The Narrative of Arab Palestinian Battered Women in Israel

Ola Kattoura*

University of Otago, New Zealand

***Corresponding Author:** Ola Kattoura, University of Otago, New Zealand.

Email: olakattoura@gmail.com

Abstract

Domestic violence is the most common form of violence against women worldwide. Despite abundant literature on this social problem, there is a shortage of research in Arab countries and among Arab women who are citizens of Israel. This article draws from qualitative interviews with thirty-six participants to explore Arab Israeli women's own understandings of their experiences of domestic violence.

This research contributes to the social work and human rights literature through exploring how women's life trajectories were shaped by ongoing and entangled forms of entrapment which influenced their experiences of abuse, their coping strategies and their decision-making around whether and when to seek help.

Keywords: Domestic Violence; Arab Women in Israel; Qualitative Interviews

Introduction

Domestic violence is the most common form of violence against women worldwide [6]. It is endemic, cutting across racial, cultural and economic lines and constituting one of the most serious global human rights problems [27,31]. Human rights activists view this phenomenon as tied to structural violence, including factors such as poverty, and unequal access to resources, particularly health and education [2]. The UN definition emphasises the gendered roots of violence, acknowledging that violence situates women at an inferior status compared to men [17].

Despite an abundance of studies on domestic violence, there is a shortage of research in Arab countries [10]. This gap of knowledge is pronounced among Arab women who are citizens of Israel who are over-represented in shelters and family welfare centres despite the fact that Arabs only constitute 20% of the Israeli population [33].

Recent quantitative studies have investigated the differences between Arab and Jewish battered women residing in Israeli shelters by measuring variables such as demographic features, depression, level of violence, traumatic life events and characteristics of perpetrators [5,23]. The results revealed elevated rates of violence, fewer resources, lower levels of education and employment and more traumatic childhood events among Arab women. The authors highlighted the need to further examine domestic violence and its implications for this specific population. There is also a need for research that examines Arab women's own understanding of experiences of violence, while also interrogating the impact of Jewish systemic structures on Arab people as an ethnic minority. For example, Sellers & Shelton's (2003, 30) research on the connection between conflict violence and domestic violence has revealed that discrimination appears to be one of the key factors that explain the reasons behind violent acts among some ethnic minorities.

Aside from being a collective society whereby the family or collective's interests are favoured over those of the individual, the establishment of Israel in 1948, referred to as Al-Nakbah (The catastrophe), resulted in Arabs' loss of land and many Palestinians were either killed or became refugees. Al-Nakbah has divided Palestinians into two societies: Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and Palestinians inside Israel who have become an ethnic minority and face discrimination [29]. Arabs do not have equal opportunities in terms of work or education; and they do not receive equitable resources, budgets and services, especially in education, health care and welfare [19,26]. They are over-represented in poverty and unemployment statistics in Israel, experience the lowest socioeconomic status and suffer from under-developed infrastructure [21].

Today, the Palestinian minority in Israel, who are Israeli citizens by law, numbers approximately 1.2 million people. They are referred to as 'Israeli Arabs' which reflects the dual components of their inclusion and exclusion in Israel [1]. The Arab population is 82% Muslim (including Bedouins), 9% Christians and 9% Druze. Male dominance is legitimised in all these religious groups but is more rigid within the conservative Bedouin and Druze communities [1]. Arab women in general are taught from childhood that their sexuality is their family's property rather than their own [3]. If women stray from the strict norms of sexual conduct, they may be ostracised or even killed by family members to guard the family's honour [29].

This study, which builds on the quantitative research of Ben-Porat., *et al*. (2017) [5] and Levy., *et al*. (2019) [23], further explores how a patriarchal culture, an inequitable political structure and a position of socio-economic disadvantage serve to entrap Arab battered women. Through presenting a composite narrative of the women's experiences, this article unpacks the intersections of political, social, financial and gender forces which delimit women's independence and create barriers to escaping violence.

