

Domestic Violence as Public Discourse: Media, Narrative, and Moroccan Women's Struggle for Justice

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Abstract: This article examines spousal violence as articulated in Moroccan women's narratives. It highlights how their voices serve as a powerful tool for advocacy, awareness, and change. Central to this exploration is the role of various media platforms in the fight against gender-based violence by showcasing how victims' stories convey their painful experiences and respond to them. VAW is a pervasive phenomenon that transcends cultural and geographic boundaries. The persistence of gender-based sociocultural norms, discriminatory legal practices, and the lack of strong preventative measures are among the significant factors that continue to influence public perception of VAW, often leading to self-inflicted pain, victim-blaming, and discouraging help-seeking. By adopting narrative analysis, this article underscores the necessity of listening to women's perspectives on spousal violence to address it as a public matter rather than a private issue that victims have to deal with alone. By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the article advocates for a shift in discourse that recognizes the complexity of the victims' realities and calls for a more grounded understanding of spousal violence that aims to dismantle the structures that perpetuate it and address its systemic roots. Ultimately, this research aims to inspire a collective commitment to transforming victims' narratives into a comprehensive gender-sensitive policy, ensuring that their voices are heard and considered in the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment in Morocco.

Keywords: Conjugal violence, Women's narratives, Cultural norms, Socioeconomic precariousness, Help-seeking.

I. Introduction

Women's status in Morocco has significantly transformed over the past few decades, driven by internal dynamics and international commitments (see al-Uthmani & al-Musali, 2021). Central to this evolution has been the reform of the country's legal corpus, which has increasingly integrated gender-sensitive provisions to enhance women's rights and protections (Gertholtz, 2010). These legal reforms reflect a broader national strategy to align domestic legislation with international human rights standards, particularly following Morocco's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. This ratification marked a critical turning point in the country's gender policy as it established a normative foundation for promoting gender equality and provided a platform for policy interventions in various domains, including family law, labor rights, and political participation. While challenges persist, the incorporation of gender-sensitive legal instruments signals the state's evolving stance on women's empowerment and underscores the dynamic interplay between global norms and local reform initiatives.

Within this comprehensive gender-sensitive legal reform, Morocco has launched a strategy to combat violence against women, emphasizing legal reforms, institutional mechanisms, awareness campaigns, and support services. A cornerstone of this strategy was the adoption of Law No. 13.103 on Combating Violence Against Women in 2018. This legal provision criminalizes actions such as harassment, abuse, domestic violence, and forced marriage while providing protection for survivors (Ministry of Justice, 2018). It also necessitates the creation of specialized units—a national committee, along with regional and local committees—to address cases of gender-based violence sensitively and effectively (Ministry of Justice, 2018, Articles 9-16; see Saadoun, 2019, for a critical evaluation of this law).

Along with this legal reform, Morocco has established support centers and shelters to provide legal, psychological, and medical assistance to victims of violence. It has also created several institutions to address VAW. On August 7, 2014, the National Observatory on Violence Against Women was created to monitor and track incidents of VAW, compile a database on the phenomenon, and evaluate public policies in the field of combating VAW (Ministry of Solidarity, Social Integration, and Family, n.d. b). On September 5, 2019, the National Committee for the Care of Women Victims of Violence was established to foster a participatory approach among various stakeholders involved in combating violence against women, address various aspects

of this phenomenon, contribute to the development of knowledge in the field of violence against women, and disseminate a culture of respect for women's rights (Ministry of Solidarity, Social Integration, and Family, n.d. a). On March 8, 2020, the Marrakech Declaration to Combat Violence Against Women was signed under the effective presidency of Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Meryem. The government also adopted the National Policy to Combat Violence Against Women and Girls by 2030 to keep pace with the legal reforms designed to protect women and fulfill Morocco's national and international obligations (Ministry of Solidarity, Social Integration, and Family, n.d. c). This strategy also aims to offer protection to victims of violence, empower women in difficult situations, and contribute to changing social and cultural norms that perpetuate violence and all gender-based stereotypes (Ministry of Solidarity, Social Integration, and Family, n.d. c).

