“Hitting as Light as Feathers”: Religious Leaders’ Voices on Domestic Violence

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) is described as a major public health issue that negatively affects women’s physical, mental, reproductive, and sexual health. In Lebanon, there are 18 religious sects that are allowed by the Lebanese constitution to manage their own affairs, judge, legislate, and issue rulings. These laws discriminate against married women and favor men over women. The purpose of this research is to explore the views and attitudes of religious leaders on DV, and their experiences of dealing with DV in Lebanon. This study involved in-depth interviews with 13 male religious leaders from various religious denominations. Each religious leader participated in an in-depth interview to assess understanding and perceptions about DV, and how DV cases are usually dealt with. All of the participants stated that they were involved in the affairs of their communities by counseling on familial and marital problems. Thus, several themes emerged throughout this study which are related to types and prevalence of DV,

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causes of DV, responding to DV through counseling and taking legal measures, religious leaders' opinions on the DV law, and the support they need from the community and stakeholders to encourage the implementation of the law against DV. The results demonstrated that religious leaders are one of the many stakeholders concerned with addressing community-level issues because religion is a prominent part of people's lives in Lebanon. Therefore, religious leaders could have a pivotal role in raising awareness about and responding to DV. Providing them with proper information and referral options in the communities they serve would improve society's response to DV. Finally, their request for building their skills in DV counseling in the form of trainings or workshops indicates a need that can be met by local community organizations.

Keywords

domestic violence and cultural contexts, domestic violence, perceptions of domestic violence, spirituality and violence, cultural contexts

Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is a public health issue (Usta et al., 2007) which adversely affects women's physical, mental, reproductive, and sexual health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013). Globally, 30% of women have reported physical and/or sexual violence by their partners at least once in their lifetime (WHO, 2013). The highest prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV), at 37%, was reported in the Eastern Mediterranean, South-East Asia, and African regions (WHO, 2013). Victims of DV are more prone to have attempted suicide, experienced induced abortion from physical violence, and contracted sexually transmitted infections (WHO, 2013). IPV is a term used interchangeably with DV (Keshavan, 2015) but excludes family members such as siblings, parents, and children (Keshavan, 2015).

Research in the Middle East region shows that one out of four women in Jordan, for example, are victims of DV (Safadi et al., 2018). A qualitative study exploring causes of DV in Jordan found that forced marriage, financial burdens, cultural beliefs, sexual factors, absence of legal measures taken against the perpetrators, and families' rejection of women leaving their spouses are determinants of DV (Almajali et al., 2019). A systematic review also revealed that one in

three women in Saudi Arabia are victims of DV and that levels of education of the perpetrator and the spouse, as well as the spouse's drug addiction are determining factors (Kazzaz et al., 2019).

In Lebanon, the most recent research indicates that 35% (494 of 1,418) women surveyed in four primary health care centers from four diverse geographic areas reported that they were victims of DV (Usta et al., 2007) and that verbal violence was the most common form followed by physical violence. The study also found that unemployment, low education levels, reduced health status, and familial violence were positively associated with DV (Usta et al., 2007). Further research shows that 240 (68.8%) of Palestinian refugee women attending antenatal care clinics in Lebanon have experienced various forms of partner abuse, and that 11.4% were physically abused during their pregnancy (Hammoury & Khawaja, 2007). DV among Syrian refugee women in Lebanon had increased since the onset of the conflict as a consequence of the stress, anxiety, and sense of powerlessness their husbands were experiencing (International Rescue Committee, 2012).

