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This study is based on two in-depth case study interviews with two Iranian women trapped in violent/abusive marriages. Using a feminist methodology in combination with a systems perspective, several themes emerge from the data gathered in the interviews. The study provides an overview of Iranian family law, the role of the community and family, as well as other factors that contribute to the subjugation of women trapped in abusive relationships. In conclusion, the author provides recommendations on ways to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence in Iran.
Domestic Violence in Iran

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Chapter One

Introduction

Preface
Similar to the lives of early twentieth century American women, Iranian women's lives and experiences remain largely invisible, despite the fact that women play active and valuable roles in Iranian society, politics, academia and virtually every other aspect of the culture. In Our Blood Andrea Dworkin has stated: “This goes right to the core of female invisibility in this culture. No matter what we do, we are not seen. Our acts are not witnessed, not observed, not experienced, not recorded, not affirmed” (Dworkin, 1976, p. 53). Patriarchal culture systematically operates to devalue women's experiences, and silence them by using fear and social stigma. This is especially true regarding women's experience of violence in a male dominated society. Patriarchy traps a woman in violent relationship and punishes her if she seeks to escape.

Furthermore, the fear of violence that women are socialized with is in itself so powerful that it often controls and limits women’s activities. In fact, according to the National Research in Understanding Violence Against Women, the perceived fear of being physically or sexually assaulted is so high among women, that studies in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Holland and Greece, all found that: “women curtail their activities because of this fear. 42 percent of women in Warr's (1985) sample avoided going out alone (compared to only 8 percent of men,) and 27 percent of women even refused to answer their door in response to fear” (NRC, 1996, p. 87). Indeed, as
stated by Jill Davis (2000) in “Building Opportunities for Battered Women’s Safety and Self-Sufficiency:”

A battered woman will face one set of batterer-generated risks if she stays in the relationship and a different set if she leaves. Leaving a relationship does not guarantee the reduction or elimination of violence, threats, or other risks. For some battered women, leaving may create new risks or increase existing ones (www.vaw.umn.edu).

Domestic violence is not unique to any particular nation or culture and although studies of family violence in the U.S. can be traced to the 70’s, research in this area in developing nations is relatively new. Domestic violence is a particularly brutal and devastating disease that has plagued patriarchal cultures across the globe for at least 5,000 years. Dworkin states that women’s slavery:

Originates thousands of years ago, in a prehistory of civilization which remains inaccessible to us. How women came to be slaves, owned by men, we do not know. We do know that the slavery of women to men is the oldest known form of slavery in the history of the world (Dworkin, 1976, p. 78).

Domestic violence is a direct manifestation of sexism, the system of oppression that maintains women’s subordination. As presented in “Violence Against Women in the Family,” by the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, feminist studies and research suggest that “violence by husbands against wives is not a breakdown of the social order at all, not an aberration, but rather arising out of the socio-cultural belief that women are less important and less valuable than men” (Eigenberg, 2001, p. 148).

Furthermore, women are dehumanized and subordinated due to their perceived connections with nature, such as the ability to give/take life. This female power sprouted in Mankind a deep fear of the feminine, which from the advent of patriarchy has been
manifested in the desire to control and subdue womankind, which has been attempted by various forms of violence, including the mass murder and genocide of women by the hundreds for over 300 years in 16th century "Enlightened" Europe, through accusations of "witchcraft" (Shiva & Mies, 1993). Gynoicide is defined by Dworkin as the "systematic crippling, raping, and/or killing of women by men. Gynocide is the word that designates the relentless violence perpetrated by the gender class men against the gender class women" (Dworkin, 1976, p. 16). Additionally, according to the National Research Council, "victims of battering suffer from a host of physical injuries, from bruises, scratches, and wounds, and gunshot wounds to permanent damage to vision or hearing, joints, or internal organs to death" (NRC, 1996, p. 77).

Domestic violence is a particularly insidious form of sexism, as it is perpetrated in a domain that is deemed and assumed to be safe and loving. The scars of domestic violence aside are the trauma and emotional damage that due to the prevalence of domestic violence are spread beyond womankind, creating adverse/negative effects on our women, children, families and societies in general. Domestic violence’s threat not only to women, but the very foundations of our communities requires immediate notice and action. Indeed, in addition to the adverse and negative effects of DV on family, children and friends, including depression, developmental problems and delinquent behavior are the sheer economic costs that DV forces upon our societies. The National Research Council, “[data from 1986] estimated that intrafamilial homicide cost $1.7 billion annually; Meyers (1992) calculated the medical costs and lost work productivity of DV at $5 to $10 billion per year; and the Bureau of National (1990) estimated the annual cost of DV to employers for health care and lost productivity at $3 to $5 billion”
(NRC, 1996, p. 87). It is important to note also the hidden costs of a. diminished productivity and b. the decrease in the quality of life among victims/survivors, due to experiences of DV (NRC, 1996, p. 89).

Domestic Violence, as defined in “What is Battering,” by the National Coalition Against DV is:

Battering is a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the threat or use of violence. Battering happens when one person believes they are entitled to control another (www.ncadv.org).

Domestic Violence includes physical or psychological battering, and sexual assault.

Furthermore, NCADV states that:

Battering escalates. It often begins with behaviors like threats, name calling, violence in her presence (such as punching a fist through a wall), and/or damage to objects or pets. It may escalate to restraining, pushing, slapping, and/or pinching. The battering may include punching, kicking, biting, sexual assault, tripping, throwing. Finally, it may become life-threatening with serious behaviors such as choking, breaking bones, or the use of weapons (www.ncadv.org).

In Iran, violence against women within the home/family is an issue protected and condoned by silence/secrecy, as well as the laws. Based on the studies conducted by Muhammad Haj-Yahia in Palestine and Arab society (2000, 2002) this is also true for the greater Middle Eastern region. Although the societal norms around marriage and divorce in Iran are rapidly changing, there still remains a large amount of pressure to maintain the family structure at all costs. Divorce and separations are, therefore, avoided by any means possible. Rampant sexism in Iranian family law has created many barriers for a woman seeking divorce from her husband.
The law makes it excruciatingly difficult for a woman to be granted divorce, whereas Iranian men have been granted the clear and exclusive right to divorce for any reason and at any time. Iranian family is such that a man can divorce his wife whenever he wishes a woman is faced with numerous barriers. If she seeks divorce, she must provide proof that her husband has ill-treated her to the point where her life or heysiat (social status/pride) is in serious danger, and in order to save her life, belongings or social pride, she has no other solution but divorce (Kar 2001). Some examples where a court will grant a woman divorce are, if her husband is an addict to the point where he can no longer financially provide for her/the family, or if he can no longer keep her sexually satisfied. If the husband has an addiction problem, but can sexually perform and financially support the family, divorce will not be granted. Even if the two conditions were met, proving them in a court of law is exceptionally difficult therefore a woman is often denied divorce. In “Religion, State Power, and Domestic Violence in Muslim Societies,” Lisa Hajar echoes this reality for Egyptian women:

Aside from the difficulties in meeting burdens of proof of domestic violence and the general reluctance on the part of judges to dissolve a marriage at the behest of women, other factors impede Egyptian women from pursuing divorce. Often, women’s families would not support a decision to seek a divorce or be willing to take them in, and establishing separate homes for themselves is both socially unacceptable and economically unfeasible for the vast majority. Another significant deterrent is the likelihood that women who seek divorce will lose custody of their children (Hajar, 2004, p. 25).

Spousal disputes are generally taken to a family elder, who intervenes and mediates for the purpose of reconciliation. Such is also the case with battered women. In both interviews for my study, the women stated that they resorted to the intervention of extended family members. Although the husbands were directed to refrain from battering
their wives and children, the primary pressure from the extended family was for the
couple to maintain a positive family image at all costs. Therefore, both interviewed
women bore the brunt of the pressure, as they became less likely to seek outside help for
the continued experience of violence. It must be emphasized here that this study is based
on two individual case studies, and the findings can not be generalized to the larger
population of Iranian women, nor other Iranian women who may be in abusive/violent
relationships. Additionally, I would like to interject here that the extended family, as we
will see, not only played a major role in pressuring the couple to stay together, and
maintain the marriage, however, it was also often a source of support and refuge for the
women. As there are no established safe houses/shelters for battered women in Iran, the
homes of extended family effectively provided refuge or haven for the women on many
occasions.

There are instances where spousal abuse occurs in the public domain; however,
domestic violence is generally perpetrated in the private sphere of home/family. As such
there exists a thick shroud of secrecy and denial about the issue of domestic violence. It
is the attempt of this research to break the stifling silence about the reality of Iranian
women who are tortured/terrorized and brutalized in their homes. The time is past due
that we begin calling domestic violence what it is and challenging/resisting/abolishing the
systems of oppression that have permeated our homes. The first step towards social
change is to expose the ugly face of domestic violence for what it is: an act of terrorism,
which according to the Encarta English Dictionary is defined as: “violence, or the threat
of violence, especially bombing, kidnapping, and assassination.” In “The Oldest Form of
Terrorism Known to Humankind," by Veronica Hendrix, a columnist for the Los Angeles Sentinel Newspaper, states.

Our culture is no stranger to domestic terrorism. It has been enacted against millions of innocent people, and every year at least four thousand die in an unconscionable act of evisceration at the hands of those who promised to protect them for the rest of their lives. That act of domestic terrorism is domestic violence, the oldest form of terrorism known to humankind (www.lacity.org/csw/html/domesticviolence.pdf).

Jennifer Corrigan of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence echoes this perspective in, “Domestic Violence-The Other Terrorism,” (2002) asking the question, “How are we doing on our other war on terrorism?” and stating that “Those on the frontline are overwhelmed” (Denver Women’s Commission, www.denvergov.org).

The research findings stemming from studies in the U.S. by the National Research Council, demonstrate several clear patterns among the findings, most importantly that the assailant is often an acquaintance, or intimate, whether the assault was sexual or physical. The NRC states that: “The average annual rate of victimization is 74.6 per 1,000 for women aged 12-18 and 63.7 per 1,000 for women aged 19-29” (NRC, 1996, p. 32).

Clearly violence and the threat of violence against women is extremely high, and as such considered acts of terrorism by this author. Once we begin acknowledging domestic violence and violence against women for what it is, we can start to clearly identify the impacts of domestic violence on our societies.

The aim of this research is two-fold. First and foremost it has emerged from the urgency to reveal and expose violence against Iranian women in general and at home in particular. Secondly, I aim to challenge the politically motivated stereotypes regarding Middle Eastern women in general and Iranian women in particular, as voiceless and powerless victims. The willingness of both interviewees to speak out about their
circumstances and experiences of culturally condoned violence itself demonstrates the courage, strength and resilience of women.

I would like to acknowledge the potential danger of this thesis, which is to confirm Western stereotypes regarding Middle Eastern women in general and Iranian women, in particular, as submissive, silent and powerless beings. It is not my intent or purpose of this work to perpetuate these politically motivated cultural misconceptions. On the contrary, my wish is to demonstrate that as women, we all suffer from patriarchy. However, sexism/violence against women is manifested and experienced differently depending on where and in what culture we live. Similarly, Muhammad Haj-Yahia (2000) in his study “Wife Abuse and Battering in the Sociocultural Context of Arab Society,” states that, “societies differ in their perceptions of wife abuse and battering, as well as in their attitudes toward battered wives and violent husbands” (Haj Yahia, 2000, p. 237).

Iran is a patriarchal society. The country is currently ruled by a group of right wing Shiite men, the Ayatollahs, who can supposedly trace their heritage to the prophet, Mohammad. Prior to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran was ruled by a Monarchy, which can be dated back to approximately 559 BCE (chronology of Persian history online at farsinet.com.) Therefore, sexism permeates and forms virtually every thread of life; the courts, legal system, law enforcement and media (Kar 2001, Ezazi 2002). Despite this truth, however, it is essential to note that Iranian women have not only managed to survive, but many have continued to thrive. Women continue to exert their presence in almost all areas of Iranian society, despite the numerous barriers and obstacles that attempt to immobilize and stifle them.
Additionally, according to Lisa Hajar, Iran is a theocracy, meaning it is a country “where the state defines itself as Islamic, and religious law is the law of the state” (Hajar, 2004, p. 27). In a Muslim theocratic state, family relations (marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance) are governed by shari'a. “Shari’a functions both as specific legal rules and as a general religio-cultural framework for Islamic norms and values” (Hajar, 2004, p. 4). Hajar’s comparative study points to the diversity of interpretation and application in various Muslim societies, that clearly “deter overgeneralizing about Islam” (Hajar, 2004, p. 4). This reality is echoed by Kecia Ali in “Islamic Family Law in a Changing World,” who states that, “the divergences between countries tend to support that the ‘political will of the state’ is paramount in determining how particular laws will be implemented and enforced” (Ali, 2004, p. 3). Although shari’a is interpreted and applied differently across the Muslim world, according to Hajar it is overwhelmingly, “interpreted to allow or tolerate some forms and degrees of intrafamily violence” (Hajar, 2004, p. 9). She goes on to state that the dominant interpretations of shari’a perpetuate the patriarchal and hierarchical family.

In contexts where shari’a is interpreted to permit violence against women by family members, the harms women suffer do not only go unpunished but also unrecognized as harms. However, such interpretations are neither universal across Muslim societies nor universally accepted even within societies where intrafamily violence is sanctioned on the basis of shari’a (Hajar, 2004, p. 12).