A composite narrative is employed in order to convey the rich and complex individual experiences of women and to avoid a categorising and depersonalising account of the data [32]. Composite narratives can help build understanding of particular groups of people, in such a way as to provide an understanding of women's lived experiences which may incentivise interventional methods and practices and create the opportunity for research to become "future-forming" [32]. Future- forming research involves looking at research as situated in the social world with the aim to intervene and implement change rather than to simply describe and analyse [14].

Method

This article draws from semi-structured interviews undertaken in 2017 and 2018 with 36 Arab battered women in Israel as part of a doctoral research project. The key aim of this project was to explore these women's experiences. Narrative methodology was engaged due to its strengths: it allowed me to examine multiple questions about how humans create and maintain meaning, including the meaning of identity; and it allowed me to foreground the perspectives of a specific subgroup in society, who are usually unheard, marginalised and defined by their ethnicity, religion, gender, or class [24]. Exploring narratives of identity enabled an examination of the links between power, cultural, personal, and social structure [7]. While my doctoral research explored these broader questions in more detail, in this article I focus specifically on the composite narrative that was developed from the participants' interview data.

In order to obtain official permission to undertake the project, I contacted the Ministry of Welfare in Israel, explained the project's aims and provided them with my PhD proposal in Hebrew. The study was also approved by my University Ethics Committee. I then contacted the shelters' managers and the feminist organisations which run these shelters, to obtain permission to enter each shelter. I sent the shelter managers an information sheet, which included an explanation of the research objectives and procedures. I asked the managers to give the information sheet to women at the shelters and centres. I used a feminist paradigm as a guiding framework which emphasised listening to women's voices. This approach not only consolidated the narrative perspective, but also focused on the linkage between the personal and the political [16,20]. Through this paradigm I formulated the research questions, collected and analysed the qualitative data.

The sample included Arab women who had suffered from partner violence or family members' violence (e.g. father, brother). I met Arab women in three shelters; the two allocated for Arab women and a third one which is a mixed shelter for Arab and Jewish women. Christian and Druze presence in shelters was

minimal. To obtain population diversity, I had to meet women in family centres, where I sought specifically to interview Christians or Druze. Twenty-seven women were from the three shelters, and nine women from the three family centres. Seven women were Druze, six were Christians, three were Bedouins (who are considered religiously Muslim but identify themselves as Bedouin) and twenty were Muslim women. All women were born in Israel except for one woman who came from Jordan at the age of 12. The women's ages at the time of the interview ranged from 21 to 50 with an average age of 33 years old. Eleven women were married at the time of the interview, sixteen were divorced, seven were separated, one woman was engaged, and one woman was single. Most women [31] had children. Years of marriage ranged between 3 months to 35 years.

The level of education varied significantly between the women. One woman was illiterate, eleven women had finished primary level schooling, sixteen had finished secondary level while seven women had a university degree. For most women [21] whom I met in shelters, it was their first time in a shelter. Seventeen women discussed partner abuse, seven attributed their residency at the shelter to their family's violence, while twelve women talked about being abused by both their partners and their families.

According to social workers' evaluations, the women I met in the centres met the criteria for a low to moderate life-threatening evaluation except for one woman who was at a moderate to high risk (Manal) but who refused to go to a shelter because she did not want to cause "any further changes" to her children's schooling. Most women in the shelters were considered at a moderate to high risk with four women considered to be at a very high risk of being murdered.

The semi-structured interviews began with the prompt: "If you could share your story with me…" and concluded with demographic questions. During the interviews, I asked the participants for clarification and detail as they told their stories. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and the quoted interview text was translated into English. The participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

The journey: Childhood

The composite narrative described in this study encompasses the common stories, ideas and perspectives that frequently appeared throughout the narratives of the participants. It describes the women's journeys of living in abusive spousal or familial relationships, illustrating the preliminary phases of women's entrapment, describes types of marriages, women's understanding of violence, their coping strategies, the reasons that kept many of them in abusive relationships and finally the turning point, where participants decided to make a change.