Victims of DV, especially religious women, seek help and counsel from religious leaders (Choi & Cramer, 2016; Houston-Kolnik & Todd, 2016; Levitt & Ware, 2006; McMullin et al., 2015; Sisselman-Borgia & Bonanno, 2017; Züst et al., 2017). Research exploring religious leaders' views of DV and their role in counseling DV survivors has shown that religious leaders lack the necessary training, and report challenges pertaining to protecting women while preserving the marriage, given the limited community-level resources for referrals (Choi & Cramer, 2016; Levitt & Ware, 2006; Moon & Shim, 2010; Sisselman-Borgia & Bonanno, 2017; Züst et al., 2017). We found six such studies which mostly stem from the United States with the exception of one from Sweden, and each of the studies interviewed participants from one religious background (Choi & Cramer, 2016; Levitt & Ware, 2006; Moon & Shim, 2010; Rudolfsson et al., 2012; Sisselman-Borgia & Bonanno, 2017; Züst et al., 2017). The studies also indicate that religion may contribute to silencing the issue, as some Christian faiths hold patriarchal ideologies that dictate women should be submissive (Houston-Kolnik & Todd, 2016; McMullin et al., 2015). Religious men who beat their wives have been found to refer to biblical phrases to justify their behavior (McMullin et al., 2015; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Similarly, in Muslim communities, men who beat their wives justify their behavior through Koranic interpretations (Al-Tawil, 2012; Douki et al., 2003).

To our knowledge, no research has involved religious leaders from different religious denominations in the same study, exploring their experiences with DV in their communities. Given they are considered to be credible figures in their societies, especially in Lebanon, where multiple religious communities co-exist, they are important stakeholders in interventions addressing DV in the country. This study reports on the perceptions of religious leaders from several religious denominations about DV in Lebanon, and their experiences in responding to it.

Background

In Lebanon, there are 18 religious sects. These include the Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Jewish denominations. Those which have the most significant number of followers include Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christian, as well as Muslim Sunni and Shiite denominations (Shehadeh, 1998). The Lebanese state institutionalizes the representation of various religious sects and grants their leaders power over religious affairs, including personal-status codes, and therefore, are allowed by the Constitution to manage their affairs, judge, legislate, and issue rulings. Thus, each religious sect follows its codes of practice that deal with divorce, marriage, custody of the children, and inheritance (Henley, 2016). These laws discriminate against married women and favor men. For example, in the case of divorce, the custody of the children goes primarily to the husband in all religious sects (Shehadeh, 1998).

The recently issued Lebanese Law 293, or “Law to Protect Women and Other Family Members from Family Violence” was put into effect on May 15, 2014 (KAFA, 2014). Features of the law include punishing beating between family members and issuing protection orders against the abuser (KAFA, n.d.). However, there were gaps identified in Law 293, as some aspects continue to be handled by religious courts. For instance, the Law does not sanction marital rape (KAFA, 2014). Since the implementation of the Law in 2014, the protection orders that were released from 2014 to 2016 were minimal compared to the reported DV incidents during that same period, during which the media reported the death of 14 women due to DV, which shows that the Law has not been effective in protecting women from DV (AUB Policy Institute, 2017).

Method

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the American University of Beirut. Two of the authors (N.A. and S.K.)

who were graduate students at the time of the study, conducted and recorded in-depth interviews with 13 male religious leaders from a variety of religious denominations in the country after obtaining their informed consent. We extended invitations to as many religious leaders as we could find, and who represent several denominations, to capture a diversity of views and practices, except for those from the Jewish faith, who are not present in Lebanon. We interviewed everyone who responded to the invitation. A total of 25 were contacted and 13 accepted. We used criteria-based sampling to select our participants. The criteria included religious leaders who were involved in the affairs of their community and were well-informed in their respective religion. While the names and addresses of religious leaders in the Christian denominations are publicly available in their communities, we had to visit the Civil Council for the Druze sect, Dar el Fatwa, and the Supreme Islamic Shia Council to access the Druze and Muslim religious leaders. The religious communities were not always limited to geographical areas, so we used word of mouth to identify smaller congregations to inquire about the religious leaders they refer to; however, many were not always available because they lived elsewhere and commuted from rural areas for religious events when necessary.