In Violence Against Women in Iran, Mehrangeez Kar points out that 1. violence against women is a global phenomenon 2. violence against women in Iran is very subtle, and also 3. violence against women is not confined to the home. While violence against women is diverse and widespread, in this research I focus specifically on the occurrence of domestic violence in two case studies of Iranian women.
Violence against women is manifested in many subtle ways, depending also on cultural traditions. In Iran, similar to any other patriarchal culture, various misogynistic traditions make it extremely difficult for a woman trapped in a violent home to break free from the abuser and the abuse. The misogynistic ideas that we are exposed to in our culture and are constantly socialized by, serve as the greatest obstacles to women’s empowerment and sense of agency. More than women’s economic independence, equal job/education opportunities, it is the very idea/belief that women are inferior to men that requires our immediate attention. “Domestic violence is strongly-and directly-related to inequality between men and women” (Hajar, 2004, p. 7).

This thesis addresses the issue of domestic violence in Iran from the perspective of two Iranian women. Focusing on these two women trapped in abusive relationships, I will provide examples from both their experiences throughout this paper. I have based this research on two in-depth and detailed life interviews in order to gain a better understanding of the problem of DV. I also examine the patterns that emerged from these interviews and discuss how both women, each in their own way, sought freedom from the abusive relationships in which they found themselves trapped.

It is also the wish of this author to make connections between DV in the U.S. and Iran by presenting data and statistics, as well as theories from both perspectives about domestic violence in the United States parallel to the information gathered from Iranian women subjects. My hope is that these connections will allow readers to see that DV is a global problem that is given culturally specific forms but affects women across the spectrum of national, racial, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic diversity. Indeed it is important to note that contrary to the Western perspective many Middle Eastern feminists
maintain that Islam, in fact, can not be viewed as any more or less misogynistic or inherently as contributing to Middle Eastern/Muslim women’s oppression. In her book, 

*The Hidden Face of Eve* Dr. Nawal El Saadawi states:

Any serious study of comparative religion will show clearly that in the very essence of Islam, as such, the status of women is no worse than it is in Judaism or in Christianity (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 5).

El Saadawi’s perspective is echoed by numerous Middle Eastern and Muslim scholars. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leili Ahmed contends:

The Western legacy of androcentrism and misogyny, though differing in its specificities, is nevertheless, generally speaking, no better than that of other cultures, including the Islamic (Ahmed, 1992, p.128).

It is in many ways uplifting to note that women of every culture and religious background have taken it upon themselves to challenge the sexist interpretations of their religions, and reclaiming their faiths. In *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case Study*, Haleh Afshar attests to this long standing tradition of resistance. “For over a century a number of intellectual Islamist women have chosen to challenge the patriarchal and negative interpretations that the male dominated religious institutions have presented of their faith” (Afshar, 1998, p.1).

Following this introduction, Chapter II discusses the existing Iranian, and other Middle Eastern, women-centered academic research available and relevant to this thesis. In particular, I will compare books, by two Iranian women. *A Study of Violence Against Women in Iran*, by Mehrangeez Kar looks at the broader issue of violence against women in Iran focusing on how the Iranian laws and customs in particular condone violence, while *Family Violence “Battered Women,”* by Shahla Ezazi takes a look at the occurrence of violence specifically within the family. Ezazi discusses the ways in which
Iranian society views women, men, as well as the family unit and marriage. I also examine broadly existing literature on domestic violence in general.

In Chapter III I discuss various methods utilized for feminist research, provide a brief overview of these theories, and explain the methods I have chosen to use for this particular research. I discuss the manner in which the women were selected, as well as the overall process of the interviews, the make up of the questions, and the conclusion of each interview.

Chapter IV analyzes the data from both life history interviews. I seek to identify and document any patterns that may have emerged through both women’s interviews and discuss them in terms of feminist understandings of domestic violence. Chapter V provides a summary of the research and articulates the conclusions I have drawn from my analysis.

Position as Interviewer

Since we, as women’s studies researchers, acknowledge life history interviews as an interactive process and emphasize the researcher’s influence on the interview process, it is essential that I provide some basic information regarding my own background, as well as my relation/position to this study and its participants. Prior to conducting the interviews for this project, as the interviewer, I provided minimal personal information to the interviewees. One of the women interviewed is a blood relative and, therefore, aware of my personal background. Other than providing information regarding this research project, its goals/objectives, the interviews did not involve any personal exchanges.

Due to the very personal and private, as well as taboo nature of the subject researched, it is my opinion, that my shared cultural background, language and heritage
provided me with access to information and ease in obtaining and recording personal stories of these women, in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

Although born and raised primarily in Iran by an American mother and an Iranian father, English is my “mother tongue” and the language used in our home. Despite my mixed heritage, my fluency in Farsi, the national Iranian language, as well as familiarity with styles of communication and culturally prescribed manners of interaction, all contributed to the relative ease at conducting this research.

My first years of life in Iran, shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, were spent in the lower middle class socioeconomic level. However, by high school my family had risen quickly to the upper middle class. After moving to the U.S., my socioeconomic level again reached the lower middle class level, which I currently continue to occupy. Despite the economic class I currently occupy, it is important to note that simply by virtue of living abroad in a wealthy nation, I occupy a higher socioeconomic level than both interviewees, and therefore exist in a position of privilege in relation to both women.

I believe being raised bilingual and obtaining the majority of my K-12 education in Iranian public schools and fluency in Farsi was of course a tremendous asset to this project, as both interviews were conducted in the women’s native tongue, Farsi. I, therefore, in addition to understanding the language, was able to correctly interpret the various socially prescribed social cues presented throughout the interviews.

This thesis follows my interest in women’s issues that I discovered first when I was approximately 14 years old. I recall frequently questioning the gender roles I was forced into for example, serving guests with tea and fruit, clearing the table, helping in the kitchen, all of which are traditional female roles in Iran, whereas I was most
interested in reading, and listening to or participating in discussions about politics and religion. This fledgling interest blossomed further after my formal introduction to Women’s Studies through a course “Feminist Philosophies,” which compelled me to further pursue the study in graduate school. My awareness at the widespread existence of domestic violence, and also the secrecy and urgency of the issue prompted me to embark on this particular topic. It is my hope that additional studies in this area will take place by other Iranian women.

Limitations and Concerns

Despite my shared cultural background/language and familiarity with the interviewed women’s religious beliefs, there were factors that at the same time served to set me apart from the subjects. My status as a young, single, privileged, college-educated woman of mixed heritage certainly created a minor barrier. The very fact of possessing a college education from a U.S. institute of higher education set me in a position of authority and privilege.

On the other hand, I am a young, unmarried, western college educated woman. Neither interviewed women had the opportunity to pursue higher education. They married at a relatively young age and were occupied as house-wives and mothers. Throughout this research project I was concerned with the ethical aspect of my work, despite the fact that both interviewee’s freely volunteered their time in order to openly and willingly share their experiences with me. After all, what does it mean for me to pry into the lives of battered women, whom I can only merely hope and try to empathize with, while I try to represent them and their experiences in a public academic setting. I
pondered over the potential exploitation that might unwillingly enter my project due to my western-feminist education and ideas.

Furthermore, of utmost concern throughout this project, conducting the related research, as well as formulating and writing the thesis, has been the simultaneous struggle with existing negative stereotypes regarding Middle Eastern women, specifically Iranian women, whom the Western public has been taught to view as existing submissively under the rule of a fundamentalist, religious regime. While true, there exists much more than this to the life and existence of an Iranian woman. The challenge, therefore, has been that while I do wish to challenge and question the rampant and unjust patriarchal laws that have come to govern Iranian women’s lives, I do not wish to, willingly or unwillingly, participate in creating and perpetuating negative images of Iran and its people in environments that are already overflowing and teeming with misconceptions. As such, it is a delicate and sensitive task to separate patriarchy from Iranian culture, and to critically analyze it and work towards abolishing it, while simultaneously working to preserve Iranian culture and many of its beautiful traditions, such as the role and importance of hospitality. As Lisa Hajar has eloquently stated:

In societies where resistance to women’s rights is expressed as a defense of social traditions or religious beliefs, women’s rights activists have been challenged to cultivate a persuasive distinction between culture and violence against women (Hajar, 2004, p. 15).

The fine balance, then, is between defending Iran’s national identity and nation from the growing global imperialism, while battling the sexism that has for 2,500 years become so intertwined with the fabric of Iranian culture, seeking to stifle and control
women. In *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, Haideh Moghissi touches upon this fine balance and problem as well. She states:

The problem exists in the conceptual frameworks which prevent many Western intellectuals including feminists from seeing and appreciating the diversified burgeoning women’s movements in Middle Eastern countries and their feminist content. The hegemonic influence of the Western image of Middle Eastern women as veiled, obedient and subservient, if nonetheless alluring and wistful, overshadows the mounting evidence of their intellectual, cultural and political struggle for social and political reforms in the region (Moghissi, 1994, p. 9).

Again, it is not the intention of this paper to, at any point, imply or claim that Middle Eastern women are better off than Western women, or vice versa. Rather it is to demonstrate that, as women, we all suffer from the forces of patriarchy, and to emphasize the urgency in abolishing it, for as Dworkin has eloquently stated: “Under patriarchy, no woman is safe to live her life, or to love, or to mother children...before we can live and love, we will have to hone ourselves into a revolutionary sisterhood” (Dworkin, 1976, p. 20).

Gender consciousness exits in women across the globe. This has been demonstrated in different women’s movements independent of one another in different parts of the world. Similarly, the women’s movement in Iran has old roots, dating to over one hundred years. In fact, according to Homa Hoodfar author of “The Women’s Movement in Iran,” “by the late nineteenth century, debate around women’s issues and women’s socioeconomic situation in Iran had become widespread among intellectuals, modernists, nationalists, and anti-colonial forces” (Hoodfar, 1999, p.5). This fact is supported by Ali Akbar Mahdi (2004) in “The Iranian Women’s Movement: A Century Long Struggle,” as well.
It is clear that neither the systematic oppression of women through various forms of violence, nor women’s resistance and action against Patriarchy are unique to any one people, race, nation or socio-economic class. As Dworkin has stated:

Female slavery in England, then in Amerika, was not structurally different from female slavery anywhere else in the world. The institutional oppression of women is not the product of a discrete historical time, nor is it derived from a particular national circumstance, or is it limited to Western Culture, nor is it the consequence of a particular economic system. Female slavery in Amerika was congruent with the universal character of abject female subjugation:...their slavery was the base on which all social life was built and the model from which all other forms of social domination were derived (Dworkin, 1976, p. 81).

In the eloquent words of Moghissi, “the task we face is how to reconcile the universality of gender oppression with the particular ideographic conditions and contingencies of women’s lives” (Moghissi 1994). With the universality of violence against women in mind, as well as the knowledge that this particular study is based on only two individual case studies (therefore, findings can not be generalized,) we will begin examining some of the existing literature around domestic violence in Iran, the broader Middle Eastern region, as well as in the US and other nations.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

As previously mentioned, domestic violence is a particularly insidious form of violence. According to the National Research in: Understanding Violence Against Women, although many more men than women are victims of violent crimes overall, women constitute a high percentage of people who experience violence perpetrated by an intimate partner. Women are also significantly more likely to be killed by an intimate than are men. In 1993, 29 percent of female homicide victims were killed by their husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends; only 3 percent of male homicides were killed by their wives” (NRC, 1996, p.7). In a more recent study conducted by UNIFEM it is stated that violence against women has reached such levels globally that: “one in three women will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime.”

A fatality study conducted by Margaret Hobart in Washington State in 2002, identified the following gaps within the community’s response: 1. lack of contact with community, 2. friends, neighbors, relatives who were aware of the DV and chose to ignore it, 3. failure of intervening professionals to recognize threats, 4. criminal justice system response that was weak or inconsistent, 5. significant barriers to accessing help, 6. civil courts ill prepared to oversee the formulation of parenting plans that would protect the safety of victims and their children...(Hobart, 2002, p. 11).

Theories attempting to explain the causes of violence against women are numerous. Violent behavior toward women has been attributed to any individual man’s mental health issues, personality traits, biology/genetics and/or drug/alcohol use. These
perspectives discuss the “individual determinants,” (NRC, 1996, p. 50) and although they do place responsibility on the perpetrator, at the same time they create the impression that violence against women is an abnormal or “aberrant” phenomenon, something that is outside the norm and occurs infrequently. As stated by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence in “Why Do Men Batter Women,”

> These issues may be associated with battering of women, but they are not the causes. Removing these associated factors will not end men’s violence against women. The batterer begins and continues his behavior because violence is an effective method for gaining and keeping control over another person and he usually does not suffer adverse consequences as a result of his behavior (www.ncadv.org).

Furthermore, these perspectives focusing on “individual determinants” ignore the widespread occurrence of violence against women and also the constant fear of violence that shapes and forms every woman’s life. According to Pagelow (1984) enough evidence exists now to show the widespread occurrence and extent of woman-battering in this and other countries that it can no longer be viewed as a rare problem of individual psychosis.