These measures showcase Morocco's commitment to implementing a gender-sensitive strategy to address violence against women comprehensively. However, several challenges hinder the full enforcement of the laws and addressing the factors that perpetuate this phenomenon. Data reveal that VAW is still prevalent in Morocco and remains an extremely painful experience many women endure, especially when support is inaccessible or costly. Therefore, despite the implementation of specific laws addressing domestic violence, many women continue to encounter various forms of violence, particularly within the intimate space of their homes, which should ostensibly be the safest place for them.

II. Literature Review

Violence against women remains a pervasive global issue, transcending cultural, economic, and social boundaries. According to the World Health Organization (2024), nearly one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence, whether perpetrated by an intimate partner or a non-partner, at some point in their lives. In Morocco, the prevalence of the problem is similarly alarming. A recent study by the High Commission for Planning revealed that 7.6 million out of 13.4 million women aged 15 to 74—representing 57% of this demographic—had been subjected to at least one form of violence in the twelve months preceding the study. Notably, 6.1 million women, or 52%, experienced violence within the family sphere (Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental, 2020, p. 9). These figures underscore the urgent need for more effective legal, social, and institutional measures to address gender-based violence both globally and nationally.

In the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the UN defines violence against women as

any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (United Nations General Assembly, 1993, Article 1)

Data indicate that women experience violence primarily within the household and are often subjected to physical and psychological abuse by intimate partners (World Health Organization, 2024). Domestic violence encompasses harmful acts such as battering, sexual abuse, marital rape, and female genital mutilation [FGM] (United Nations General Assembly, 1993, Article 2, a). Because the household is a private space that frequently escapes public scrutiny, particularly from the community and law enforcement, addressing spousal violence poses significant challenges.

Several reasons contribute to the prevalence of spousal violence. For instance, socio-cultural norms and expectations perpetuate violence against women, exacerbate its normalization in society, and create a significant barrier to victims' protection. VAW is also perpetuated when men feel entitled to control women's bodies and use violence to punish them (Veen et al., 2018). Additionally, women's educational attainment and economic empowerment can further entrench gender-based violence, as men may view women's increasing autonomy as a threat to their authority, which may potentially trigger violent reactions (Machariah & Iteyo, 2023). Societal tolerance of conjugal violence is also a key contributor to its prevalence. Societal attitudes that condone male dominance and reinforce women's subservience create an environment where VAW becomes normalized (Banda, 2019). Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and rigid gender-specific stereotypes tend to foster men's feelings of entitlement to exert control over women, even through violence (Veen et al., 2018).

The issue of why many women are reluctant to seek help has garnered significant scholarly attention (Green et al., 2024; Madhani et al., 2017; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024; Saadoun, 2019). Reporting violence is among the prerequisites for fighting this phenomenon; however, Saadoun (2019) argues that the culture of reporting violence remains weak (p. 103). McCleary-Sills et al. (2015) explain that one of the first challenges many survivors face is determining whether the violence they have endured exceeds what is considered 'normal' or 'socially acceptable' within their community (p. 19). Research has uncovered at least five major reasons that make women prefer remaining silent over exposing violence.

First, the belief that seeking help is a sign of weakness or failure can instill feelings of shame in the victim and her family, which can silence victims and discourage them from seeking support (Green et al., 2024; Madhani, 2017). Second, in many societies, domestic violence is still normalized and viewed as a private matter. Many women believe that enduring violence is a spousal duty, compelling them to accept abuse as inevitable rather than reportable (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Nnyombi et al., 2022; Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024). Third, social norms that assign women the responsibility of maintaining family harmony discourage abused women from seeking support; thus, reconciliation efforts often prioritize protecting the marriage over the safety of the victim (Fulu & Warner, 2018, p. 21).

Fourth, women may fear retaliation from their partners if they disclose abuse or seek help (Green et al., 2024). This fear can be intensified by community attitudes that condone domestic violence, making it difficult to assure women that reporting such abuse will lead to positive outcomes (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024). The lack of gender-sensitive community support and the stigmatization of divorced women continue to dissuade many from reporting domestic violence to law enforcement agencies (Madhani et al., p. 10). Women worry about the potential escalation of violence or abandonment following a report, as they are not guaranteed legal protection from their perpetrators (Saadoun, 2019, pp. 104-105). Furthermore, women may be concerned about the financial repercussions of reaching out for help (Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024, p. 541), which can deter them from taking action. This fear can create an environment where silence seems safer than seeking help (Green et al., 2024).