Two of the three authors (N.A. and S.K.) conducted the interviews in colloquial Arabic, from February to May 2018, one interview for each participant. Each lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and took place in locations chosen by the participants. The interviews followed an interview guide which consisted of open-ended questions asking about the type of social problems that the participants mostly came across, types of advice they were sought for, cases of DV they encountered, how they dealt with them, and how the new law against DV could support their work. As the interviews progressed, new findings emerged, and probes were added about the types of DV they described, the support they needed from the community and their opinion about the Law. The two interviewers transcribed the interviews verbatim and generated codes from the transcribed data. To guard against possible prejudice, and to confirm data accuracy, the two authors cross-checked each other's transcriptions and coding. The whole research team including the primary investigator (J.M.), a faculty member at the University, cross-checked the translation of quotes which were included in the manuscript. All the research team members collectively familiarized themselves with the data before collective thematic analysis ensued; the themes were based on repeated reading of transcripts and generation of codes until the coding formulated themes that the authors

collectively agreed upon. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants in the write-up. Data analysis was based on one of the most commonly used forms of analysis in qualitative research, thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012), which consists of the six-stage framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, reviewing patterns, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

The 13 participants were all male religious leaders from six religious sects: three Muslim Shiite, three Muslim Sunni, two Druze, three Maronite Christians, one Greek Orthodox, and one from the Evangelical faith. We could not find religious leaders representing 10 of the 18 sects; and two leaders from two sects refused to participate. The ages of our participants ranged from 30 to 60 years. Eleven of them served in urban areas, while two commuted between the two. The participants were specialized in the teachings of their respective religions and were employed as school teachers or university instructors. Two Muslim religious leaders (Islamic scholars) had publications on marriage and DV from a religious perspective. One of the Druze religious leaders was a member of the cultural committee in the Civil Council of the Druze sect, while the other was a judge in the Druze religious courts. In contrast, the Christian religious leaders were priests managing parishes for more than 10 years, and all of them had studied theology as a prerequisite for priesthood. Two priests reported teaching religion at school, while another hosted a TV show on the topic.

Results

The following major recurring themes emerged from the data analysis: types and prevalence of DV, causes of DV, responses to DV, challenges faced in dealing with DV cases, participants' opinions on the DV-related law, its implementation, and the support they need in their response. Despite the differences in religious backgrounds, findings were not very different across the sample of participants.

All of the participants reported being involved in the affairs of their communities by providing spiritual and religious guidance, psychological support, and counseling on familial and marital problems for adults and youth. Participants reported that the most common types of issues

people ask them for advice on include familial, martial, psychological, and financial problems.

DV: Types and Prevalence

All of the study participants, regardless of religious backgrounds, reported encountering cases of varying degrees of DV with the exception of two Druze religious leaders who reported that DV was rare in their communities. Married women were described to be the victims of DV in the majority of cases in addition to a few children, but vary rarely men. The types of DV reported include verbal, physical and emotional violence. Most of the participants regarded cursing as a form of verbal violence, and as the most recurring type of verbal abuse.

I think that DV has decreased in our community. DV is still present for sure, but it has decreased. (Christian RL#4)

We have DV in our community but it is not frequent. But we do have some cases where the husband physically abuses his wife but nobody dares to talk about it since it is considered a taboo. Physical abuse exists in our society, but its prevalence is less than other types of DV. I have encountered two cases of physical abuse and four to five cases of emotional abuse. (Christian RL#3)

I do not know how prevalent DV is, but it exists in the community. It is not low, but I cannot give you an exact estimate because it might be higher. (Muslim RL # 8).

DV is present in our community, but its prevalence is very low. It is very rare that we encounter severe cases. (Druze RL #9).

Our participants did not however, bring up sexual violence as a type of DV. Only one participant referred to marital duties of the woman toward her husband:

We cannot say we have rape and violence. So, we advise the wives to be more understanding and considerate towards their husbands' sexual desires... Sometimes people consider a husband forcing his wife to please him as a form of sexual violence. According to our Sharia, we do not face such a case, because when a wife does not fulfill her husband's sexual desires, he will take a second woman for a wife. And when that

happens the wife gets angry. A man has uncontrollable desires he needs to satisfy. Women also have sexual desires, but they can control them, men cannot. (Muslim RL #5)

Multi-Causation of DV

The participants attributed DV to several personal (behavioral and psychological) as well as societal-level factors.