From a feminist perspective the broader issue of the “gendered nature of violence against women and its roots in patriarchal social systems,” (NRC, 1996, p. 50) requires our attention and examination. As stated in “Violence Against Women in the Family,” by the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, “[this perspective] suggests that wife battery is neither a private nor a family problem, but rather a reflection of the broad structures of sexual and economic inequality in society” (Eigenberg, 2001, p. 148). Similarly the presentation by UNIFEM, “Not a Minute More,” states the reasons for the widespread epidemic of violence against women to be:
Gender inequality fuels violence against women and the power imbalances it creates are not easily rectified. As long as women in diverse countries do not have access to property and employment and equal wages, to the seats of power, to education, it is possible for governments to ignore them and their needs (Not a Minute More, 2000, p. 6).

Andrea Dworkin contends that as women, we are in bondage and enslaved because we are women:

Everywhere, our people are in chains-designated inferior to men; our very bodies controlled by men and male law; the victims of violent, savage crimes; bound by law, custom, and habit to sexual and domestic servitude; exploited mercilessly in any paid labor; robbed of identity and ambition as a condition of birth (Dworkin, 1976, p. 77).

According to Dworkin, then, as a “condition of birth,” women are designated inferior to men. If women are viewed as inferior to men, then it becomes easy to justify crimes against women. Following this designated inferiority, is women’s economic status in any given nation and the ways in which it traps women in violent relationships. In Family Violence, Pagelow discusses the role of economic and sexual inequality in DV.

An economic system that is unable to accommodate all willing workers and has large segments of the population living whole lifetimes in financial insecurity or poverty while a tiny minority lives in opulence and splendor must be considered a strong contributor to family violence. In addition, women’s subordinate status in society and family also contributes (Pagelow, 1984, p. 465).

According to social learning theory, “social institutions promote rather than discourage male violence against women and tend to keep women in conjugal relationships to preserve the ‘sanctity of the home’ despite the damage being done to all family members” (Pagelow, 1984, p. 31). This thesis follows the premise that domestic violence is in fact caused by sexism, the very idea that women are inferior to men and is supported/perpetuated by a complex interplay among the cultural norms, religious
ideologies, media, the legal systems and law enforcement agencies of any given nation, to mention a few.

Studies on family violence in developing countries are scarce, however in most of the Middle East, it is especially so. In Iran research in the area is relatively new, perhaps beginning with the pioneering work of women’s rights and family law attorney, Mehrangeez Kar, only three years ago. Anahid Devartanian Kulwicki in, “The Practice of Honor Crimes: A Glimpse of Domestic Violence in the Arab World,” conducted in 2002, attests to the scarcity of DV related information in Arab culture. Additionally studies of interfamily aggression in Turkey (Hortascu, 2003) and wife abuse/battering in Palestinian society, (Haj Yahia, 2000) attest to the severe lack of information about domestic violence. Haj Yahia states:

The incidence of wife abuse and battering has been studied extensively in many societies throughout the world. Nevertheless, there is a serious lack of similar research in Arab societies, including Palestinian society (Haj Yahia, 2000, p. 347).

I would extend this statement beyond the Arab region to include the entire Middle East, for there is a serious lack of information regarding domestic violence in the entire region. Furthermore, similar to the findings of Haj-Yahia’s study in Palestine, there is an attempt to hide DV in Iranian society behind closed doors. Another study conducted by Haj-Yahia titled “Wife Abuse and Battering in the Sociocultural Context of Arab Society,” is also of value and importance to my thesis, as it demonstrates some of the socio-cultural differences in Arab society that affect how domestic violence is both manifested and experienced. Haj-Yahia discusses how DV is experienced by women in collectivist societies as opposed to the West and the role that the collectivist society
cultural norms play on the ways women seek to cope with or escape violent relationships.

In collectivist Middle Eastern societies,

Every family member is usually considered responsible for the behavior and even for the living conditions of other members. This commitment often leads one to forego personal aspirations, needs, and desires in exchange for the family’s well-being, as well as for maintaining the family reputation and honor (Haj Yahia, 2000, p.239).

Therefore, in most Middle Eastern societies, including Iran, the needs/desires of the individual are subsumed by what matters to entire family unit. Furthermore, outside, or police intervention is viewed extremely negatively (Haj Yahia, 2000). Nawal H. Ammar echoes this distrust of police intervention among Arab-American’s in the US as well, stating, “Ethnic and racial minorities have been mistreated by police in the US since the early days of this nation. Arab Americans, unlike many others, are invisible in criminology and criminal justice books dealing with race and ethnicity” (Ammar, 2000, p. 57).

In the following section I will compare and contrast two existing books written by Iranian women specifically addressing the issue of misogyny in Iran. These two books have been chosen for their direct and in-depth study of instances of violence against women, and therefore, their relevance to this thesis. Mehrangeez Kar approaches the subject on a broader scale in *A Study of Violence Against Women in Iran*. The author is an attorney specializing in women’s rights who continues to work in this profession and she has also written several other books addressing Iranian women’s issues. *A Study of Violence Against Women in Iran*, includes six chapters beginning in chapter one with the question: “Why is challenging violence against women an urgent matter?” Chapter two
seeks to address the various domains where violence against women is perpetrated. In Chapter three she addresses the roots of violence against women, touching upon the legal system, the cultural make up of Iranian society, and the courts. Chapter four discusses the different forms of violence against women (physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and political) as well as the prices we pay as women and as a society for the occurrence of violence. Chapter five presents how victims as well as advocates/specialists describe violence against women. Kar provides us with methods of resistance followed by her conclusion in chapter six.

On the other hand, Dr. Shahia Ezazi’s book, *Family Violence, “Battered Women,”* focuses on the specific occurrence of violence in the family sphere. Her book is divided into three chapters addressing the issue of domestic violence. Chapter one provides an overview of the changing/evolving definition of family violence, as well as methods of researching instances of violence in the home and the various challenges inherent in conducting such research. Chapter two discusses the varying perspectives that have emerged in academia in regards to the origin of violence, emphasizing what each perspective deems as most influential in creating and perpetuating violence. This includes 1. Feminist, 2. Social, 3. Environmental, 4. Systems, 5. Economic, 6. Exchange, and 7. Cultural theories. In chapter three, Ezazi presents an analysis of data gathered from battered women as well as a summary.

Ezazi begins by tracing the definition of violence and following the various changes it has gone through. She then discusses some of the difficulties faced by researchers of family violence. She states that: “in most cultures and societies, marriage and family point to a “private” environment, which is closed off to outsiders, especially
researchers." Some of the characteristics of a family that are generally kept private are the family income, religious practice, or the ways a family might discipline their children (Ezazi, 2002). The sensitivity of the subject of family violence creates additional challenges for the researcher. Some research methods utilized in other studies can not be utilized in the study of family violence. For example, one can not gather data through direct observation. Even if a family were to invite a researcher into their home, they would likely present very different modes of behavior. Furthermore, a researcher can not ethically, simulate the environment of a violent home for the purposes of study.

Ezazi claims that due to the abovementioned reasons, personal interviews are the only method one can use to gather data relating to family violence. However, Ezazi states that this method also has its particular difficulties, for first and foremost, according to her, are the issue of trust and the level of honesty of either the victim or abuser interviewed. “A researcher can interview the abuser or victim, however, in both cases the main question is whether the interviewee completely answers the question, or if they seek to hide the truth, or even to exaggerate it?” (Ezazi, 2002, p. 33). She goes on to explain that often the abuser will hide the truth or present answers according to what s/he knows to be socially acceptable. On the other hand, due to the threat of further harm/violence or because of feelings of shame, the victim may not speak the entire truth. Ezazi concludes by stating that the best and most complete method of research, then, is interviewing both victim and abuser. This particular thesis, however, utilizes only interviews of female victims of domestic violence with the aim of focusing on/and giving voice to women’s experiences.

**The Global Face of Violence Against Women**
Both Ezazi and Kar independently state that violence against women is not particular to any one country or nation. This reality is expressed by researchers of family violence across the globe, such as by Anahid Devartanian Kulwicki (2002) in “The Practice of Honor Crimes: A Glimpse of Domestic Violence in the Arab World,” the study conducted by Wasim Maziak and Taghrid Asfar (2003) “Physical Abuse in Low-Income Women in Aleppo, Syria” as well as findings by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. In relation to sexual assault, Recorded Crime 2003 reports:

- There were 18,237 reported sexual assaults in Australia in 2003, a rate of 91.7 per 100,000 population, an increase of 1.5% over 2002.
- Women comprised the majority of victims (82%), with females in the 10-19 year age group recording the highest victimisation rate (497 per 100,000 population).
- Victims of sexual assault were four times more likely to know the offender than not, with the offender being a family member of 29% of victims.
- Two thirds of sexual assaults occurred in a residential location. (ABS 2003)

Among these studies, however, the study of “Physical Abuse in Low-Income Women in Aleppo, Syria,” in Health Care for Women International, 2003 seemed the only study inconsistent with the other studies used in this thesis in terms of findings relating to correlations between education, income level, etc. This study is the only one stating a correlation between the physical violence experience by women of Aleppo, Syria and their education level, economic status, etc. Most data available in the U.S., and also the studies conducted by M. Haj Yahia, and others suggest that DV cuts across socio-economic, education, age and race.

In chapter one of her book, Kar provides us with statistics regarding instances of violence against women in the U.S. as well as other countries. She states: “violence against women is a global phenomenon, for: 30-35% of American women experience
violence at the hands of their husbands. 15-25% of American women experience violence during her pregnancy and also according to an FBI report in 1992, of each ten murdered woman, in the U.S., three are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends (or ex-husbands/boyfriends.) In Columbia more than 20% of women experience verbal or mental violence at the hands of their husbands. 41% of East Indian women attempt suicide due to experiencing physical violence at the hands of their husbands. And 42% of women in Kenya experience consistent physical violence at the hands of their spouses” (Kar, 2001, p.13). With the global occurrence of violence against women, Kar and Ezazi both claim that the effects of violence against women, not only adversely affects women, instead it also creates social problems of a larger scale. Ezazi states that there is a direct link between familial relations and the buildup/structure of any given society (Ezazi, 2002).

In her preface, Ezazi states that “although family violence is not a new phenomenon, paying attention to it as a social issue is relatively new. In Western societies, from approximately thirty years ago, and in Iran from a few years ago, family violence has attracted the attention of specialists” (Ezazi, 2002, p.7). She also claims that “if the buildup of a society is based on inequality among its members and the laws, customs and social ideologies support the existing systems, the reflection of such inequality is also seen in the family unit, and the use of violence for the perpetuation of the superior member is viewed as natural” (Ezazi, 2002, p. 9). Similarly, Kar states: “From what has been concluded in various international centers/conferences for women, we can understand this point that violence against women in the family is an ancient issue and a global problem, and the urgency of the issue is such that different countries must
understand its roots and each according to their own resources seek to abolish violence against women” (Kar, 2001, p. 16).

Despite violence against women being a global phenomenon, Kar claims that it is expressed differently in each culture and according to that society’s unique laws, customs, religion and politics. This view is shared also by Muhammad M. Haj-Yahia, who has studied violence against women in Arab society quite extensively. He states:

Societies differ in their perceptions of wife abuse and battering, as well as in their attitudes toward battered wives and violent husbands... This includes formal and informal responses to the various manifestations of the problem (Haj Yahia, 2000, p. 237).

According to Kar, violence against women is not specific to the home; rather, it is expressed both in the public sphere and the private domain. “For example, Iranian women, in the private domain, exist in a unique violent environment that is the result of the specific laws/customs that dictate marriage/divorce laws, which do not exist in the west” (Kar, 2001, p. 18). Divorced women in Iran have no available support systems in the society, therefore, in their marital life, they “give in” and submit in order to refrain from the stigma of divorce. According to Iranian marriage/family laws, the divorced woman has no share in her husband’s wealth and very often, following a divorce, women sink into poverty. Also, women are faced with the threat of losing custody of their children to their husbands, upon divorce. Therefore, even employed women who are not in financial need, continue to suffer from violence so they maintain the custody of their children (Kar, 2001). Additionally, from a Western feminist perspective, economic equality has been highly emphasized since the second wave of the women’s movement.
It has become clear, however, to many of us that economic freedom does not necessarily mean freedom from violence, or even equality. It is apparent that in the western world where women have achieved a higher level of participation in the public domain of economics and politics, women not only continue to be plagued by the ever present forces of sexism, they are also finding themselves facing new problems and barriers, such as the “double-shift,” which may even create additional difficulties for women. Various forms of violence against women, furthermore, strengthen and reinforce each other. For example, the negative view of divorced women in Iranian society helps in keeping women trapped in violent marriages. “Therefore, the effects of violence are a combination of various forms of violence, family, social, political, and certain religious interpretations. Thus, it must be discussed from different angles/perspectives” (Kar, 2001, p. 19).

Furthermore, sexist Iranian family laws have created many barriers for a woman seeking divorce from her husband. The law makes it excruciatingly difficult for a woman to be granted divorce, whereas Iranian men have been given the right to divorce for any reason and at any time. The law clearly and concisely states: “A man can divorce his wife any time he wishes” (Kar, 2001, p. 159). He needs no explanation, nor does he need to provide any sort of proof and/or documents to the courts.

Kar goes on to explain that in addition to violence against women being a global phenomenon, it is often expressed in very subtle ways. In Iran, particularly, thousands of years of cultural pressure mandates a woman to remain silent about her experiences of violence. “They object and seek help only when they have lost all other hope” (Kar, 2001, p. 17). M. Haj Yahia echoes this statement in his study of wife abuse in Arab
society as well, and states that the abused woman keeps her suffering to herself except in extreme cases. He states that “even then, battered women usually approach their family of origin and only seek support and intervention from formal, professional welfare services as a last resort” (Haj Yahia, 2000, p. 240).