Many participants reflected on how negative childhood experiences helped contextualise their incentives to get married and their later experiences of abusive relationships. Most women discussed being born into poverty and many also described growing up in a family where the male head of the household was dominant and violent.

- **Narmin**: "Today, I understand why all that happened... You know, I am Christian; I grew up in an urban modernised city but got married at the age of 19 to a Muslim guy from Hebron, because I wanted to escape from my brother's control. My brother tried to control my life, like he decided everything for me, and it was really difficult at home. That was why I told myself that it would be better if I got married, no matter where or with whom as it would be better than the situation I was suffering from […] I just wanted to get a better life, but it was worse".

- **Lina:** "My childhood was so difficult; it was not only my husband … it was also my father. Can you imagine a situation that whatever you say as a little kid you would be hit? No matter what you said; you had to expect the hit… that smack. As a kid I was so weak, didn't know what to do. Later, it started to be the same with my husband. Everything is connected, I understand now, like my childhood affected my decisions concerning my husband …after getting married and being abused by my partner too, I realised that I had lost me, lost my personality from a very young age".

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[1]The participant selection process is detailed in my doctoral project (see author, forthcoming).

[2]The main difference between the centres and shelters lies in the fact that centres are family and community orientated. Centres provide therapy for all family members including perpetrators and engage within the community and social institutions such as schools.

Difficult childhood experiences thus influenced many women's desire to get married, as they sought to escape the family home. Many participants not only faced structural limitations, such as growing up poor with limited access to education, but also were able to reflect on the psychological impacts of their childhood experiences and how they shaped their entry into adult relationships.

Types of marriages

Most participants got married at an early age or underage. Therefore, the transitional process from being a teenager to a married woman with significant responsibilities occurred relatively quickly. Women depicted four types of marriages in their narratives: Underage, traditional, forced and marriage by choice. Eleven women were underage when they were married. These marriages occurred when women were between the ages of 13-15 years old and were conducted in secret without formal institutional registration, as the legal age for marriage in Israel is 18.

- **Fatin:** "I could not say 'no', I was voiceless, there were people around me who were deciding for me and for my life. I knew nothing, he was older than me and I felt weak and little, I was only 15. On my wedding night, nobody told me what was going to happen, what a man was like and what he was going to do. I was so frightened. It was just too ugly".

Women described these experiences as painful and emphasised that they were children or teenagers who had no idea what to expect. Fatin was 36 years old at the time of the interview and still remembered and reflected on having started her marital life as a teenager without sex education or preparation, as a source of pain.

Traditional marriage usually occurs when a man sees a young woman or is told about one. He then goes to the woman's family and asks to marry her. Thirteen women were married according to traditional practices and they all described a short engagement period. Two women from this group described recognising "red flags" regarding their partners:

- **Manal:** "My partner was not my choice. He saw me at a social event and told a relative of mine that he was interested in me. During the engagement period, I felt something was wrong, and I told my family. They told me that he was a great guy and things like misunderstandings during the engagement period were usual. I experienced many uncomfortable things but kept silent; you know how families are…"

- **Samah:** "I used to dance ballet, but he asked me to quit dancing, and I did. I don't really know what's happened to me… There were many other signs… even on our wedding party, when he first saw me, he whispered into my ears 'why do you look like that? What kind of make-up are you wearing?' but, I could not let my family down, I am used to saying 'yes' to everything and everyone. So, I just told myself that these were only minor signs and meant nothing".

Traditional marriage is still probably the most common form of marriage in Arab society. The role of families of origin was central to these narratives, as they often either directly or indirectly coerced women into such marriages. Manal's family, for example, delegitimised her feelings of discomfort regarding her partner. Some families thus teach and expect women before marriage to normalise and to silence their misgivings. Such normalisation appears also in Samah's narrative, where she could recognise the "red flags" but silenced herself. According to Katz, Boggiano, and Silvern (1993) [18], women are often taught to see the core of themselves in terms of relationships, in connectedness rather in separation. There is thus a process of gender socialisation which enhances women's interdependency.