Psychological problems, mental illness, anger mismanagement, and drug abuse were among the recurring causes of DV. Participants explained that individuals who had experienced such problems were the perpetrators of DV. In their opinions, experiencing DV in childhood would most likely lead to similar abuse toward other family members in adulthood. Individuals who have suffered from drug and alcohol addiction were also described to be prone to take money from other family members by force to buy these substances.

When a person reaches an advanced stage of abusing others, this person has surely had psychological problems in childhood. I am sure that someone used to physically abuse him or his mother as a child, so he turned up this way. (Christian RL #4)

Once a man came seeking help from me because his wife was beating him. It turned out that the wife has Schizophrenia and never disclosed it to her husband before marriage. (Christian RL #1)

Participants referred to men's misinterpretation of religious texts as another cause of DV. Three Muslim religious leaders stated that husbands abuse their wives because they misunderstand the teachings of Islam, believe that Islam requires women to be obedient toward their husbands, and that men are allowed to beat their wives. A priest also stated that sometimes a patriarchal mind-set is a result of these misinterpretations of the teachings of the Old Testament.

Sometimes I encounter cases where the husband would not allow his wife to leave the house except after his permission. These men believe that Islam dictates that their wives should obey them. (Muslim RL #13)

Hitting does not mean bruising or leaving marks on the body or breaking her hand. As I mentioned earlier, there are cases where the man misinterprets the "Ayah" or does not understand it at all in the first place. (Muslim RL #7)

Men justify their perceived superiority over women by using the biblical story which says that Eve is created from Adam's rib. (Christian RL #4)

Social factors that the study participants reported include social unacceptance of premarital cohabitation which they reported as providing an opportunity for couples to develop their relationship in preparation for marriage.

There are some cases of newlyweds who are still getting to know each other. Even if they have been engaged for a while, when they live under the same roof, they start to notice things they were unaware of before. Because in Lebanon, we have an oriental culture where cohabitation or pre-marital sex is frowned upon... it is still not part of our culture and not accepted by society. (Christian RL #1)

The patriarchal mind-set was another social cause of DV. It allows men to control their wives and their family finances. Three Christian religious leaders described emotional violence as an outcome of this patriarchal mind-set, which allows men to prevent their wives from participating in decision making in family matters or from pursuing an education and a career.

Some communities in the mountains are similar to tribes. The final word belongs to the head of the tribe or the father in the family. The girl is not allowed to open her mouth and has to stay inside. The men go out to work. (Christian RL #2)

Before marrying his wife, the man knows that she is working. But later when they move into the same house, the husband starts to impose his authority, so he will not allow his wife to work. (Christian RL #1)

Another prominent underlying cause of DV that the participants repeatedly mentioned is financial strain. Men feel stressed because of the declining economic situation of the country, which forces them to hold more than one job to provide for their families:

The economic situation that the Lebanese community is experiencing has negatively impacted families and the social life in Lebanon... leading to tensions within the family. (Muslim RL #12)

If the husband works two shifts, one during the day one during the night, until late at night... he does not earn enough money for a comfortable life... this is reflected on the family and leads to divorce. (Muslim RL #5)

Other stressors cited include an unstable socio-political situation in the country, traffic, the lack of social security, and state support.

I believe that DV occurs as a result of wars, daily hassles and economic burdens that are experienced by our society, as well as corrupt politicians, the government and its institutions- all of which do not pay any attention to the public. There are also other causes, such as people not getting their paychecks and their rights. (Christian RL #6)

The study participants spoke of the breakdown of religious values as a main cause of DV because religion is the system that maintains society's morals and strong relations and also teaches respect and outlines the roles and responsibilities which individuals should have toward one another. Consequently, people who drift away from religion experience problems in their marriage and are more prone to engage in DV.