Similar to Arab women and other Middle Eastern women, Iranian women are, in the words of Haj Yahia, “clearly trapped.” Hassouneh-Phillips echoes this sentiment in her study of American Muslim women by stating that women, “aware of the tremendous social stigma associated with divorce, participants typically decided to leave their abusers only after having experienced severe psychological, spiritual, and/or physical abuse.” She states that this severe abuse brings women to what she calls, “point of saturation” (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001).

Often, an Iranian women’s experience consists of living in her father’s home and acquiescing to his laws, and when she marries, she continues to sacrifice her wants/desires to the will of her husband. In the work environment she is subject to the patriarchal structure of her place of employment; in society as well, patriarchy seeks to control her through misogynistic customs. Through this form of socialization, violence becomes accepted and often she will submit to violence and refrain from showing any reaction (Kar 2001). I would like to interject that such is also the case in most countries, even the U.S., where a woman will more often than not refrain from speaking out about her experience of violence, because she has been taught that she will be called a liar, re-victimized in a court of law, or frequently she is threatened with more violence if she speaks out. Furthermore, different aspects and institutions of patriarchal culture reinforce and support each other, so if a woman does seek help outside of her marriage, she will be
punished by the legal system and larger society. Similarly, in her study of American
women’s experiences in leaving violent relationships, Hassouneh-Phillips states that “in
addition to experiencing disapproval and receiving very limited social support,
participants found that after divorce they no longer fit into the social structure of their
families” (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001, p. 427).

According to Kar, the manner of reaction to a woman’s case in the court of law is
an important and complex issue, in Iran. The legal system actively ignores women’s
cases and complaints of violence, thus perpetuating the problem. It is also the case that
such cases are not taken seriously by the legal system. Even in instances when a woman
seeks legal assistance due to desperation or the gravity of her situation, she is punished,
as Iranian society continues to view such a step negatively. Similarly in the states,
women rarely approach the legal system with claims of violence, due to the lack of
accountability for men who commit acts of violence against women, through lenient
bail/jail sentences.

In Iran, when a woman is granted divorce, she very soon learns that although she
may have exited the cycle of violence in her home, she has been plunged into a similar
cycle in society. There exist many barriers for women to seek/maintain employment, as
well as gain social opportunities. Often when a woman is granted legal separation from
her abusive husband, she is forced into forfeiting her mehrieh. Mehrieh is a fixed sum of
money determined and agreed upon at the time of marriage as a form of insurance for the
woman. If at some point the couple seek separation, the husband is legally responsible
for paying the sum in full. However, in modern Iran, if a woman asks for a divorce due
to violence, she is often faced with social pressure from her spouse, friends and family to
forfeit her *mehrieh* in order to be granted a divorce (Kar, 2001). Thus in patriarchal society, the purpose of *mehrieh* is nullified.

**Private & Public Violence**

Kar and Ezazi both agree that violence against women is perpetrated in two areas: public and private. According to Kar, “violence in the private domain is violence within a family environment where people are bound together through blood or by law.” In her father’s home, an Iranian girl is denied many of the freedoms granted to the boys. Often she is held responsible for the caring of younger siblings; therefore, cleaning and cooking are deemed more important tasks for the girl, than completing school work/studies. Furthermore, most young girls are prohibited from engaging in social activities (even with proper *hejab*, or dress) such as riding a bike, playing soccer, engaging in physical activities, or socializing with friends in public; privileges which young boys are free to enjoy. In many Iranian families, young girls are forced into marriages, for economic, social or religious reasons. She is often viewed as an “extra mouth to feed,” and therefore, the family is anxious for her to enter a marriage. Many young girls forced into such marriages, run away, and are then faced with even more violence, as often her family will disown and isolate her. According to Kar, the number of young girls who become addicts from such familial mental/psychological pressures is very high (Kar, 2001).

In most Iranian households, the man continues to be the primary “breadwinner.” As such, the legal and religious systems give him authority over the rest of the family members. When a man feels his power and authority threatened within the home, he uses physical and mental violence to control his wife. He will also create financial difficulties
for her, or even seek to isolate her from friends and family members, to the point of imprisoning her in the house (Kar, 2001).

Ezazi questions the role of socio-economic class on the occurrence of family violence. Previously it was believed that the pressures of a low income life, poverty, unemployment, high number of children, low education levels, inadequate housing, would lead to higher levels of domestic violence, or have an influence/impact on it. However, it has since been proven and established through various conducted research that there exists no correlation between domestic violence and the socio-economic, political, educational level of any given race/nation of people (Ezazi, 2002).

**Roots of Violence**

Kar explains that the public domain includes a much broader and wider area concerning violence against women. In Iran it includes: 1. Customs, 2. Oral/Written Expressions, 3. Traditional Religious Interpretations, 4. Public Institutions, 5. Government. The customs condoning and supporting violence against women, differ from province to province in Iran. Some of these customs include beliefs about marriage, “purity” and the wedding night. In more traditional areas of Iran, a girls’ virginity is a matter of family/tribe honor. It is also in the taking of a young girls’ virginity that a man announces his authority and claims ownership over her. In some areas a girls’ virginity is proven by the bloody towel that is produced, and in other areas her sexual purity is determined by a midwife or gynecologist (Kar, 2001).

In addition to certain customs that permeate the culture, it is also the language, both oral and written, that reflect the level of misogyny. “The expressions that exist in our oral culture that circle from mouth to mouth also contain a message of violence
against women” (Kar, 2001, p. 45). Of these particular expressions there are many, which Kar has documented in her book; however, since their translation to English would be almost meaningless, I will refrain from including them here. However, expressions such as “rule of thumb,” that are widely used in the U.S., containing misogynistic content and history, are similar and parallel to those discussed and presented by Kar. Kar also touches upon the traditional interpretations of the primary religion, Islam, and the ways in which they have and continue to serve as supporters of violence against women. Various interpretations ranging from the belief that woman was created from the 13th rib of man, or the left-over mud of creation, to the idea that women can not reach the perfection of men, and that their sole purpose for creation was to maintain the home, continue to exist in Iranian and Muslim culture.

It goes without saying that such interpretations also exist in the Western Christian world, justifying the subjugation of womankind. For example, these ideas include laws of impurity that relate to women in the Judeo-Christian tradition that do not equally apply to men. The influence and role of religious interpretation and the ways in which it shapes our ideas of men and women, whether in Iran or the U.S. can not be denied.

In more traditional Iranian families if women sway from these prescribed modes of behavior and roles, violence is condoned for their subjugation. Kar states: “For, in one word, keeping women trapped within the home, and away from public life, can not be accomplished without the creation of fear, or the threat of violence” (Kar, 2001, p. 45). She goes on to claim that these religious interpretations put a woman’s psychological and physical well-being in danger. In addition, it creates, in the public view, the false idea that religion, particularly Islam is a collection of misogynistic ideas. In “Domestic
Violence in the Muslim Community," Faizi discusses the ways in which abusive Muslim men use Islam to justify their behavior. "Abusive muslim men use the Qur'an and Sunnah as their tools, manipulation verses to keep their wives subservient and obedient and manipulating the woman's spirituality and faith to reinforce the abuser's power and control" (Faizi, 2001, p. 211).

Faizi is not alone in claiming that there is nothing inherently misogynistic about the Qur'an, instead it is the interpretations of a particular group. Her views are shared by Fatima Mernissi, whom in her book titled The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam states:

If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite (Mernissi, 1991, p. ix).

According to Kar, Iranian social institutions, which include the education system, media, and fitness and art institutions are mainly controlled and dominated by men. The books designed and used in schools all emphasize the division of labor and role in the home, thus restricting her opportunities, and socializing her from a very young age to assimilate to a particular role. "Young Iranian girls are faced with not only inequalities in social opportunities, but when seeking to occupy their spare time, they are also subject to serious barriers rooted in their family's particular mentality. For example, in recent years a few recreation, fitness and cultural centers have been designed/built specifically for women: however, often due to their distance, families will not allow their girls to attend" (Kar, 2001, p. 48). Similarly, the governmental institutions of Iran continue to be dominated by men and women continue to be actively denied participation in the political
domain. In the political system of Iran, women are denied the right to act as judges in a court of law, or in other words, women are prohibited from becoming judges (Kar, 2001).

As an attorney, Kar began looking for the roots of violence against women in the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ways in which they effect women. In Iran, many crimes are punishable by certain determined number of lashes, or through a fine. However, the law differentiates between men in women, by claiming that women reach the age of puberty earlier than men. As such, girls at 9 years of age are punishable by law, whereas boys are not considered men until they are 15, and as such they can not be punished/tried as an adult.

Additionally, there are laws governing the bodies of women and what women can and can not do with their own bodies. This includes laws about what is/is not acceptable clothing and whether or not a woman has sexual rights-rights in choosing her own sexual (life) partner or spouse-and abortion rights. All the laws, as they exist now, seek to limit women’s freedom in all these areas (Kar, 2001). For example, since the 1979 revolution in Iran, a particular law has come into effect called the “unacceptable hejab” law, allowing government officials to arrest/punish all those whose hejab is unacceptable. Hejab can include everything from a person’s clothing, to a person’s way of walking, and talking; however, unacceptable hejab has not been clearly defined within the law, leaving it wide open to personal interpretation. In other words, its meaning is relative and depends on the law enforcement official that a person might run into. This is how the Islamic government of Iran seeks to control a woman’s clothing/manner. A similar law has not been created for the control of men (Kar, 2001).
Additionally, the law has denied married women the right to freely move about both within the country, or outside of it. A married woman must have her husband’s permission to travel within the country or move from their place of residence. Legally, a woman can not leave the country either, without the specific permission of her husband (Kar, 2001, p.136). Ezazi also substantiates this statement, and claims that according to the law, the man has the freedom to determine the couple’s place of residence.

“Furthermore, a married woman’s travel can only take place through her husband’s permission” (Ezazi, 2002, p. 206). She states that since the man is determined the “head of the household,” he can legally control the family members, and, if they do not submit to his will, he can resort to violence. Ezazi goes on to say: “The problem is that violence is so accepted, that society blames the victim, and the victim also accepts this view” (Ezazi, 2002, p. 206).

An additional way Iranian society seeks to control a woman’s freedom is by making it difficult for a woman to access birth control. A married Iranian woman is required to obtain her husband’s permission if she should wish to tie her tubes or resort to any other form of birth control that may be permanent. Furthermore, an Iranian woman does not have the right to legal abortion and in the event that she is found guilty of aborting the fetus, she is punishable by law (Kar, 2001).

Ezazi discusses the way Iranian society views men, women, as well as the institution of marriage. Men, she claims, compared to women, enjoy higher social opportunities and positions. Also, within the family, men are privileged with specific rights. Violence, she says, is viewed as a masculine trait, and society claims that some male behaviors are inherent/”natural” and can not be changed, thus, it is a woman’s duty
to tolerate them (Ezazi, 2002). On the other hand, Iranian societal views of women are such that: women’s position within the family is subordinated to men; women must be under the control/"protection" of men; a woman’s social validity depends on her association with men; women must accommodate themselves with the desires/characteristics of their husbands or change according to their husbands wants (Ezazi, 2002).

According to Ezazi, society’s view of marriage and family is as follows: marriage is inherently important (must be maintained at all costs); within the family, the man is the “breadwinner” and the woman is responsible for creating a pleasurable environment for others; a family is a private unit/domain away from outside interventions; and conflicts within the family are natural (Ezazi, 2002). Furthermore, the social situations are such that: most formal agencies are male dominated; formal agencies are weak in their ability to provide assistance to women; there is a lack of financial/social assistance for women; and women are faced with lack of information (women are kept ignorant of resources,) (Ezazi, 2002).

Ezazi outlines the characteristics of family violence in Iran, as follows: if the violence is not severe, it is viewed as acceptable for the purpose of “educating” a woman. This form of violence is “acceptable violence.” She goes on to say that in Iran, family violence is viewed as natural, as it is a common occurrence. Therefore, it is attributed to the male “nature,” and as such family violence is considered “natural violence.” Furthermore, she states that family violence not only occurs in the private domain of the home/family environment, but it is also seen in public. This violence is labeled “obvious or overt violence.” She goes on to state that: “Since violence against women (by her
husband) is deemed as acceptable, natural, and overt, nobody shows special attention to
the matter, and victims do not receive any form of support through social institutions”
(Ezazi, 2002, p. 207). Haj Yahia’s study of wife abuse/battering in Arab society, also
reflect these statements:

In a society with these values, if men perceive their power and privileges are
being threatened, they may use violence as a tactic for restoring their dominant
status and power. They are generally educated as children to view violence as a
legitimate way to solve problems, and even to demonstrate power and authority in
certain situations (Haj Yahia, 2000, p. 241).

Conclusions

Ezazi draws general conclusions about how society views violence, men, women,
maintenance/family, as well as existing social opportunities in Iran.

Iranian society views violence as such:

- Certain family/social positions permit the use of violence.
- The use of violence for the purpose of punishment/education.
- If the violence is not “severe” society is accepting of it.
- Unfamiliarity with other methods of conflict resolution lead to the use of
  violence.
- Often the victim is blamed for the occurrence of violence.