Fifth, in many countries, discriminatory laws still regard violence as a private issue that individuals must resolve among themselves (Petersen, 2019 & 2021). Influenced by conservative religious doctrines, family laws may perpetuate gender discrimination, notably by restricting women's rights in areas such as marriage, divorce, and custody (Petersen, 2019 & 2021). Religious beliefs can significantly contribute to normalizing domestic violence and influence women's decisions regarding seeking help. Certain interpretations of religious texts sometimes reinforce the notion that enduring abuse is a religious duty (Pertek et al., 2023; Petersen, 2019 & 2021). Emphasizing endurance over seeking formal support fosters the belief that marriage is sacred and should not be dissolved under any circumstances (Pertek et al., 2023), thereby discouraging their pursuit of justice (Green et al., 2024).

In conclusion, research on VAW highlights the prevalence of the phenomenon and the complex challenges that victims encounter when attempting to report abuse. It explores the various social, cultural, economic, and psychological factors that contribute to the persistence of gender-based violence. The research also examines the numerous obstacles that continue to hinder reporting violence to formal authorities, including discriminatory legal provisions, fear of retaliation, sociocultural norms, and fear of stigma.

III. Narrative Analysis

Three major questions have guided this research. First, how do women describe their experiences of violence? Second, what obstacles hinder the victims' help-seeking? Third, how can women's life stories contribute to addressing the issue of violence? Exploring these questions should help understand the nature of violence in Morocco, with more focus on spousal violence, given its prevalence on one hand and women's disadvantaged status in a marital bond on the other. These questions should also help explore how women respond to conjugal violence, the reasons for its pervasiveness, and how it can be effectively addressed.

To explore these questions, this article adopts narrative analysis. This qualitative research method focuses on understanding how individuals construct and convey their experiences through stories. It emphasizes the importance of the context within which events occur and the narrators' subjective interpretation of them, which offers insightful perspectives into participants' experiences, emotions, and reactions (Riessman, 2008). Because stories offer profound insights into one's lived experiences, narrative analysis allows for a nuanced understanding of how women experience and interpret their world and helps uncover the complexities of power dynamics in their lives (Miller, 2000). Women's narratives offer valuable insights into their personal experiences and enhance our understanding of broader societal themes. These stories go beyond the individual experience and reveal patterns and themes that might otherwise remain invisible. As such, narrative analysis not only contributes to academic knowledge but also plays a vital role in social advocacy, guiding policymakers, legal professionals, and activists toward more informed, empathetic, and effective responses to VAW.

Because the radio creates a safe and engaging environment for participants to share their stories openly, it provides a wealth of data that can be used to address societal issues. Exploring radio narratives is particularly informative about women's real-life experiences, as many women share stories on the radio that they may not have told their closest relatives and friends. Additionally, the radio offers a convenient platform where women can freely express themselves without facing judgments, stigma, or shame. This is especially true when skilled program presenters extract valuable information from speakers without infringing on their privacy or harming their self-esteem. Additionally, because stories of violence are usually told with loads of intense emotions, they

point to the indelible scars that violence leaves on victims, even when its physical marks have faded away. Narrative analysis helps capture the minutiae of women's sufferings, providing solid ground for understanding their systemic causes and pointing to workable action plans to help women face them.

This article draws on the narratives of fifty women who shared their stories via two radio programs: *Biqalbin Maftouh* (With an Open Heart) and *Samiru al-Layl* (The Night Companion). Both programs are broadcast from Monday to Friday between 9:00 pm and 12:00 am. I relied on the narratives available on YouTube, given the possibility for their transcription. Ismail Aroui, the presenter of *Biqalbin Maftouh*, and Mustapha al-Harda, the presenter of *Samiru al-Layl*, have amassed extensive experience in addressing socially oriented issues. Their reassuring tone, relevant questions, and keen sense of social awareness make their interactions with the speakers a rich source of data. These qualities encourage speakers to share their stories openly and with minimal reserve.

Women's narratives were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of the stories and capture not only the spoken words but also the pauses, intonations, and other verbal nuances that contribute to meaning construction and interpretation. I began data analysis by noting preliminary themes and patterns in the margins of the transcripts. After concluding this stage, I initiated the coding process, following an inductive approach. Since inductive coding allows themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data (Charmaz, 2006), it helps to focus on how participants construct their stories and convey meaning. After completing the inductive coding, I began a thematic analysis. At this stage, I aimed to identify the recurring themes across different narratives. I analyzed how these themes related to broader social contexts and theoretical frameworks that had emerged during the literature review.