Forced marriages often occurred within the extended family boundaries: girls and women were forced to marry relatives in order to preserve the family's unity and tribal ties.

- **Lily:** "I was not yet 19 when we got married, my parents forced me to marry my cousin. I wanted to go to university. He was my cousin from both of my parents' sides, so they were under so much pressure in front of the extended family. I insisted that I wanted to finish my studies first then to think about marriage, but they refused. I know they loved me but on this issue; they just forced me, it was like an 'either- or' situation, because if I refused to get married to my cousin, they would not let me go to university or allow me to leave the house. I didn't know what to do so I had to marry him".

All six women who described forced marriages, emphasised having no other options. Some Bedouin women were threatened with death if they refused to marry their relative. Other participants were physically imprisoned, isolated and deprived from having phones, contacting friends or leaving the house. Accepting the marriage was the women's only way to escape their families.

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[3]Social workers at shelters and family centres conduct risk assessments with every battered woman to determine the safest intervention plan possible. Every organisation has its own criteria of evaluation.

The last category of marriage described by participants was marriage by choice. Only two out of the five women in this category articulated choosing to get married to their partners because they were persuaded that he was the "right one". The remaining three asserted that the marriage served an ulterior motive related to family dynamics.

- **Dima:** "I was sexually abused by my uncle at the age of fourteen. Since then, my life has totally changed. I told my father what happened but instead of supporting me, he beat me and asked me to keep silent. As a little kid, I suffered from depression and tantrums. When I got older, I escaped to marriages. The first time I got married was with a mute guy whom I did not love. I did that just to humiliate my family, my father... I was seeking revenge as if I was telling my father that 'you hit me in the past when I was raped, now it is my turn. I am going to escape from the house and dishonour you in front of everybody, the whole community' ... I chose to get married just to get even".

Even with this type of marriage where women 'chose' to be married, like Dima, another two of the five women contextualised their decision to get married in terms of coping with violence they had experienced at a younger age.

The categories of marriage described in this section illustrate both coercion and women's inferior status. The descriptions women provided demonstrated their entrapment, which appeared in their limited choices; their experiences of coercion and helplessness; and their trauma stemming from incest, marital rape, being married at a very young age or against their will.

How did women understand violence?

Participants explained men's violence in multiple ways. Some participants discussed men's personal deficiencies such as their lack of self –confidence, envy of women's success, and perception women as inferior.

- **Shams:** "Gaps between men and women are becoming bigger as more women are going to study. This is a threat on men. So, he would beat her to tell her nothing has changed and that he was still the man".

Violence was thus interpreted by some participants as a way for men to assert control, prove their masculinity, and defend their ego in response to changing gender roles.

Participants also discussed specific precipitating factors to violence. These included women's responses to violence – such as expressing fear, rejecting their partner sexually or making steps to leave the relationship. Pregnancy also precipitated violence for some participants. Furthermore, actions such as suicide attempts, going to the police, social services or shelters were considered acts which disgraced and shamed "men's good reputation" and escalated violence.

- **Nibal:** "When I swallowed the pain killers trying to kill myself, they [the family] brought a doctor home to rescue me. When I woke up, I was just too weak and fragile, but my dad and brothers started beating me and blaming me for what I did as my suicide attempt could damage their reputation".

Families' expectations that women adhere to strict social norms and maintain the family's unity also constituted a major precipitating factor for the escalation of violence for most participants.

- **Lily:** "When I used to go to school; my uncle would shout at me that I was not dressed properly, you know wearing long sleeved shirts and putting a headscarf. Mum used to tell him that it wasn't his business. But then he would go to my dad and keep pressuring and reproaching him that my dad would eventually give up and force me to dress according to my uncle's views".