Ezazi concludes that family violence transcends all socio-economic levels. In her studies
she found that in general, the men in the family were considered the “breadwinners” and
occupied more prestigious positions, thus, having higher wage’s compared to the
employed women, who occupied most of the teaching or some clerical positions. Often,
many of the men who lacked any higher education, continued to make more money than
their female counterparts. "Societal views that are reflected in people's psychology and ways of thinking, as well as in the nation's laws, exist in such a way that although they may not overtly advertise the use of violence, by allowing people to occupy certain privileged social/family positions, permits and condones the use violence (Ezazi, 2002). Similarly in his study of wife abuse in Arab society, Haj Yahia states that despite many changes in Arab society in recent years,

The husband's position as head of the family still provides him with considerable power based on his economic and social status, as well as on a stereotypic division of roles and tasks. As head of the family, men have more authority than women—not only in relation to their wives, but also in relation to their offspring, and often in relation to their married sisters. They expect their wives and children to respect them and obey their rules and requests (Haj Yahia, 2000, p. 241).

Iranian society views men as follows:

- In society, compared to women, men are privileged with higher social status.
- Within the family, men are allowed certain rights/privileges.
- Violence is seen as "masculine" behavior.
- Certain behaviors that are attributed to men, are deemed to be natural, and thus unchangeable, therefore, they must be tolerated.

As the "head of the household," Iranian men have been given the right to interfere in women's decision making in regards to her employment, travel, and choice of shelter, to name a few. Married Iranian women must have their husband's permission to travel in or outside of the country. The husband has been given the legal right to interfere in her work or prohibit her from obtaining or maintaining work. Also, legally, the husband has the right to choose the location of their home.

The Iranian society views women as such:
• Women occupy lower social positions.
• Women must be under the protection/control of men.
• A woman’s status depends on her relationship to a man.
• Women must behave according to their husband’s wishes.

Furthermore, society views family and marriage in the following manner:

• Marriage in itself is important.
• Within the family, the man is responsible for the economics, while the woman is responsible for creating a pleasurable environment.
• The family is a private domain and closed to outside intervention.

Ezazi concludes that DV demands our attention due to its negative effects on a society. Since DV is not the outcome of one certain variable, the whole structure of society and its institutions are responsible for its tolerance. In order to eliminate DV, much work must be done on different levels, individual, social, political, and it requires government assistance. Ezazi claims the first step towards eliminating DV is widespread education (Ezazi, 2002).

Similarly, Kar views DV as a complex matter that can not be eliminated without a unified response from all aspects of society, including law enforcement, court systems, medical faculty/facilities, and other governmental and non-governmental agencies. She states that first and foremost Iranian society must provide support systems to victims of violence through the following steps:

• Growth and expansion of women’s groups.
• Creating cooperation among law enforcement and women’s groups.
• Creating a female police force.
• Creating safe houses or shelters for women.
• Strengthening social service providers as well as family courts.
• Coordinating roundtables for educational discussions.
• Create employment opportunities for women.
• Supporting women’s education in tech institutes.
• Providing concrete and applicable suggestions for action

Kar also believes it essential for men to change by:

• Encouraging women’s discussions
• Encouraging men’s cooperation
• Providing rehabilitation centers for violent men

Both Kar and Ezazi agree it to be necessary that there be a comprehensive, holistic response and approach for eliminating violence against women, requiring cooperation among all institutions, and aspects of Iranian society.

In this chapter we have looked at the unique barriers battered women face in Iran as they struggle for survival. Studies by two Iranian women scholars, Mehrangeez Kar and Shahla Ezazi outlined the various factors that form to keep Iranian women trapped in violent relationships. Their findings were supported by studies conducted by other Middle Eastern scholars mentioned in this chapter as well. These studies all outline the unique circumstances and barriers faced by Middle Eastern women in their struggles for survival, and also point to the scarcity of information around the issue of domestic violence within Middle Eastern societies, and call for further research. In the following chapter we will look at the specific theories and methods utilized to create the framework/perspective of this research.
Chapter Three
Methodologies: Theories and Practical Use

I have attempted to utilize the systems perspective/theory in combination with phenomenology, as described in Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods by Patton for this project. According to Patton, the systems theory views things as whole entities (Patton, 1990). As such, in contrast with the traditional mechanistic perspective that attempts to break down problems and/or phenomenon by reducing them to their parts, this research attempts to study the problem of domestic violence in Iran from a holistic perspective, i.e. the study of patriarchy/structure of violence against women in Iran as a system. Therefore, I have attempted to move from the more simplistic method of viewing the problem of domestic violence as a simple “cause and effect” perspective that according to Patton, “distorts more than it illuminates,” in order to take into account larger systems involved in the perpetuation of DV, such as social norms, gender roles, attitudes, and societal responses.

Additionally, the methodological theory of phenomenology, which asks the basic question of, “what is the essence of the experience of this phenomenon (in this case, domestic violence) for this people (in this case Iranian women?) has been utilized in combination with the theory called hermeneutics, by Patton, which asks the question, “what are the conditions (in this case Patriarchy) under which a human act took place that make it possible to interpret its meaning? In other words, this method is used to establish context and meaning for what people do (in this case the occurrence of violence against women.) I will seek to address the question, what is the context in which DV occurs in
conjunction with women’s experiences of DV. Similar to Catherine Mackinnon’s study of sexual harassment, as described in *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, in this thesis DV is viewed to derive from a particular social context. It is clear that there is a relation between individual lives and societal arrangements (Reinharz 1992, p. 170). Again, this is how I apply systems theory to my thesis, for each entity is viewed as part of a larger whole.

By using Patton’s purposeful snowball (or chain) sampling, this research focuses on two information rich cases for in-depth study. Case study provides the method most appropriate for my research study because it provides the opportunity to “illustrate an idea, to show the limits of generalizations, to explore uncharted issues by starting with a limited case, and to pose provocative questions” (Reinharz, 1992, p.167).

Furthermore, according to Deborah K. Padgett in her book, *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research*, case studies act as a method of inquiry, rather than focusing on a broad cross-section of individuals, they focus on “bounded systems of action” (Padgett, 1998, p. 31). Patton goes on to state that there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry, or case studies; rather what is of importance is what can be done with the given time/resources (Patton, 1990, p. 184). Additionally, Reinharz states that case studies are, “the desire to document aspects of women’s lives and achievements for future secondary analysis and future action on behalf of women” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 171).

The case study is a tool of feminist research that is used to document history and generate theory. It defies the social science convention of seeking generalizations by looking instead for specificity, exceptions, and completeness. Some feminist researchers have found that social science’s emphasis on generalizations has obscured phenomena important to particular groups, including women. Thus case studies are essential for putting women on the map of social life (Reinharz, 1992, p. 174).
This research project includes two case studies and utilizes semi-structured interviews. The feminist case study method was selected in order to allow participants/interviewees the maximum opportunity to provide clarification and discussion. Similar to many feminist researchers, I found this particular method appealing for, as Reinharz’s explains:

For one thing, interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19).

Furthermore, this method provides the potential for conducting research in a non-hierarchical fashion, “avoiding control and power over others,” as well as allowing for the formation of connections between the researcher and the interviewee. In this way, the interviewee is less likely to be viewed and treated as a mere provider of data and also less likely to feel alienated from the research/researcher. Additionally, many feminist researchers maintain that the non-verbal cues presented during the interview can be just as revealing and significant as what is communicated verbally. Feminist interview methods often allow for the research to be “interviewee guided,” and therefore, more likely to allow for such cues to become apparent.

One of the ways to get at these subtleties is to be interviewee-guided, which means focusing less on getting one’s questions answered and more on understanding the interviewee (Reinharz, 1992, p. 24).

A prior existing relationship with one of the interviewees, as well as a strong relationship among the second volunteer with good friends of my family, served to
minimize potential power dynamics within the qualitative life-interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, I provided some minimal information regarding myself and the research, its goals and objectives, as well as the opportunity for the interviewees to ask any clarifying questions in order to prohibit the existence of an exploitative nature within this research.

Although I recognize the value of self-disclosure in conducting feminist interview research by promoting a sense of “dialogue” between researcher and interviewee, I refrained from engaging in any significant self-disclosure on my own behalf, in order to avoid influencing the interviewees’ responses. Similar to what Mary Bricker-Jenkins found in conducting her interview research, I remained attentive to receiving any cues from the interviewees and their readiness to receive information about myself. Throughout the process, therefore, I remained open for any questions they might have regarding either the research or myself, personally, thereby allowing the participants the power to ask questions when they felt comfortable (Reinharz, 1992, p. 33).

The qualitative, semi-structured life-interview method for these case studies was utilized in order to gain an in depth understanding of the problem of domestic violence and the ways in which it adversely affects women’s lives. Furthermore, it has been a feminist tradition to gather research information through the use of qualitative life history interviews. Toby Epstein Jayaratne and Abigail J. Stewart contend that these feminist criticisms stemmed from: a. “negative personal experiences with traditional research, b. “the concern that existing methods support sexist, racist, and elitist attitudes and practices and therefore negatively affect people’s lives, and c. “general rejection of positivism, its claim that science is value neutral, and that the scientific method protects against
contamination of findings by ‘subjectivity’ (Reinharz, 1992, p. 85). In “Doing Feminist Research,” Mary Maynard and June Purvis contend that more recently the tradition of embracing primarily the qualitative method itself has come under criticism, for it seemed to rule out qualitative data as fundamentally invalid and un-feminist. Also, according to Epstein and Stewart, there is now a move toward an “inclusive feminist perspective, in which often a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is utilized:

An inclusive viewpoint on methods, which appears to be increasingly accepted in feminist research circles, takes the form of promoting the value and appropriate use of both qualitative and quantitative methods as feminist research tools. The emphasis here is on using methods which can best answer particular research questions, but always using them in ways which are consistent with broad feminist goals and ideology (Reinharz, 1992, p. 90).

Among feminists, therefore, it has become increasingly the case where feminist research involves combining methods in conducting women studies research. However, due to the limited resources and scope of this specific project, as well as my interest in a more in depth study, I have utilized only qualitative methods for both cases. Furthermore, I took care to minimize any possible power dynamics in conducting this research, for many writers, including Epstein and Stewart, have suggested that maintaining a “non-hierarchical” position in research is vital for “finding out about people through interviewing” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 90). Also, I believe that the qualitative method is most appropriate for the questions I ask, and also the information that I am seeking to gather (in-depth study of DV), although I am aware of the limitations of this approach, which are the potential for poor representation and possible over-generalization.

**Procedure**
Selecting the Site & Participants

Both interviews focused primarily on the dynamics of the abusive relationship, and the struggles of each woman in her fight for survival in that environment. However, the questionnaire was designed and formulated in a manner that also addressed each woman's herstory, providing us with essential background information, therefore, creating for us a context/backdrop to each woman's life. Therefore, the interview questions include biographical data such as age, date and place of birth, level of education, number of children, and so forth. Questions addressing the biographical data were generally straightforward, however; the questionnaire was created to mostly include open-ended questions providing each interviewee the opportunity to disclose as freely as she deemed appropriate and felt comfortable with. Both interviewees were very open during the process and in general I provided outlining questions and both women were trusting enough to honor me with the intricate details of their marital lives. Interviewees were selected through recommendations by family members.

Due to the distance between myself and the target population of this research, I conferred with family members, primarily my paternal aunt, who remained my contact person during the entire research process, regarding the objective of this research, its nature and scope of interviews. I asked that she make it known through appropriate family members and friends that I was interested in conducting up to 5 interviews regarding women's experiences with domestic violence. The first interviewee who had requested my father's mediation services in the past due to the repeated occurrence of violence in her home, expressed interest in sharing her story. My paternal aunt (ammeh,) as the middle person, set up the meeting time and location once I arrived in Iran. The
interview site was decided to be my home, to ensure the privacy and safety of the interviewee.

The second interviewee was recommended through a family friend, by chance, when I was creating a documentary on Afghani women refugees, during a stay in Mashhad, in northeastern Iran, bordering Afghanistan. Again, my ammeh, coordinated the time/location of the interview, which was set in a private office at the factory owned by our family friend where she worked as a janitor. This interviewee, although a stranger to myself was the trusted worker of our friend’s factory, as well as employed for housekeeping at their home. Similar to the first interviewee, a relative, she was also very open regarding her life and experiences. Again, the location for the second interview was also chosen for its privacy and safety.

The onset of each interview included informing the women of their informed consent as well as their rights to refuse to participate at any point, or to refrain from answering any question they did not feel comfortable with. The interviews were conducted at the same meeting, after the acknowledgement of their informed consent and willingness to voluntarily participate in the interview.

Once each woman acknowledged her rights and made clear they understand and agree with the informed consent, I provided them with an introduction, stating the goal of the research, which was to essentially be a vehicle for the expression/voicing of their experiences, thus seeking to shatter the stifling silence and denial around the occurrence of domestic violence in Iran. I reminded each participant that pseudonyms would be utilized to protect their privacy and ensure their safety. I also reiterated their right to refuse answering any questions at any point, as well as their liberty to elaborate as much
as they felt comfortable with. I then provided them with the opportunity to pose any
questions they might have regarding the research and its intent.

Participants

Maryam: Maryam was 35 years old at the time of the interview (Spring, 2002.) She was
born in the suburbs of city of Kaashmar in northeastern Iran, and raised in Kaashmar.
She was married at the age of 17 after obtaining 2-3 years of elementary education. She
is one of eight siblings. Maryam has been employed on and off as a house-keeper. At
the time of this interview she was employed as a janitor in a factory as well.

