribution of forces, supportive and oppositional, will probably not occur on a sectarian or regional basis or on other "natural" ones. As such, the performance of a non-governmental organization combating violence against women has a focal mission: it must attract and organize the societal forces supporting its work by upgrading its organizational skills, building its members' capacities, building coalitions, undertaking public struggles, capitalizing on its successes, and learning from its failures etc.

These tasks seem simple for a traditional patriarchal organization such as the Najat Organization, for it is likely to draw upon the repertoire of experience of its male counterpart. The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women is working in a novel space, targeting a varied heterogeneous group (abused women), and attempting furthermore to undermine the deeply entrenched patriarchal gender system...for this organization, "innovation" (creativity) in its daily tasks and endeavors seems to be the "fate" of its activists.

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