- **Samya:** "When I used to go to my mum after an incidence of physical abuse, she and some other women from the family would tell me that I was to be blamed, as they would say 'you probably don't get dressed up too sexy for him'".

Many participants described the escalation of ongoing violence during two phases: families used violence to force daughters to get married and when women left their homes and decided to get a divorce. The violence in some cases escalated to threats of murder.

Divorce or separation for most women meant returning to the family home and being under the surveillance and control of their brothers. Many women described becoming a 'slave' for the family and this was also a threat that families used to discourage them from getting divorced.

- **Farah:** "I was suffering from physical abuse from my partner and his family. I was living overseas, did not really know where to go. So, I asked for my father's help, telling him that I wanted to go back. But my father shouted at me on the phone and told me that if I were to get back, I would become everybody's slave because you know, divorce is not allowed".

Additional forms of abuse among divorced or separated battered women were manifested in sexual harassment by men in the community and pressure from family members to remarry.

Because women are expected to maintain the unity of the family regardless of violence, divorce or separation may jeopardise women's situation. Divorce in some parts of Arab society is still predominantly seen as a woman's fault, and it is interpreted as shameful for the family who has failed to control its female members [4]. Most women in the sample outlined three main reasons for the family's violence after separation. The first was financial with the divorced woman and her children seen as an economic burden for the family:

- **Susan:** "When my husband divorced me, my brothers wanted me to get remarried as soon as possible because me and my kids were seen as a burden on them, not limited to but mainly a financial burden".

The second reason was the family's fear of societal judgment:

- **Rinad:** "When an Arab woman gets divorced, that's it for her: she goes with a big X [stigmatised] all her life. People immediately think that for sure she has done something wrong, or like she cheated on her husband".

The third reason was the family's fear of women's sexuality.

- **Suheir:** "When I got divorced and got back to my family's home, I was not allowed to leave the house, they [the brother] were too scared that I would do something, always checked what I was doing or if I left the house… they were so controlling because they were afraid that… you know how Arab mentality is. They would think that the divorced woman would go and have a relationship or sexual intercourse with men, they were too scared that the woman would dirty their honour".

Thus, when divorce occurs, women are often blamed for it, and sometimes even accused of infidelity. Regardless of the reasons for a divorce, there is nonetheless suspicion among some male family members that a divorced woman may engage sexually with men and thus further harm the family's honour.

Thus, ending the abusive relationship does not necessarily help Arab battered women to break free from entrapment. Rather, many of them are forced into an alternative entrapment inflicted on them by the family and society.

Living with or near the partner's family was an additional contributing factor to abuse. Ten women lived in a room inside their partner's family's house while twelve women lived near the family due to both the family's insistence on having their sons close and to financial stress. This financial stress, in part, reflects the Arab population's status in Israel. There are high rates of poverty and unemployment and an unequal distribution of resources [28]. These living conditions meant that it was not only the husbands that exerted control over the women, but also their mothers-in-law or other family members.

- **Samah:** "I ran to my mother in law, escaping from his beating. We lived in the same building; they lived on the second floor. I was hurt, crying out of pain asking her to help me. She looked at me with anger and shouted at me saying: 'Why did you go to see your grandmother? Why don't you just listen and behave as he wants you to?'".

Alongside women's articulation of individual and intra-familial factors as precipitating violence, they also addressed broader social forces as contributing factors to violence, particularly specific elements of Arab society and culture. More specifically, all participants discussed male dominance or the religious justification for behaviour as key features of Arab society:

- **Manal:** "We as a society, we really have a huge problem. We live in a disgusting society which easily judges divorced women and sees them as sexual prey".
- **Sibba:** "No awareness, it should start from school age, making programs for women. But to be honest, even if all these things were done, nothing will change. The leaders are bad, and men interpret religion according to their own interests".

Many women also discussed the state's role in perpetuating the abuse.