Zahra: One of four siblings, three sisters, one brother, married at 18 in the traditional
manner of khastegari. She received her high school diploma prior to her marriage.

Zahra was born in one of the villages of Karaj area. She had been married for twenty
three years at the time of interview (Spring, 2002.) Zahra is a stay at home mother.

Data Analysis Process

In the following chapter, I attempt to discern any emerging similarities or commonalities
within the two conducted interviews, and also make connections to existing feminist
theories about the occurrence of violence against women. I have emphasized the
importance of each interviewee’s voice, by providing direct quotations from the
interviews throughout the chapter. All direct quotations are set apart from my analysis
through the use of italic font. Given the fact that the interviews were conducted in Farsi,
they were translated into English for use in this thesis. Although every effort has been
made to make the translation as accurate as possible, readers should be aware of the
possibility that in some instances meaning may have been lost in the process of
translation.
In Chapter Five, the data gathered during this research has been analyzed through the methodological lenses of systems theory, phenomenology and hermeneutics. Through the testimonies of Maryam and Zahra, as well as the literature provided by other researchers, I will form the larger context and system of the patriarchal condition as it shapes women’s lives in Iran, using also the feminist theory that violence against women occurs because of the very inequality among men and women.
Chapter 4

Data Analysis

In the following chapter I present the information gathered from two life history interviews of Iranian women conducted during the spring of 2002. Throughout the data analysis I use excerpts from the life history interview transcripts in order to reflect primarily their own voices, using pseudonyms to protect their privacy and safety. Focusing on two women trapped in abusive relationships, I provide examples from both their experiences throughout this chapter. I have based this research on two in-depth and detailed life interviews in order to gain a better understanding of the problem of domestic violence. I also examine the patterns that emerged from these interviews and discuss how both women, each in their own way, sought freedom from the abusive relationships they found themselves trapped in.

It should be noted that this thesis follows the perspective that violence against women and DV are rooted in sexism, the idea that men are superior to women. According to Helen Eigenberg, “feminist scholarship places patriarchy at the center of any explanation for woman battering. It is based on the domain assumption that sexism is not a factor contributing to woman battering but the factor” (Eigenberg, 2001, p. 141). Additionally, the condition/system of patriarchy is perpetuated and supported through a complex interplay among Iranian cultural norms, media, legal system, courts, and religious interpretations.

In Chapter Two, we reviewed existing Iranian literature around DV extensively. As such I make significant use of Western feminist analysis of DV in this chapter, based on the idea that as women, we all suffer from patriarchy. This is to demonstrate our
similarities as women and to resist politically motivated notions that unlike Western
women, Iranian, or Middle Eastern women are primarily oppressed/subjugated. The
Western feminist texts used in this chapter reveal to us that DV is a problem even the
most affluent, and “progressive” of nations. I agree with Moghissi’s claim that,

The basis of women’s oppression everywhere is patriarchal structures and
relations. Despite diverse forms, they have the same content. Feminist paradigms
and frameworks are as useful for understanding and theorizing gender relations in
non-Western societies as they are in the West. This is true, provided it is a
selective use of feminist ideas that are applicable to specific socio-historical
location and concerns (Moghissi, 1994, p.17).

**Courting and Marriage Traditions**

Maryam was 35 years old at the time of the interview. She was born in the
suburbs of city of Kaashmar in northeastern Iran, and raised in Kaashmar. She was
married at the age of 17 after obtaining 2-3 years of elementary education. She is one of
eight siblings. Maryam was engaged in the traditional Iranian manner, which is through
the custom of *khastegari*, where the man, after hearing about a certain girl, along with his
family, goes to her home and formally ask her family for permission to marry her. Often,
if very traditional families, the young girl will not know the young man, or have very
minimal knowledge of him. In the less traditional parts of Iran, the young man and
woman will have secretly befriended one another, however, they will follow the tradition
of *khastegari* in order for the families to formally meet one another prior to engagement
and wedding, if the families are in agreement and give their consent for the further
progression of the relationship. Traditionally, the man and his family offers the bride-to-
be a certain sum of money, or gold coins, or similar items of value as *mehrieh*, which
theoretically is a kind of insurance fund that the women can legally claim at any point in
the marriage, or upon a divorce. The woman’s family is obliged to provide the couple with the *jahaz*, which includes the basic household items, such as dishware, stove, refrigerator, furniture, etc. that may be necessary for the couple to begin their lives together. Similarly, Zahra, one of four siblings, three sisters, one brother, married at 18 in the traditional manner of *khastegari*. She received her high school diploma prior to her marriage.

Maryam’s family was acquainted with her husband-to-be’s uncle. Often in more traditional families, an acquaintance will make a recommendation to a family about a young girl. Similarly, Maryam did not know the young man personally. At the time of *khastegari*, the young man had not completed the two year military services that are required of all adult Iranian men. As such, Maryam’s brother disagreed with the marriage match, however, under pressure from her mother, Maryam agreed.

I didn’t know him [at the time:] we knew his uncle and they came Khastegari and asked my family; because he wasn’t finished with his military service yet, my brother disagreed but my mother decided to give me to him.

Zahra did not know the young man pursuing her either. He and his family were tenants in their building.

I did not know him before hand. He was a neighbor. I mean they were tenants. It was a week or ten days that they had moved there, when they came khastegari.

Among traditional Iranian families, courting as well as the subsequent marriage is closely tied to involvement from extended families. As such, we will see that from the very beginning of the courtship, throughout the marriage, the family and larger community place significant pressure on the couple to maintain marriage. In the context of violent
relationships, women bear the brunt of this social/familial pressure, which along with other factors trap her in the abusive marriage.

The Role of Family

Maryam's parents, both villagers, have since passed away.

My parents were villagers and both have passed away. Their life was wrong; they shouldn't have brought so many kids. None of us kids have become fortunate in our life. Two of my brothers are doing o.k. but none of the sisters have been fortunate.

We had good relationship with our parents and especially our father was very good to the girls; he would take us to the farm land with himself against my mother's wishes. Once in the farm we were attacked by wolves but my father saved us; I wish the wolves would have eaten us. My parents didn't have a good relationship with each other and this was very harmful to us. The husbands of us 3 sisters don't have a good relationship with their wives neither.

Maryam states that during her childhood, the control of the family was in her mother's hands:

The control of my family was more in my mother's hands. When they came for my nine year old sister, my father was against that marriage but my mother insisted to give her to that guy. This sister lost her kidney when she was 17 years old and her husband even though has the money but never spends enough for curing her. My father used to say that "roots" are very important but the roots of my husband and his family weren't good; maybe this was my destiny. My mother wouldn't listen to anyone.

Zahra's father passed away when she was very young and she has no memories of him. She states that her relationship with her mother is good, although she would become irritable at times, due to the many pressures and difficulties of raising four kids alone. Zahra had been married for twenty three years at the time of interview. She had
three boys, ages twenty-two, sixteen and six. She was nineteen when she gave birth to her first child. Similar to Maryam she was under significant pressure to marry:

I did not marry with knowledge and since I had no father, I was under the protection of my grandfather, grandmother and uncle. My mother was insistent that I marry so that a load would be lifted from her shoulders. I did not want to marry so early. My grades were good in school and I was interested in literature. I had 6 or 7 khastegar [marriage offers] that I did not accept. Whenever I would say no, everyone would attack me and say: 'who is going to support you?' Family pressures forced me to accept his proposal.

In both case studies the young girls were discouraged from pursuing higher education, for their real worth was seen in marriage and childbearing, not their intellectual capacity. In Our Blood, Andrea Dworkin has stated:

While the physical assaults against female life are staggering, the outrages committed against our intellectual and creative faculties have been no less sadistic. Consigned to a negative intellectual and creative life, so as to affirm these capacities in men, women are considered to be mindless; femininity is roughly synonymous with stupidity (Dworkin, 1976, p. 101).

Maryam herself had been married for eighteen years at the time of the interview. She has two children; a girl and an eleven year old boy. She states that ever since the birth of her daughter, her husband has become seemingly indifferent to life. This was not always the case, according to Maryam:

At the beginning my family life was good; we went once to a movie but my mother in law wouldn't let us go anywhere alone after that. She always intervened in my personal life and treated me very badly, but after my husband got addicted, she didn't care very much.

Zahra’s father-in-law was a military man and during the former regime (Pahlavi Shah,) unknown to her at the time, her new husband was employed by the Department of Intelligence and Security, an agency notorious for its violent interrogation methods.
Three months after their marriage, the Iranian Revolution took place, and her husband
lost his job.

From the very beginning he made me believe that I would need his permission to
do anything. We lived at my mother’s home at the time. If I wanted to go from
our room to my mothers I would need to ask his permission. When they would
call us to eat, I would have to ask him if it was okay that I answer. I thought that
things would get better with time, and since we were newlyweds, I thought that I
didn’t know what to do, and that I make mistakes. I thought that I was in the
wrong. But things didn’t change.

Dworkin states that as women “we are victims of a violence so pervasive, so constant, so
relentless and unending, that we cannot point to it and say, “there it begins and there it
ends” (Dworkin, 1976, p. 71). In the case of Zahra I would suggest violence did not
begin with the first instance of physical assault. Rather, the psychological manipulation
preceding the physical assaults was the beginning of her experiences of domestic
violence.

Although Zahra is a housewife and stay-at-home mother, Maryam supports her
family by working as a housecleaner in people’s homes, as well as a janitor in a factory.
Her husband, a tailor by trade, is often unemployed and as such, she is left with the
economic burden of the household. She says she lacks comfort in her life:

The last place we had was a very cheap place; I work at people’s homes and a few
times thought about committing suicide, I hope God forgives me. My husband is
most of the times unemployed; he is a tailor and when he does work, he bothers
us less; otherwise he bothers even our children who are good kids, and for stupid
reasons such as kids talking to each other or playing, he gets on their case and
gets very noisy. He is worse to our daughter who is a very good girl. Lately he has
become more cruel like his mother and maybe this is due to hi addiction.

Maryam’s husband served on the front lines, in the [Iran-Iraq] war. Similar to many
soldiers, he returned home with a devastating opium addiction.
He wasn't addicted before going to the service, but when he came back from the fronts, he got addicted and our agonies started. His mother had five kids. He took my refrigerator and sold it but I didn't say anything and thought when he comes back from service, he'll work and we'll buy another one.

When questioned about his use of violence in the home, Maryam states that he used violence from the beginning. As was the case with Zahra, Maryam's mother-in-law played a substantial role in the disruption of her life.

From the beginning he used violence at some rate and he was very weak against his mother who used to call me a villager and kept down grading me. Even though I am very humble but in different ways she tortured me before finally dying.

According to Zahra:

He was under the influence of his mother and sister. Although they pursued me and wanted me, I'm not sure why suddenly they began making allegations over small things. Once my cousin was leaving to go to U.S. and he had come by to say goodbye. When he was leaving I shook his hand. That night my mother-in-law told my husband that I had shook hands and kissed face with a namahram [nahahram is any one outside immediate family.].

Iranian society, as any other patriarchal culture, clearly condones the use of violence for the man to maintain his sense of authority within the home. In Family Violence, Pagelow states that: “research shows that the hierarchical structure of the family vests power in men to dominate and control others, and to use whatever means are viewed as required to maintain their authority. Furthermore, the unequal relations between men, women and children in the family are supported by all social institutions” (Pagelow, 1984, p. 126).

Additionally, many feminist theorists emphasize the role of social learning in cultures that actively teach boys to be aggressive. In Woman Battering, Pagelow contends:

“...male violence directed against females is learned in a society where men are trained into competition, aggressiveness, dichotomized sex-specific role behavior, physical force, and a need to dominate and control women in the hierarchical structure of the patriarchal society (Pagelow, 1984, p. 31).
Justifications for Violence

Maryam states that her husband beats her for different reasons and sometimes for no reason at all. She has contemplated suicide several times, however, although often the "breadwinner," and economically independent of her husband, similar to many battered women she continues with her life only for the sake of her two children.

One day [he beats me] for the non payment of our rent, another day why do I go to work at people's homes, one day starting to gossip about others with yelling, screaming and using bad words sounding to neighbors like he is fighting with me. He swears at our daughter with bad words to the point that I prefer that instead he would beat me up and leave our girl alone because the physical wounds heal soon. Right now because of last time that he beat me up, my nose still hurts; he says whatever he does I shouldn't answer him back [talk back to him:] if it wasn't for the kids I would kill myself.

Zahra also states that her husband will use any small excuse to beat her, and sometimes he will beat her for no reason at all. When Zahra was six months pregnant with her first child, her mother, a friend of hers and her mother-in-law were at her home, helping her put together baby items. Zahra's mother, who had three girls and one son made a comment about wanting her child to be a boy. Zahra's mother-in-law on the other hand, preferred a girl. Apparently she told her son that Zahra's mother had said she wanted a boy and what ensued is as follows:

My husband asked me what my mother had told his? He said that she had no right to make a comment about wanting their child to be a boy. He said he would not allow the child to stay for it to be either a boy or girl. He told me we would go to the doctor to have an abortion. As I was trying to dissuade him, he kicked me in my stomach, saying if you won't have an abortion, then I will abort it myself. My mother's friend who was still there tried to intervene, however, he told me to get up and go to the doctor. Once we were there, the doctor said there was no way he would conduct such a procedure, as the child was complete and would live if a c-section performed. He also told my husband to refrain from violence. We came home, and he went to our room and shredded all our wedding
pictures, and took all my clothes and put them in the yard, pouring gasoline on them and set them on fire. After that he went to his mother's house for 10 or 12 days and only returned after I went there, pleading and apologizing for what my mother had said. When our son was born he had swelling on his rib area. The doctor said two of his ribs had fallen on each other due to blow to the stomach. He said he would have difficulties later on.