In the final stage, I focused on interpreting the meanings of participants' stories and understanding their implications for the research objectives. Reflecting on data is integral to qualitative research as it engages the researcher in the construction of meaning (see Charmaz, 2006), particularly considering my common cultural background with the victims. This reflection aimed to investigate how individual narratives contribute to understanding collective experiences and societal issues by considering the context in which narratives are produced, the interaction between personal experiences and broader cultural narratives, and the significance of these findings for theory, practice, and policy.

The significance of this research venue is justified by its contribution to the existing literature on the effects of violence against women on their lives, as well as the effectiveness of available exit strategies for them. Although the severity of VAW is well documented, knowledge of victims' help-seeking behavior in Morocco remains scant. Thus, this article seeks to underscore the complexity of this issue by illustrating that women often feel helpless even when they have institutional and legal tools at their disposal. This discrepancy requires an in-depth exploration of the social, cultural, and economic factors that impede victims' pursuit of justice. The findings can provide a valuable knowledge base that relevant authorities and stakeholders can utilize to devise measures to reduce or eradicate spousal violence in Morocco.

IV. Conjugal violence as a societal phenomenon

Physical abuse is the most common form of violence that women talk about since it has serious repercussions on their physical, emotional, and mental health. Physical violence may sometimes require medical intervention, indicating that it can lead to life-threatening injuries. Ilham, a thirty-year-old divorcee from Tetouan, was married to an abusive husband. Her story is painful and conveys a load of sorrowful emotions. She stated:

[My husband's mother] married him off to rid herself of him. He does not support the family. I was pregnant with twins, but one of them died after he beat me really hard. After I went to court, the judge fined him 50,000 DHs (approximately \$5,000), but he started begging and said it was the last time. I forgave him for my son's sake. When he quit his job, I provided for the family. He once gave me 300 DHs (approximately \$30) and told me to buy a rope and hang myself with it. He started beating me again. He once threw a glass bottle at me and opened up my eyebrow, causing blood to rush out. He called the police and told them, "I killed her." The police took him away, and I was taken to the hospital.

Ilham's story highlights several harmful practices that have serious repercussions on many Moroccans' marital lives. For example, parents continue to make decisions on behalf of their grown-up children. Ilham's husband did not choose to marry her, nor was he prepared for such a life-changing decision. Since he was a burden to his mother, she sought to rid herself of him by arranging his marriage to Ilham, although he was neither financially nor emotionally ready to start a family. This lack of responsibility towards one's family

fosters an environment where the breakdown of marriage becomes increasingly likely, ultimately contributing to the escalation of spousal violence.

Several factors have contributed to Ilham's calamity. First, she did not file for divorce until her situation had deteriorated significantly. It is notable that after her miscarriage, Ilham and her husband had been separated for five years before they got back together. Five months later, he struck her with the glass bottle, injuring her eyebrow. Only then did she file for divorce. Her husband might have seen her indecisiveness as a weakness, leading to a serious escalation of violence. Second, Ilham's misplaced hope that things might improve inadvertently assured her husband that she had no choice but to tolerate his abuse. Third, Ilham believed her husband would change for the better once he became a father; however, her pregnancy only exacerbated the situation. Thus, rather than sorting things out before they worsened further, Ilham chose to get pregnant, adding more responsibility to her irresponsible husband, as after becoming a father, Ilham's husband became more violent. Finally, Ilham did not have a supportive family willing to take her and her child in. Believing his wife was 'unwanted' by her parents, her husband may have felt relieved from the repercussions of his abusive treatment.

In addition to physical abuse, which is the most serious and widely discussed form of violence, there are other types of violence that women endure, including the neglect of their physical, emotional, economic, and sexual needs. Overlooking women's sexual needs remains taboo and is rarely addressed. Aicha, a thirty-year-old housewife from Marrakesh, reveals that this form of violence has serious repercussions on women's emotional well-being. However, this issue is often swept under the rug, as women may experience even more severe forms of violence. When Aicha complained to her husband, seemingly via an indirect message, he responded:

What needs do you have? You're fed, sheltered, and clothed; why are you complaining?