- **Shams:** "The state is not doing much to prevent [abusive practices] from happening because the state has its own interests- national security interests and you know, they invented this statement of 'family honour' in order not to interfere... because who do you think protect the boarders with Sinai? It's the Bedouins [men]. So, the state simply overlooks the Bedouin women's oppression".

- **Dima:** "I did not press charges against the guy who tried to kill me because I simply know that just by being an Arab, the police will not do much for me".

Shams and Dima detailed how governmental institutions' discriminatory attitudes impacted on their ability to leave abusive relationships or seek help. Shams explained that women's oppression was overlooked by government organisations in favour of the state's national security, whereas Dima abstained from going to the police, knowing she would not be protected.

Financial stress was an additional factor discussed by many women, especially those who were married to partners from the West Bank who were often unemployed due to political tension and difficulties with obtaining permission to work in Israel.

- **Rimas:** "My husband was from the West Bank. He did not have the Israeli identity and that was the reason as he told me then, that he could not find a job. I lived in the same house with his parents and siblings, he had 8 siblings. So, I had to go to work because I was the one with the blue identity. I used to clean houses. For more than 3 years I was the one who worked and provided for the whole family".

Women like Rimas became not only providers for their partners and their families, but partners would often use violence to force women to give up the money they earned from their work. Thus, women like Rimas would suffer from economic abuse, being left without financial resources.

Coping with violence

The participants described different ways of coping with violence: normalising and denying violence or adapting to it; performing submissiveness, particularly in relation to sexual acts; seeking help from informal parties including talking to family and friends; and seeking formal support such as going to the police and social services; fighting back and attempting suicide.

I categorised three major coping strategies which appeared in participants' narratives: the standardisation of violence, seeking help and suicide attempts – 'SSS'.

- **Raneen:** "You know, it's that point... when a woman gets to that point that she just dwindles, she has so many rights but can't do much anymore".

- **Rimas:** "Sometimes, after he hit me, I used to go to my parents. But they would tell me not to make a big fuss out of it and that it is normal for a man to hit his wife. You know, this sentence is very common: 'that it is normal to hit the woman'. Older women from my family whose kids are now adults told me that they were still being abused and that it's normal".

These extracts illustrate women's first strategy for coping with violence. In order to prevent the escalation of violence women perceive or are told by other women within the family, that the abuse is a standard part of women's lives – "normal".

The second strategy some participants discussed was going to the police.

- **Narmin:** "I did press charges against him [her husband] and his family. I did that after he had threatened me with a knife which he held to my throat. I had to leave the house and protect my children. So, I had to call the police and come here [to the shelter]. I pressed charges because I am scared, he will take my children to Hebron".

However, seeking official support was not always beneficial. Not only were most women in the sample convinced that the police would discriminate against them as Arabs, but as appears in Sirine's extract below, they were also blamed by family members if they were to contact the police.

- **Sirine:** "Even my son-in-law told me recently that things would have been better if I had not involved the police. But I just could not take it anymore".

The third coping strategy was women's decision that the only way to be free from the violence was to commit suicide. This finding

is consistent with previous research which has found that battering was one of the leading factors in women's suicide attempts [8,9]. Thirteen women in the sample tried to kill themselves at least once.

- **Bana:** "One time, dad hit me so hard; he used to bang my head to the wall that I started bleeding. My aunt begged him to take me to the hospital, but he refused. That moment I just felt that I could not take it anymore, so I tried to kill myself only this time instead of cutting my veins I drank detergent and disinfectant".

- **Nibal:** "I could not be with him, he raped almost daily and though I begged my dad to help get a divorce, he refused. One day my father put a gun on the table (…) and asked me to choose between my husband and a bullet. So, I chose my husband and kept on being married until that day that I couldn't take it anymore and I swallowed a whole bottle of painkillers. That was the first time I tried to kill myself… I tried to kill myself three times".