It has been suggested by various theorists that DV is caused by some personality trait of the woman. That she somehow provoked the male. In actuality, however, “often a man will abuse a woman without any warning, let alone provocation, sometimes waking her from sleep to do so.” The only common pattern in the violence behavior is “the failure or refusal on the part of the woman to comply with or support her husband’s wishes and authority” (Eigenberg, 2001, p. 151). Furthermore, it has become clear that often battered women are abused ever more during their pregnancy. According to the National Research Council, “Victims of partner violence were 13 times more likely to have injuries to the breast, chest, or abdomen than were accident victims, and three times as likely as non-battered women to sustain injuries while pregnant” (NRC, 1996, p. 78).

Maryam would often be forced by her husband into lying about the reasons and causes of her physical scars and bruises. Furthermore, she never sought legal or outside intervention.

I was sick for two months all alone at the corner of a mud room, and he went and sold even our cooking gas capsules. He couldn't pay the small monthly rent but still wouldn't allow me to go to work, and we got into a fight and he beat me up so much that I ended up going to hospital. At the hospital he came and said that he was my brother and that I had an accident with a motorcycle on the street. I didn't say he was my husband and didn't go back to the hospital for more treatment; I was afraid of him and his mother and family to file a complaint.

Not every body in the family knows [about the issue of domestic violence.] I only talk to my brother's wife. Once he smacked and broke my nose. I lied to my sister and said that I fell and broke my nose but she suspected and found out.
Zahra states that she made due with the very minimal. When she talked with her family about divorce, her grandfather, the religious patriarch of the family, was in absolute opposition. He would say that his family’s status was more important than that, and that she left in white clothes and would come back in white clothes (this is an expression meaning as a bride you leave wearing white, and will come back wearing burial clothes, as among Muslim’s they are white as well.) The family was adamantly opposed to divorce. One winter, Zahra’s husband kicked her out of their home in the evening. He did so after telling her to bring him some water while she was busy tending their one year old child who crying. When he told her again, she answered “alright already!” He beat her after telling her that she must answer him in a respectful manner, and threw her out of their home.

It was very cold outside and I thought to myself that I should go into the basement and use some coal to make a fire. But I was very scared of our basement. I tried knocking on the window several times to get his attention, but he ignored me. I went into the basement 3 or 4 times and I crouched down on the terrace, crying. I put my head on my shoulder and tried to sleep, pulling my skirt over my toes, but it was very cold. I tried knocking again, but he ignored me. I went into the basement again and when I came up again it was really late. I saw that he had left the hallway door open, so I went in and laid there in the hallway, fearful of going into the room. For a week after that my kidneys were infected.

It should be noted here that although the primary focus of the extended family was the preservation of the marriage union, it often served as a refuge/shelter for the women. Additionally, in Zahra’s case, the prominence of her grandfather and extended family was often used as a tool to place pressure upon the abusive husband. Therefore, the extended family can not only act in creating great social pressure for maintaining the marriage, it often is the place of refuge for the battered women, and a family’s name/status can be used as leverage to place pressure upon the battering husband.
Forms of Violence

In “Building Opportunities for Battered Women’s Safety and Self-Sufficiency,” Jill Davis (2000) states that:

Physical violence is just one of the tactics used by batterers to control their partners, and therefore it is just one of the risks battered women and their children face. Batterers' controlling behavior may also cause risks to the children, psychological harm, the loss of housing, health care, employment, or current standard of living (www.vaw.umn.edu).

The reality of this statement is demonstrated in both Maryam and Zahra’s experiences.

Maryam’s husband would not only resort to physical violence, but would also use verbal and emotionally abusive methods to control and subjugate her, and keep her trapped in the oppressive environment.

I am ready to work very hard so that in return he wouldn't swear at me. He has found this weakness in me and uses it. I always talk to him with respect and even call him Mister Hossein, but he always says bad words and finds different excuses to get verbally and physically violent.

Zahra’s husband regularly prohibits her from leaving the home, and also does not allow anyone of her family or friends to visit her. By using these methods to control her mobility he seeks to emotionally exert his power over her.

He prohibited me from going anywhere, or anyone to come to our home. He wouldn’t even let me go to anyone’s wedding, not even my own sisters. If I begged and pleaded enough, sometimes he would allow me to go. If I said I would be home at 5 and was 5 or 10 minutes late, I would not only get a beating, he wouldn’t let me eat for a week. I had gone to a relatives wedding one night and was supposed to be home by 11. The car broke down on the way back and it took about 45 minutes for us to fix it. I was back at 12:30. I had taken my youngest son. When I got home the door was locked so I knocked. My husband opened the door and asked me where I had been so I told him about the car breaking
down. He said, no, go back where you came from. He took our son and closed and locked the door. It was 12:30 at night and I thought to go to a friends’ home who knew of our whole situation. The next day after my husband went to work, I went home and knocked and our son opened the door for me.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence defines psychological battering as:

The abuser’s psychological or mental violence can include constant verbal abuse, harassment, excessive possessiveness, isolating the woman from friends and family, deprivation of physical and economic resources, and destruction of personal property (www.ncadv.org).

Not only does Maryam continue her life for the sake of her children, she also continues to believe that her husband might change. She has considered divorce several times; however, she continues to hope that her situation may improve if he quits his opium addiction.

He has promised me to quit [opium] and I walked long ways to find the pills that he needed and tried to make the house more quite and pleasant for him to succeed but he started again.

Many times I have thought about getting divorced but then I change my mind mostly because of the kids. I don't want them to become like me, and also think that maybe he quits his habit one day. I think this poor man needs help and I shouldn't leave him alone. He is very moody and some times gets better for a short period. Now I have saved some money and want to buy a room but he isn't happy, is indifferent and doesn't cooperate and I have to walk around and look for it by myself even though my legs hurt.

I constantly have thought about getting divorced, but quickly turn away from this thought, and say hopefully he'll get better, and I don't want my kids grow up without a mother and father like myself. I think of the family that I work for as my parents (she starts crying). I think this poor guy needs help and I shouldn't leave him.

Zahra has also contemplated divorce. After she became ill with kidney infection involving the incident of being locked outside of her home in the cold, she told her husband that she was not well and asked to go to the doctor. He replied:
No. You will stay here until you die. I said, if that’s the case, then divorce me. He said, oh, you want a divorce? I’ll show you divorce, and he began beating me. He beat me until I couldn’t take it anymore and ran out of the house into the street. I got a chador from a neighbor and went to my mother’s house and told my mother that I would not go back. I told her I didn’t care what grandpa said and asked her what I’m supposed to do with my life? My mother said we would gather a few family members to talk with him. So, several of my relatives came to our home and talked with him and told him to refrain from beating me. Things were okay for 2-3 months, but I saw that nothing had really changed. He would find different excuses to torture me. He would say, ‘potato’s are expensive, why have you put potato’s in the food?’ I would say it’s not my fault there’s inflation, you need to support us. He had a hard time keeping any job for more than a few months.

Some time later, another incident of violence at home, involved severe physical damage to Zahra. She resorted to the hospital for stitches and law enforcement officials for help.

A week or so after my kidney infection healed, my friend/neighbor invited us to go with her and her husband to a park for picnic lunch. I told my husband who insisted that his mother and sister come too. When we were leaving, we had two vehicles, his mother and sister went and sat in my friend’s vehicle, and I came into ours, as there was no more room in theirs. When we got to the park, I was getting out of the car and my husband who had been talking with his mom, came over and hit me in the face. My friend’s husband came over and asked what happened, and he said we were leaving. He said his mother was upset that I hadn’t sat with them and I tried to explain there had been no more room. He didn’t listen and we left. When we arrived at our home, he said: ‘you have upset my mother, and I’m going to teach you a lesson.’ He picked up the vacuum cleaner pipe and began beating me. He was hitting me so hard that the pipe broke and ripped my arm. I screamed. I usually try to not to make a sound. Our landlord came up and got me and took me downstairs and she called my mother. When I got to my mothers I told her I want to make a complaint. I went to the doctor and I had 6 stitches put in my arm. They have me 14 days “tool-e darman,” which is how many days of rest. I took that to the court and according to 14 days of rest for the healing of DV wounds, they wrote him 3 months prison time. I told them I needed a law enforcement official to go to my home with me. They provided an officer and told me to ring my house and when my husband came out to inform them and they would arrest him. I was deathly scared of him. When we were walking down our street he had opened the door and come out. I told the officer, that’s him, and I ran away.

What ensued was her husband’s arrest, however, she was soon summoned to court and asked about her intentions regarding her marriage. She requested a divorce.
However, according to Iranian family law, the “right to divorce,” belongs to the man, unless specifically agreed upon and stated otherwise in the marriage license. Her husband denied giving her a divorce. Similarly, in her study of DV in the Muslim community, Faizi states that the rulings of Muslim courts in the states vary, however, “divorce is never encouraged, and every measure will be taken to keep the family unit together. However, if the situation is life-threatening, rulings will recommend the dissolution of the marriage” (Faizi, 2001, p. 225). Zahra stated to the court that she lacks physical safety in her home and that she would not return. If he were to grant her a divorce, he would also gain full custody of their children. At that point, however, Zahra expressed to the courts that she no longer cared. She went to stay with her mother and her husband was kept in jail to serve his sentence. Once he was out, he used various torturous methods to force her into returning.

He had our two children and would call on the phone, putting our youngest son, who had just begun speaking on to talk with me. Or he would ring the door bell at my mother’s and leave the kids standing there…After fifteen days I said to myself maybe it will get better and went back. But nothing changed. He’s always looking for an excuse to take everything out on me, because he can’t find anybody weaker.

More recently Zahra’s husband has resorted to other forms of torture. He purposefully limits access to resources in order to demonstrate power and control. According to Zahra, he will pull the phone and put it away, or take apart the computer, or T.V.

In order to save face, I have tolerated a lot, and also for the kids. The kids now think I should get a divorce. My middle son, who is busy studying for college tells me that if I get a divorce, he will work during the day to support me and study at night.”
Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967,) the celebrated Iranian poet, speaks to women's captivity in her poem, Captive:

I want you, yet I know that never
can I embrace you to my heart's content.
you are that clear and bright sky.
I, in this corner of the cage, am a captive bird.

from behind the cold and dark bars
directing toward you my rueful look of astonishment,
I am thinking that a hand might come
and I might suddenly spread my wings in your direction.

I am thinking that in a moment of neglect
I might fly from this silent prison,
laugh in the eyes of the man who is my jailer
and beside you begin life anew.

I am thinking these things, yet I know
that I can not, dare not leave this prison.
even if the jailer would wish it,
no breath or breeze remains for my flight.

from behind the bars, every bright morning
the look of a child smile in my face;
when I begin a song of joy,
his lips come toward me with a kiss.

O sky, if I want one day
to fly from this silent prison,
what shall I say to the weeping child's eyes:
forget about me, for I am captive bird?

I am that candle which illumines a ruins
with the burning of her heart.
If I want to choose silent darkness,
I will bring a nest to ruin. (1955)
One issue that is clear in the above testimonies is that violence seems to escalate. According to Pagelow: "...almost all researchers agree that batterings escalate in frequency and intensity over time" (Pagelow, 1984, p. 45).

Zahra also states that her husband beats their children:

He would beat my oldest son all the time. He was a very good student and was accepted to the Talented and Gifted school. But his father would beat him for the smallest reasons. He would beat him if he ever got a grade below twenty [twenty is equivalent to A.]. So, my oldest son began disliking school and he was refusing to go. He finally got his diploma with much difficulty.

He would sometimes try to appease him by offering to buy him a gift, or something he knew he had wanted. He also attempted this with Zahra sometimes:

Sometimes he will try to apologize. For example he will go buy me a blouse, but I can’t bring myself to wear it. Or he will tell my son: 'do you want me to buy you that pen you’ve been wanting?"

When inquired about any instances of sexual violence, Maryam stated that in the past even if she was not "in the mood," based on Islamic religious teachings that supposedly oblige a wife to keep her husband sexually satisfied at all times, she would be forced to engage in sexual activity against her will:

In the past yes [experienced sexual violence] but not any more. As per my religious teachings, I always thought it is my duty to keep my husband happy and satisfied and submit myself any time he wishes. At such times I cried a lot and even my heart would hurt, but even if I wouldn’t show enough interest he would get jealous and would go to bed forcefully any way.

Similarly, Zahra’s husband would not concern himself with whether or not she was interested in sexual activity.
I would have to be in the mood. I would have to want it. And if the pressure was
too great for me and I would refuse, then I would have to be prepared to tolerate
his other behaviors, such as kicking things, breaking things, beating the kids. I
would have to participate whenever he wanted. If he wanted it every night, or if
he didn’t for two years, I had no control over it. Unless the doctor would say I
couldn’t, I would have too.

