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UN Finds that 25% of Married Syrian Women have been Beaten

By Katherine Zoepf

Dmascus, Syria – Syria’s first comprehensive field study of violence against women concluded that nearly one in four married woman surveyed had been beaten. The study was released as part of a report by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (<http://www.unifem.org/>) on the status of women in Syria.

The findings have been published in local news media, helping to draw attention to topics like domestic abuse and honor killings, long considered taboo as subjects to be spoken of in this conservative society.

The study was carried out under the supervision of the quasi-governmental General Union of Women, which oversees the welfare of the country’s women. The study included nearly 1,900 families, selected as a random sample, including a broad range of income levels and all regions of the country. The men and women in each family were questioned separately.

“In Syria there was simply no data on violence against women; formal studies hadn’t ever been done before,” said Shirin Shukri, a manager of the project at the United Nations Development Fund for Women’s regional office in Amman. “The issue of violence against women was kept silent here for many years. But we’re making people in Syria aware that this is something that happens everywhere in Europe, in Asia, in the United States, and this is opening up discussion.”

Hana Qaddoura, a spokeswoman for the General Union of Women, said that breaking the silence on domestic abuse was an essential first step in combating violence. Many Syrians, she said, do not believe that violence in the home “counts” as violence.

“There are some forms of violence against women that our society doesn’t even see as violence,” Ms. Qaddoura said. “It all depends very much on education and income level, but many people see a woman who is beaten as being in a bad relationship; they don’t see her as a victim of violence.”

The women’s union said it would try to develop programs to protect women, in response to the study’s findings.

Advocates of women's rights here say that though the findings of the Syrian study are fairly similar to domestic abuse statistics in other countries, the fact that the official silence on the subject has been broken is in itself a meaningful step.

"The most surprising thing is that for the first time in Syria, a semi-governmental organization, the women's union, has admitted that there is a problem," said Maan Abdul Salam, a campaigner for women's rights.

Bassam al-Kadi, a rights advocate, said that the report was part of a growing openness about many forms of domestic abuse. He has recently been working on a public information campaign to try to curb the practice known as "honor killings" – the killing of female relatives who are believed to have dishonored the family by engaging in illicit sex.

"Until two years ago, discussion of honor killing was banned in the Syrian media," Mr. Kadi said. "The incidents might be discussed individually, as 'accidents,' but talking about honor killing as a phenomenon was forbidden. Now these subjects are becoming much more open."

Women's advocates say that though any efforts to broaden public discussion of domestic violence are welcome, they have seen little effort on the part of the government to address the topic in practical terms. Shelters for battered women are few and poorly publicized, and there are no formal channels for abused women to seek assistance.

"As it is now, there are still no mechanisms to report violence against women," Mr. Abdul Salam said. "We hope that this study will soon lead to practical action on the ground."

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