These three strategies demonstrate Arab women's entrapment, because when they did seek help – the second 'S', neither formal nor informal help was fully adapted, in most cases, to women's needs and circumstances. Going to the police, social services or family and friends was not always helpful. In some cases, efforts at help-seeking led to increased negative judgement and blame from family members. Through the first and third coping strategies, women could either lose their lives through suicide, or lose part of their inner identity and wellbeing in normalising violence and denying its impacts.

Reasons to stay in the abusive relationship

Reasons for staying in the abusive relationship were complex. Participants sometimes articulated feelings for the partner or a belief in their partner's "true good self" as a significant reason to stay:

- **Faten:** "He was good on the inside, that's how I used to convince myself. Sometimes I felt like I was in a whirlpool that I could not understand him well, yet I kept reminding myself of the good things he had. I just convinced myself that there were good and lovely things about him, that they did exist".

Several studies indicate that one major factor that keeps women in abusive relationships is women's fear for their children and of not being able to provide for them if their divorce were to lead to poverty [15,22]. In the present study, while concern for their children was the incentive for some women to leave, for others it was the reason to stay:

- **Sirine:** "Twenty-one years I lived with my husband, suffering from all different kinds of violence, but never, not even once I stayed away from my home. I used to get into my room and cry, I just cried all alone until I would calm myself down and then I would get back to my home chores. It was for the sake of my children, to keep the house and the family together".

Women's legal status was another important factor that kept them with their partners, especially those who were born on the Palestinian side of West Bank and Gaza and did not hold the blue Israeli identity card and for the woman who emigrated from Jordan- Salam -who had to endure her partner's violence to ensure her legal residency in Israel.

Two additional factors that kept women silent about their abuse were political tension and the limitations facing social services, including the living conditions inside the shelters.

- **Lubna**: "He wanted to sleep with me, I refused. So, he kicked me out. But on that day, there was a huge chaos between Arab youth and Jewish military forces, soldiers and police were everywhere. His brother was scared I could get shot by mistake and convinced me to stay and I did".

- **Samya:** "I saw the attitudes towards Jewish women when they leave shelters. The manager and social workers guarantee that the Jewish woman will be supported when she leaves, ensuring her with the basic needs such as food and connecting her with the right organisations and people. The same does not happen for an Arab woman… What would an Arab woman do after getting out from the shelter? She has kids to feed with no money, no job, no support from social services or any other places. The government allowance can hardly cover the rent. So, she must think of a way to get money. Well, the easiest way is prostitution. To meet some guy who will use and abuse her. I have seen that too many times".

- **Raneen:** "On day after lunch he [her son] wanted a sandwich but people at the shelter told me that I was not allowed to fix him a sandwich and that 'I needed to understand that the shelter had its rules and I was not to see it as my own private home'. I was too offended, and that incident made me return my kids to their dad. Couple of days later, I felt lonely and got depressed, so I called my husband, we reconciled, and I went back to him".

What makes Arab women's entrapment tighter is that even when they decide to leave abusive relationships, they are bound by political tension or racial discrimination. Seeking formal help by going to a shelter is already a step which may put Arab women in a difficult situation as they have challenged patriarchal norms. However, despite this defiant act, Raneen and Samya explain that even then, their situation is far from being safe or empowered. Living conditions in shelters, and limited support afterwards, shaped decisions to remain in abusive relationships. Thus, seeking formal help may sometimes further deteriorate Arab women's situation. After leaving, they may find themselves at high risk of financial destitution and with limited support.

The turning point

While scholars agree that the turning point is the stage wherein women refuse to live with violence and take active steps to stop it, some argue that women can achieve turning points while staying with perpetrators [11]. Other scholars see that leaving an abuser as a turning point is a process that extends over time and includes multiple break-ups and preparatory stages [12].

Only two women out of the thirty-six asserted that they had achieved their turning point while still living with their partners. For both of these women, the change occurred when their access to resources improved and they went to therapy.