According to Dworkin, rape, like DV, is not committed by psychopaths, rather by people
who are deemed by society to be “normal” and often “upstanding” men of the
community. She states that rape, similar to our view of DV, is:

The direct consequence of our polar definitions of men and women. Rape is
congruent with these definitions; rape inheres in these definitions. Remember,
rape is not committed by psychopaths or deviants from our social norms-rape is
committed by exemplars of our social norms. In this male-supremacist society,
men are defined as one order of being over and against women who are defined as
another, opposite, entirely different order of being. Men are defined as
aggressive, dominant, powerful. Women are defined as passive, submissive,
powerless (Dworkin, 1976, p.45).

Kar also states that the degree to which sexual assault is tolerated within the private
domain is extremely high and has become “normalized” to the extent that women very
often do not report their experiences of sexual violence at the hands of their husbands.
Furthermore, there is the attached shame and taboo of being raped that prohibits women
from talking about this issue. Iranian law has given married men free sexual access to
their wives so that “wives must [legally] submit to the sexual desires of their husbands”
(Kar, 2001, p. 346). Similarly, in the U.S. by 1980 only Oregon, New Jersey and
Nebraska had totally abolished marital rape exemption from the laws (Pagelow, 1984, p.
422).

Zahra goes on to say that she has not been able to do anything upon her own
will. If she was lonesome and wanted to visit her mother, he would say no. On the other
hand, on a day when she was tired and ill, he would tell her to get up and go visit her mother. As such, everything Zahra has done since her marriage has been according to her husband’s will. Over the years these tactics have taken away her sense of agency and autonomy.

He does this to show that he has control over me and that the last word is always his. Nobody is left in our family who is not aware of my situation, and although I have suffered physical injuries, my spirit has been injured too. My personality is broken. And there is nothing I can do. I have tolerated this for so long, that now all I ask God for is patience so that I can tolerate longer.

On the other hand, although Maryam is generally the “breadwinner,” and economically independent, her husband would forcefully take her income and as such attempt to control the family economics.

He always does that [take her money] and if I don't give him enough, he fights with me and says you have lots of income and earn $120 a month but that isn't true and I don't earn that amount. Getting addicted is the worst thing that can happen. An addict becomes indifferent even to his own mother. Once when his mother and I were walking on the snow, she fell and broke her leg, but he didn't care at all and didn't come to her help and I realized then how awful addiction is. Before his addiction, he was a good looking and kind person.

Although the use of alcohol and drugs has been noted to have a link to violence, there is no evidence for a causal relationship between alcohol/drug use and domestic violence (Eigenberg, 2001, p. 135). For example, there are violent men who use no drugs/alcohol, and on the other hand, there are men who drink and use drugs that do not batter their significant others.

In her explanation of battering, Eigenberg states that:

Laws and social customs clearly endorsed the use of “corporal punishment” for wives, and social structures keep women dependent on men for economic
survival. These values are still prevalent in our society today. Male violence is not only tolerated but encouraged by a variety of forces ranging from popular culture to organized religion (Eigenberg, 2001, p. 142).

Furthermore, the family unit reflects the greater structure of society and in the words of Andrea Dworkin, “The basic social unit of patriarchy is the family.” Therefore, although drug/alcohol use may play a role in DV or have a link to violent expression, there exists no evidence for it in fact causing DV. Violence against women in the family is an expression of violence against women at large, which is rampant in the greater social structure and imbedded in the very fabric of our everyday lives. This is an important recognition. For as feminists, we are struggling for change in the world. We are struggling for freedom from oppression and freedom from violence. Dworkin contends:

I suggest to you that any commitment to nonviolence which is real, which is authentic, must begin in the recognition of the forms and degrees of violence perpetrated against women by the gender class of men. I suggest to you that any analysis of violence, or any commitment to act against it, which does not begin there is hollow, meaningless-a sham which will have, as its direct consequence, the perpetuation of your servitude (Dworkin, 1976, p. 71).

Forough Farrokhzad speaks to our universal desire as women for freedom eloquently in her poem, The Wall:

With the cold moments of the past fleeting by,
Your wild eyes contained in your silent demeanor
build a wall around me
And I flee from you to a pathless path.

Until I see valleys on the moons dirt
Until I wash my body in the water fountains of light
In a colorful fog of a warm summer morning
I’ll fill my skirt with lilies from the fields
And hear the roar of roosters from the village rooftops

I’m fleeing from you to the very skirts of the valley
Where I’ll press my feet to the ground
Until they sip dewdrops of grass
I'm fleeing from you to a deserted beach
Where on the lost boulders beneath dark clouds
I'll learn the twisting dance of the ocean's hurricane

In a far off sunset, like wild doves
I'll see fields, mountains, and the sky beneath my feet.
And in the midst of dry bushes I'll hear
the blissful music of field birds.

I'm fleeing from you until I open the path
To the city of desires
And in that city...
The castle of dreams will have a heavy golden lock

But your eyes with their silent scream
Will blur my vision
Like your dark secrets that
Build a wall around me.

At last one day...
I'll flee from the illusion of conceiving doubt
And I'll radiate like a perfume from
the colorful flower of dreams
And I'll diffuse into the wavy hair of night's zephyr
And travel to the very beaches of the Sun
In a silent world, within an eternity of calmness.

I'll gently rock on a bed of golden-colored clouds
That extends hand like rays toward the serene sky
As if playing a song.

It is there where I am happy and free
And I weave memories of this world
Because your bewitching eyes
Find my eyes
And blur my vision
Like your dark secrets
That build a wall around me.
In this chapter we heard the stories of two Iranian women, their experiences with violent marriages, and the various obstacles they face in attaining freedom from violence, such as family/social pressure, threats of further violence or losing custody of children. It is my hope that by recognizing violence within the family unit, and creating awareness about the realities of our lives as women, we can embark on the journey towards freedom, self-determination, and dignity.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

The review of relevant literature and research has demonstrated for us that domestic violence is not an “aberrant” or “abnormal” phenomenon, rather violence against women takes many forms (physical, emotional/psychological, sexual, economic,) is widespread and global, cutting across socio-economic, education, race, nationality or religion. It also expressed/manifested differently depending on what culture/nation one lives in.

Through the documented work of the United Nations we have also seen how although patriarchal culture seeks to blame the victim for the violence, often women in violent relationships are abused without any warning or provocation. Furthermore, according to Eigenberg (2001) violence is used by men to exert their power and domination within their home, over their wives and children. The feminist perspective used in this research takes the approach that all violence against women has its roots in sexism and the very system of patriarchy. Domestic violence is supported and perpetuated by the cultural norms/values, media, legal system, law enforcement, and specific religious interpretations.

Research of domestic violence in the Middle Eastern region, as well as among Muslim populations has made clear for us the scarcity of information in this area, as well as the many unique barriers/obstacles Middle Eastern women and Muslim women might face in seeking freedom from violence in their homes. In Iran too, we have seen, there is a strong attempt to hide DV behind closed doors of secrecy that merely condone violence against women and nullify accountability for abusive men.
The two case studies incorporated in this study have been examined using the phenomenological, hemeneutics and systems methods, asking the questions: what is the essence of the experience of DV in Iran, and what are the conditions under which DV takes place that make it possible to interpret its meaning? We have utilized the approach that DV occurs as apart of a larger system and whole, deriving from a specific social context. The stories of Zahra and Maryam also demonstrated for us that social and community pressure as well as the threat of loosing their children play particularly significant roles in forcing women to acquiesce to their violent spouses. We have seen, through their stories, as well as other research in the region, the powerful force of social stigma in collectivist cultures in maintaining women’s subjugation, trapping them within violent relationships. Using the work of Pagelow (1984) we have also used the social learning theory to examine the various ways hierarchical/patriarchal cultures socialize girls and boys from a very young age, arguably prior to birth, to be either aggressive/dominant or submissive/passive.

As the founder of a non-governmental women’s organization in Iran (Center for Advancement of Women,) I have several ideas, offered by feminists before as well, for the purpose of the elimination of domestic violence. The epidemic of domestic violence in Iran, as well as across the globe, is a social problem that requires a cooperative and cohesive response from all aspects of our communities. The legal system, courts, law enforcement, religious leaders, health care providers, the education system, women’s advocates, all must be willing and able to have: first, an understanding of the problem and second, a working relationship with one another for the sake of the elimination of violence against women. Furthermore, according to Kar, “violence against women is a
complex problem that cannot be abolished without the cooperation of all community systems" (Kar, 2001, p. 504). As such, although a seemingly daunting task at times, it is an essential step towards the well-being of our cultures. Kar also argues that our communities would economically benefit by investing in the elimination of violence against women.

In his very thorough study of wife abuse/battering in Arab society, Muhammad Haj Yahia (2000) concludes by offering methods for eradicating violence against women. These strategies include: evaluating danger posed to the victim, involvement of husbands family of origin, assess informal resources, change general attitudes/stereotypes about women, and intervention through raising women’s self-image. In one of his most recent studies titled, “Beliefs About Wife Beating Among Arab Men from Israel: The Influence of Their Patriarchal Ideology,” Haj Yahia states,

Besides attempting to identify motivating factors, advocate of community education campaigns to combat wife beating in Arab society must examine some of the cultural, professional, political, economic, religious, and organizational barriers to intervention among different target audiences in this society. In addition, attempts should be made to develop messages that address those barriers and to promote action aimed at counteracting domestic violence in general and negative beliefs and myths about wife beatings in particular (Haj Yahia, 2003, p. 205).

First and foremost, in our journey towards eliminating domestic violence, it is necessary to provide the necessary support to victims/survivors of DV. It is crucial to offer services that will assist women in regaining their strength, self-concept, and self-determination. As such, counseling/therapy services through either support groups, or individual therapy, is important. In Iranian culture, due to the influence and intervention/involvement of the extended family, individuals do not often seek “outside”
or professional mental health services. However, it is also the familial pressure (in combination with other factors,) that very often traps a woman in an abusive relationship, and as such, I believe it would be beneficial to provide these services for women who can benefit from them, despite the existence of a cultural taboo.

To date, there exist no safe-houses or shelters for battered women in Iran. As we have seen through the testimony of the interviewees of this research, the only available shelter for battered women in Iran is the home of a friend or family, where they are more often than not advised to return to their spouse. As with any feminist task, or in the words of Andrea Dworkin (1976) “exploration,” there exist numerous barriers and challenges to the design and implementation of shelters for battered women in Iran. However, this too is a much needed service for victims of DV, and through cooperative efforts among women’s organizations, governmental departments, and other community groups it can be accomplished.

I also agree with Dworkin who suggests that this feminist task or exploration requires three things: a. an examination of our past, our herstory, b. examination of the present and “how society is organized,” and c. an imagination of a future in which we are free. Free from the psychological, physical, emotional, legal, sexual, social and economic chains constructed and utilized by the patriarchal-capitalist system (Dworkin 1976, p. 70). Furthermore, as women, we must challenge symptoms of patriarchy at whatever instances (which are often and every day) we encounter them.

Additionally, strengthening the bonds of sisterhood amongst ourselves is crucial to this feminist task, for the elimination of VAW and the patriarchal system will not be accomplishment by fragmentation and division. Fortunately, the grounds for a strong
sisterhood already exist among Iranian women, for the separation of the male and female population has led to strong alliances amongst women. Furthermore, as Homa Hoodfar (1999) has demonstrated in “The Women’s Movement in Iran,” feminist consciousness in Iran has existed for over a century. This woman-centeredness, however, is becoming somewhat destabilized due to the influx of Western culture and along with it a new type of female subjugation/objectification. As such, our task is two fold. Firstly it is challenging the patriarchy that is embedded within Iranian culture itself. Secondly, it is resisting the domination of the Western capitalist-patriarchy upon Iranian society. As explained earlier this is a particularly sensitive project and a predicament for many multicultural women, who are often viewed as traitors to their “native” culture when embarking on a feminist path. Therefore, maintaining and strengthening the bonds between women is a primary task for us, in addition to the consistent and constant challenging of sexism whenever it is encountered. For us to succeed, we must simply, in the words of Dworkin, commit to a revolution:

I want to ask you to remember that we have been slaves for so long that sometimes we forget that we are not free. I want to remind you that we are not free. I want to ask you to commit yourselves to a women’s revolution—a revolution of all women, by all women, and for all women; a revolution aimed at digging out the roots of tyranny so that it cannot grow anymore (Dworkin, 1976, p. 95).

Our other important task on this journey is remaining joyful as we do our feminist work and following our hopes and visions for a free future with joyful action. We remain hopeful in our work as it is clear in the documentation of Nayereh Tohidi (2002) in “The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan,” that the women’s movement in Iran has old roots and the pro-woman
movement, which includes many flourishing NGO’s, women’s organizations in Iran and abroad, continue to grow.

Forough Farrokhzad echoes Dworkin’s call for remaining joyful and in our journey, through her poem, Window.

When my trust was suspended from the fragile thread of justice and in the whole city
they were chopping up my heart's lanterns
when they would blindfold me
with the dark handkerchief of Law
and from my anxious temples of desire
fountains of blood would squirt out
when my life had become nothing
nothing
but the tic-tac of a clock,
I discovered
I must
must
must love,
insanely.

One window will suffice me
one window to the moment of awareness
observance
and silence.
now,
the walnut sapling
has grown so tall that it can interpret the wall
by its youthful leaves.

Indeed, the walnut sapling has already grown so very tall, looking over and beyond the constructed wall.
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