A spiritually involved person, a person not constrained by material possessions, will act differently with people. This person will be humble and honest, and is not affected by human temptations. (Christian RL #1)
In a moment of weakness, spiritual and psychological weakness, the devil is playing his part. In case problems start to appear between a couple, the woman might be tempted to cheat on her husband with another man. (Muslim RL #7)

Another indirect cause of DV that most of the study participants referred to was the media. Participants described the media as shattering religious values and morals through the programs they show. Participants reported that popular television programs and social media have spread immoral values among people in society by normalizing a culture of betrayal, cheating, adultery, and devaluing women and marriage. This situation has created a society which no longer values religion and has weak social ties and improper child-rearing practices. Accordingly, the outcome is an environment that is conducive to family break-up and DV.

This is when I see the pollution of media. All TV shows are about violence, betrayal, and cursing, and the use of weapons. (Christian RL #6)
All media outlets are conspiring to corrupt society. Religion, values, and morals no longer mean anything to society. So, do not be surprised when a man beats his wife because he no longer believes in marriage. (Muslim RL #10)

Responses to DV: Counseling and Taking Legal Measures

Two Christian religious leaders stated that pre-marital counseling sessions decrease the risk of DV occurring later in the marriage through raising awareness about DV and the Law, and through encouraging women to speak up when they experience any form of abuse.

Pre-marital sessions consist of four sessions. The first is about solving problems, the second has to do with improving communication skills, the third session is on expectations of marriage, and the last session explains why the Christian marriage is better than other types of marriages. And of course, during these sessions we talk about the DV law and how it protects women's rights. There are couples that have realized after these sessions that they cannot get married... this has helped them to avoid divorce. (Christian RL #4)

All of the participants asserted that they would reject any form of DV and would attempt to mitigate the problem if it presents itself. However, the participants reported that they often assumed the role of counselors, indicating that as a result of their interventions, several couples would reach an agreement to save their marriage. In the majority of DV cases they encountered, women sought help from them by themselves, and the participants consequently contacted their husbands for a meeting to resolve the couples' problems.

When I first receive a couple with DV problems, I try to absorb the wave of anger or tension between the couple. And then I listen to each person's point of view on the problem to understand its causes. Then I suggest solutions to their problems. (Muslim RL #12)

The participants would also attempt to improve interpersonal communication skills between the couple, inform the husband on the consequences of DV and try to create awareness for those who were raised in an environment of DV. An example they gave would be to teach the husband how to behave toward his wife through taking the prophet Mohammad as an example:

The Prophet Mohammad has preached that men treat their wives well. That husbands speak affectionately to their wives... husbands should share what they eat or drink with their wives. (Muslim RL #7)

A light beating was reported to be acceptable, on condition that it does not cause physical injury. One Muslim participant reported that he would teach husbands that a harsh beating is not permitted in Islam, while two others suggested that light beating is allowed.

When the Prophet Ayoub vowed to hit his wife . . . he brought 30 straws as light as feathers to hit his wife. Look if it were acceptable to hit, the Prophet would have whipped her. (Muslim RL #5)

When the Prophet explained hitting, he meant hitting with a “siwak.” “Al siwak” according to Al Shari’a law is very similar to paper. It is extracted from trees. Half of it is a branch and the other half is not. Some people think they should use pomegranate tree branches but that is not what the Prophet meant. Hitting means hitting with something very light like a pencil. (Muslim RL #7)

Although one Druze religious leader reported never receiving cases of DV, he also reported light beating as a form of a permissible disciplinary act for wives.

If a woman has done something completely unacceptable, her husband would strike her with his hand . . . as a form of discipline that is not harmful. This is when she deserves such discipline. (Druze RL #11)

The priests, in particular, would refer couples who experience marital or DV problems to a third party that could assist them. The third party would consist of civil society organizations, older experienced couples, community centers with therapists, or specialized priests and married couples who regularly assist in resolving other couple’s problems. Other ways they would respond would be advising the victim to leave the house or assisting her in finding a job to become more financially independent.