For some women, the turning point involved an internal response to situational factors, including the dangerous escalation of violence, fear for the safety of children and the death of the dominant abuser.

- **Jumanah:** "It was that moment that I just knew it... that it could be the end. In the past when my brother hit me, I would lock myself in the room and cry and that was it, I even used to tell myself 'so he hit me, that is o.k. life goes on' ...it was mainly because I had nowhere to go, so I would just stay and

keep quiet. But this time, it was different, and I knew it. It escalated to an attempted murder as he tried to push me from the balcony".

For some participants, their turning point was related to social forces manifested through women's exposure to Jewish society, and their experiences outside of their domestic role, including being in gaol, going to study or work.

- **Warda:** "I started working with Jews. They saw the bruises and started telling me that I should not be silent; that I had rights and that I should defend myself. They taught me what to do. So, the next time he hit me, I called the police".

- **Salam:** "When I got released from prison, I became someone else. I changed. No more the naïve Salam, the little girl... that was it. To be honest with you; I became aggressive myself. Nobody was there for me when I was abused, so I decided to fight for my own rights. I filed for alimony and I won the case, I just stood up to him, took his money and enrolled in university. I was all different, there was a new me."

Despite the multiple layers of the entrapment which hindered many Arab women from breaking free from abusive relationships, they were able at some point in their lives, each in her own circumstances, to make a change and reach her turning point. The above factors which constitute women's incentives, represent an interlaced dynamic of micro and macro levels which establish the foreground for women's process towards their turning point.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study supports previous research conducted with ethnic minorities around the world, which argues that addressing the impacts of cultural oppression and cultural alienation is a critical step in minimising violent behaviour [13,30]. The composite narrative provides rich detail about Arab women's experiences, these women's specific life circumstances and the impact of familial and societal forces and discriminatory policies. These forces affected not only the women's perceptions regarding their experiences of violence but also their decisions to seek help. This study contributes to the human rights field because the findings not only contextualise the circumstances and the suffering of Arab women as a specific population, but may also help translate conceptualisation into reality through urging the development of social and political interventions to minimise violence against Arab women.

The results demonstrated multilayered entrapment as, through their narratives, women discussed the different phases of their lives which were primarily characterised by coercive choices. As young women, some were married underage and were expected by their families to adapt to marital and sexual violence as teenagers. As young women in their families, they had to adhere to and obey the families' demands despite the women's own passions and ambitions. In their marital relationships, women experienced similar situations; where they had either to acquiesce to the partner's demands or they would be physically, verbally or emotionally abused.

The oppression that women experienced included forced marriage, the normalisation of violence and denial of rape, and stigmatisation by the community if they sought separation or divorce. All these dimensions of oppression explained the coping strategies: standardisation of violence, seeking help and suicide attempts- 'SSS'.

Despite the similarities one can find between Arab battered women and women who are victims of domestic violence in general, I argue that Arab women in Israel suffer from additional layers of violence which further tighten their entrapment. Arab women's location at the intersection of race and gender narrowed their entrapment. This finding is consistent with previous research where gender, race and class are viewed as structural systems of control, marginalisation, suppression and oppression that determine identities particularly among ethnic minorities [25]. The narratives revealed the entrapment in almost every decision women would make. Even when some women decided to make a change and engaged in behaviours which would normally be interpreted as proactive and empowering (such as disclosing the violence), participants were further victimised by community and institutional reactions. Community reactions included abandonment, abuse, sexual harassment and death threats. Professional help manifested through police and formal institutions was not always forthcoming and/or suitable to women's needs.

This study, through its composite narrative, revealed the multiple oppressions battered Arab women must deal with on the personal, familial, societal and political levels. However, despite the multilayered entrapment Arab women in the sample had to endure, almost all of them were able to break the cycle of violence, reach their turning point and succeed despite the difficulties, to make a change in their lives through separation, divorce or entering a shelter.

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