

OP ED: Broken Homes in Far Lands

By: Justice Kassoumis

Imagine a life where you wake up, take a shower, brush your teeth, fix your hair, and cover your bruise's before you start your day. Many women face this every day in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with little to no help. Domestic abuse in these areas is a common problem, and with no safe havens for these women, they are forced to live in constant fear. There are also fewer services available to these women than in other parts of the world. While it can be difficult to gather data in the MENA, a recent study indicates that 66% of women in Iran report having been abused. Religious interpretations and lack of legal punishment contribute to an environment that supports such abuse yet there are courageous organizations attempting to put a stop to this cycle of violence.

Violence has to come from somewhere and in many MENA households it is rooted in an age-old problem, the oppression of women. In many of these societies, women are married off at young ages and move into extended households where men hold the authority. These men, usually much older, feel certain parts of their faith and their community norms give them the rights to discipline wives and daughters and to use violence to do so. Such practices are often justified by reference to Islam particularly as encoded in sharia law. Sharia law, or Islamic law, is the term for religious guidelines that the government has shaped into their legal laws. These laws are a blend of the religious interpretations from the Hadith and legal systems that dictate public and private actions, as well as punishments. These laws usually favor the rights of men, giving them full control over wives and daughters and allowing beatings specifically when women are disobedient. At its most extreme, some versions of sharia law, such as that found in Saudi Arabia, also take away women's independence by not allowing to be alone in public or drive cars.

Laws, or to be exact the lack of laws, to prevent and punish the perpetrators is another big problem, as well as enforcing existing or future laws that help these women. If there is nothing to hold the people at fault for their actions or anyone to police these specific crimes, it just adds to them thinking that they can get away with it. Sadly, often times they do. Many laws state things towards women that put them in a powerless position or treat their legal matters as lesser than. For an example, Pakistan has laws and punishment against domestic violence, but as stated earlier, they are poorly enforced and usually tossed into civil court instead of being treated as a criminal case. Even in places, such as Iran, that have some punishment for violence against women (rape, abuse of a pregnant women, etc.), they still don't have laws against domestic violence in certain situations or protect the women in these situations. Religious oppression is a major issue to women's rights everywhere, and Islamic influence on the government laws continues the trend. Men's control over their wife in marriage, ability to divorce easily and keep the children, and women's forced veiling, legal marriage age (nine), and forced bride exchange are all just examples of the negative effect religion has on state law. A separation of church and state has been stated to be the most helpful solution, and places such as Iran, Egypt, and Pakistan are going in that direction.

Teaching a child that physical and verbal violence is the answer is also another reason the cycle continues. A child watches his parents and begins to think that it is okay to do the things that the father is doing. They grow up surrounded by the daily life of this violence and eventually create violence themselves; thus a cycle of violence perpetuates itself.

There are many different programs in MENA countries and in the US to help victims of domestic violence. Education that is culturally focused for the community and that teaches young boys peaceful domestic skills, women their human rights, and the community/legal system to shun and punish these actions are being added by programs such as KAFA, (<http://www.kafa.org.lb/>), all across MENA. In addition, letting these woman know they have support by joining together and showing you care is a big

step in the right direction. For example, writing a blog with information, contacting government officials, and generally raising awareness are simple acts that can have big impacts. In addition, donating small contributions of food, water, clothing, or money to shelters that house these women or writing letters of encouragement to help them through their plight are all easy and doable. To help you find the resources that help the victims of both the MENA and US, visit <http://www.api-gbv.org/resources/programs-serving-muslims.php>.

Now, imagine a life where you wake up, take a shower, brush your teeth, and are greeted by your loving spouse. That is the life that women in the MENA, and everywhere, deserve. You can make that happen with just a little bit of your time and care, and show the women and children of this of this world a brighter tomorrow.

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