Hadn’t I remembered to give them the number of an NGO (non-governmental organization) called KAFA, she would have slept on the streets. And that is what happened, they called the organization and were told to send the woman to (name of suburb), where they have a specialized center I think, and they would take care of the rest. (Christian RL #1)

Yes, there are a couple of NGOs we know of that have to do with women’s rights. I would support her to file a complaint and let a specialized organization follow-up on her case. (Christian RL #3)

One solution that could help a battered woman is to find a job through which she would feel productive and have self-worth. (Christian RL #6)

I helped her find a job so she can reach stability in her life. We should be able to help this individual to start her life anew. (Christian RL #4)

All the participants stated that they would suggest psychological counseling as a solution to the problem, or medical treatment for the victims of DV who experience severe mental illnesses.

I was following up with her for over a year in collaboration with a psychiatrist and psychologist. I also contacted an organization called Himaya. She started going there with her children, and the NGO was providing therapy to her children to try to help them. (Christian RL#4)

Challenges

Although some participants referred survivors of DV to civil society organizations and couples' therapists, they reported they were reluctant because they either did not trust them or were doubtful of their effectiveness.

The problem with civil society is that it tries to separate itself from the religious society. The problem with the secular society, even the stakeholders who designed and implemented the Law, is that they refuse to communicate with religious leaders. This is wrong. (Muslim RL #8).

Another challenge that our participants reported facing is not knowing what to do when the problem becomes worse even after referral to psychotherapy.

There are a lot of psychologists who do not have the experience, and these couples are going to psychologists . . . but the couple find themselves in the same place. Psychologists study abroad, and the problems there differ from those of Lebanon . . . they are trying to apply their theories here, and this is causing a lot of problems. (Christian RL #4)

One pastor stated along the same lines, that it is important for a religious leader to be educated and knowledgeable in the field of psychology, so if the couple cannot afford therapy, the RL would help them based on his knowledge in psychology and couples therapy.

Sometimes I suggest to the couple to go seek the help of psychologists. When the pastor has enough knowledge in psychology, he will be able to

help a lot of couples solve their marital problems, especially when they cannot afford a therapist. (Christian RL#4)

Two priests stated that the police were ineffective in assisting DV survivors giving examples of how the local police rarely respond to any such complaints.

They called the police for them to come and investigate, they called internal security forces who told them to send the beaten woman to the police station to file a complaint! They are lazy! (Christian RL #1)

Types of Support Religious Leaders Need to Better Address DV

The majority of the participants expressed the need for collaboration between all the religious sects and the government to work together to protect citizens' rights and to spread awareness about this new law.

We cannot claim anymore that a priest can fix the problems of all the people alone. (Christian RL #6)

There have to be conferences to raise the public's awareness regarding the law where they would bring doctors, psychologists, people of the law, specialized social workers, and even internal security forces. (Muslim RL #7)

Two participants stated that they would benefit from collaborating with relevant stakeholders to address DV. One priest noted that a center already exists in his parish, while another suggested creating specialized centers open to the general public to include relevant human resources, such as psychologists, Muslim, and Christian religious leaders, as well as lawyers.

It is beneficial to have a place not only for Christians but for Muslims too where there are psychiatrists, psychologists, priests, and religious leaders. This place could be a rehabilitation center for people who are wrecked. (Christian RL #4)

Critique of Law 293 and Its Implementation

Even though most of the participants were not very knowledgeable about the details of the Law, they all reported having heard about it.

While two of the participants stated that Islam and Christianity are in accord with the workings of the new Law and that they support it, two Christian priests and one Druze religious leader asserted that Islam does not support the Law, since it is against Muslim beliefs.

Some religious sects do not approve of this law because it goes against the beliefs of some religious sects. There is a Koranic text that dictates that a man can beat his wife as long as he does not harm her . . . the new law also considers that a woman can reject engaging in a sexual relationship if she does not want to. Some religious sects believe that this [law] could lead to divorce. (Druze RL #9)

This new law stipulates that a woman can choose not to be in sexual relationship with her husband if she wishes not to. However, some religious sects consider that a woman who refuses is wrong, and this leads to divorce. This is why some religious sects are against this law more than others. (Druze RL #9)

Several of our participants stated that there is room for exploitation of the Law by some women seeking divorce by pretending to be battered by their husbands.

Sometimes the wife lies if she does not want her husband; she fakes documents at the physician's office that her husband has beaten her. And sometimes she injures herself and claims that she has been beaten. (Muslim RL #7)

Women who feel that the law protects them will start provoking their husbands, a situation which leads to increased violence and increased problems in their marriage. (Druze RL #9)

Some participants were also concerned that women's awareness about being protected by the law could adversely affect how women deal with mild marital problems.

The DV law highlights that the woman is being abused and men want to prey on her . . . the law made men appear as terrorists, and this has made women more aggressive towards their husbands . . . and are creating problems to get rid of their husbands. (Muslim RL #10)

A recurring problem according to our participants lies in the lack of proper implementation of all laws in the country. All participants agreed that the Law is rarely adequately implemented, and is therefore

ineffective in reducing the occurrence of DV in Lebanon. The majority of our participants claimed that the Law could be beneficial if it were implemented without the influence of corruption.

Now the problem with this DV law . . . This law is important, but we need to see it practiced. Some aspects of the law are not implemented. (Christian RL #1)

Lebanon is the country of surprises. So this law came out, in the end, how is this law going to be implemented? How is this law going to be implemented when each religious sect has its own laws? (Muslim RL #8)

One Muslim religious leader emphasized that Muslim religious leaders should not feel that the Law is replacing their role in personal-status codes, but it is in support of religious leaders, and this point should be communicated to them.

The government should inform the religious leaders that this law assists them in managing DV cases, it is not targeting their role as religious leaders, nor the role of religion in managing family matters. (Muslim RL #12)

Discussion

This study is the first to involve religious leaders from different religious denominations simultaneously, to express their views and experiences with DV. The findings are particularly significant for Lebanon, a country in the Arab region where religious courts have a primary role in deciding the fate of the families in legal matters. The study has revealed that religious leaders are prominent stakeholders in the response to DV in the country, as they are sought by survivors for advice. Despite variations in age and religious affiliations, the participants reported common views and practices related to DV which was reported to be common in their communities for the majority of participants.

The study participants spoke of patriarchy, or male domination, as a societal cause of DV. They referred to the patriarchal mentality which causes men's control over women's freedom to education, careers, and even their freedom of speech. The study contributes to the relevant literature on DV causation by echoing women's perspectives in the literature, such as in the study conducted by Linos and colleagues (2010) which revealed that where women are able to make decisions about

employment and education, wife beating was not accepted (Linos et al., 2010).

The finding that religion is seen to be important in maintaining societal values is not surprising, given that our participants are religious leaders. The study contributes to the literature on protective factors against DV (Cunradi et al., 2002; Ellison et al., 2007), by revealing religious leaders' perspectives, which collectively point to the importance of religious values as a protective factor against DV. Meanwhile, and in concurrence with the literature by, for example, Nash and Hesterberg (2009), Al-Tawil (2012), Douki et al. (2003), and McMullin et al. (2015), the study participants justify wife beating through their reference to religious texts of the Bible and the Koran, interpreting this act as part of their husbands' duty. While all the pastors referred to biblical texts as guides to good behavior, chastising such acts of violence, all Muslim religious leaders spoke positively about the Koran and two attributed men's aggressive treatment of their wives to their misinterpretation of its teachings. However, they did not condemn physical violence, also by referring to religious verses, and were in favor of light beating based on Koranic interpretations. Consequently, the study adds to the body of literature by highlighting the risk that is presented when religious leaders have a major role to play in determining what course victims of DV should take. When religious leaders advise women to submit to their husbands and suggest reducing beating rather than condemning violent acts, they may risk keeping women in an abusive relationship and even presenting a barrier to access legal protection where available.

Although this is not new in what is known about religious leaders being consulted for advice in times of crises, more so than other professionals combined (Bruns et al., 2005; Horton & Williamson, 1988; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005), this study has shown that religious leaders provide women with inaccurate advice about a secular problem using religious texts. Their literal interpretation may sustain DV when religious leaders suggest reducing beating rather than condemning violence, and when they advise women to remain in an abusive relationship and to submit to their husbands. The literature has indicated that Koranic phrases can be misinterpreted as allowing wife beating in cases of misbehavior (Ammar, 2007; Haj-Yahia, 1998). Biblical texts can also be misinterpreted if they are read literally as Evangelical religious leaders in the United States suggest (Zust et al., 2017).

This study adds to the body of literature by highlighting the risk that is presented when religious leaders have a major role to play in

determining what course victims of DV should take. When religious leaders advise women to submit to their husbands and suggest reducing beating rather than condemning violent acts, they may risk keeping women in an abusive relationship and even presenting a barrier to access legal protection where available. Although religious leaders are representatives of their religions, they are influenced by elite clerical hierarchies, and are trained for their communal roles as male leaders of religions (Henley, 2016) which is how they are known in Arabic speaking societies, the men of religion: “*rijal eddine*,” and are described to be inherently patriarchal, and treat women as subordinate to men (Mernissi, 1987; Ruether, 1982). This may explain why the discourse that the study participants use is patriarchal in nature, where some even suggest women would exploit the law to file for a divorce.

This study has several implications for practice. Since religious leaders are one of the many stakeholders concerned with addressing community-level issues, such as DV because of the trust and the respect people have for them, and also because religion is a prominent part of people's lives in Lebanon and the Arab world, they could have a pivotal role in raising public awareness about and responding to DV. Providing them with proper information and referral options in the communities they serve would improve society's response to DV.

Partnership and dialogue between religious leaders and secular agencies concerned with vulnerable groups and human rights could take the form of informal workshops and meetings to encourage open dialogue and mutual learning. It would not only reduce the sectarian/secular divide but may also provide religious leaders with opportunities for self-reflection about their prejudices pertaining to DV. Such partnerships would also benefit women from all religious groups.

Religious leaders to our knowledge, have not been integrated into the national efforts by civil society advocacy groups who have prepared different versions of the Lebanese Law against DV. We are also unaware of any efforts to bring religious leaders into discussions about DV. Similar to other sectors of society, including women themselves, this study shows that religious leaders are not fully aware of the Law and are doubtful about its implementation. Society will benefit from a plan that outlines a role for religious leaders in implementing Law 293. Civil society groups and the public sector need to involve religious leaders in developing this plan.

The participants' suggestion about establishing centers which incorporate different players in responding to DV, including psychologists, lawyers, as well as religious leaders may integrate social, legal, and

other services in one place. The centers may consequently become better able to provide holistic services for victims of violence.

Several limitations may have affected the study findings. The type of information our participants disclosed during the interviews may have been influenced by the gender of the researchers who are all women, in comparison with the participants who were men. In addition, DV is a sensitive topic and not one which is readily discussed openly in a conservative society; some participants may have refrained from disclosing their opinions. Sexual violence was not mentioned at all by our participants, and the researchers could not ask probing questions although it is of relevance to the study. The researchers were aware of the inappropriateness of discussing such sensitive topics in a conservative context with religious leaders.

There are implications for future research. This study has involved participants who mainly reside in urban areas. A future study could be conducted in the more conservative rural areas of Lebanon to explore possible variations in views and practices. Research evaluating civil society initiatives which aim to involve continuing education for religious leaders on DV is valuable to test interventions and document lessons learned. Further research with other stakeholders, such as survivors, social workers, the police, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) would provide a more comprehensive interpretation of issues that need addressing after the passing of the recent Law.

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