Satisfying one's natural needs is fundamental to a healthy marriage. However, Aicha cannot discuss this matter with her husband because it is not culturally acceptable. Instead, she uses the radio to express her frustration about her husband's lack of affection for her and the subsequent lack of sexual intimacy between them. This complaint is embedded in her narrative rather than explicitly stated.

V. Social and economic precariousness

Socioeconomic precariousness is prevalent among victims of conjugal violence. It is a state of uncertainty regarding one's social and economic circumstances. Economic instability, caused by being unemployed, performing an insecure job, or lacking an income-generating skill, often leads to social vulnerability. This vulnerability compels many women to tolerate intimate-partner abuse due to their fear of facing potentially worse alternatives, such as homelessness or returning to an unsupportive family that is not willing to support them and their children.

Many marriages exhibit imbalanced power dynamics between partners. For girls and women, getting married can sometimes lead to sacrificing education and employment, which are among the most empowering tools in today's world. Relinquishing these sources of agency places women in a vulnerable and dependent position vis-à-vis their husbands. Failure to obtain a degree or acquire professional skills forces women to rely on their families or husbands for sustenance. Economic vulnerability can trap women in abusive relationships, as a lack of sufficient financial resources can hinder their attempts to escape troubled marriages.

Based on women's narratives, several factors perpetuate their socioeconomic precariousness. First, most of these women are unemployed, making them reliant on their husbands for sustenance. Even when employed, they often work in underpaid or insecure jobs that do not guarantee a sustainable income. Second, many women have not acquired income-generating skills that could help them easily integrate into the job market. Third, they have grown up in low-income families that can barely meet basic needs. This social and economic instability deprives women of informal support in cases of conjugal abuse. Without this support, victims face serious challenges when deciding to take action if they choose to end their marital struggles.

The story of Hajar, a twenty-year-old woman from the rural outskirts of Agadir, illustrates how dropping out of school can significantly affect girls' futures. After her parents divorced and began new families, Hajar became collateral damage. She stated:

I loved school, but I chose marriage over pursuing my ambitions. I gave in to my father's pressure, as he insisted that I get married. Despite my mother's objections to my early marriage, since she expected me to provide for her, I ultimately acquiesced.

When girls drop out of school and do not pursue professional training, marriage remains the only alternative for socioeconomic security. Many parents still view marriage as a shortcut to finding a provider for

their daughters, pushing them to marry them off without ensuring that their future husbands will take good care of them. Several women have expressed, either explicitly or implicitly, that their parents have grown tired of them and viewed them as a financial burden. Thus, marriage becomes the only available means for girls to escape their precarious situation on one hand and a way to reduce household expenses on the other hand.

Parents' vulnerable socioeconomic situations have serious repercussions on the well-being of their children. These parents view their unemployed daughters as burdens and merely consumers of the family's limited resources. They also believe that marrying off their daughters soon is necessary lest they become spinsters who will need long-term support. Mounia said:

My husband had already been divorced twice when he proposed to me. However, since my parents were poor, they gave me away without hesitation.

Although Morocco has implemented a range of initiatives to address violence against women, women's narratives reveal that many of these measures remain inaccessible or impractical, particularly for women with children. Because they cannot sustain themselves or their children if they divorce, many women view violence as a fate they must endure. A strong reason several women have cited to 'justify' their tolerance of spousal violence is the protection of their children. Many believe that ending their marriage would negatively impact their children's welfare and disrupt their lives. However, they are probably afraid to acknowledge that they *themselves* have no one to turn to. For instance, Oumaima, a twenty-four-year-old married woman, does not have a secure income to support herself. Additionally, she has no one to help her care for her children if she chooses to work. Listening to her story, one can sense her helplessness and lack of support. Oumaima said:

I called you because the flood has reached its limit, and the pain has become unbearable.

Morocco has not put in place the necessary measures to support victims of violence (Saadoun, 2019, p. 105). Additionally, unlike several developed countries with welfare systems that prioritize female victims of violence and divorced women to help them overcome the repercussions of divorce and raise children in optimal conditions, Morocco's inadequate public welfare system has perpetuated women's dependence on their families for support when they lack secure employment. Morocco has only recently launched a social protection program to assist families in precarious conditions; however, the limited budget allocated for this project and the high number of beneficiaries have hindered the implementation of support services specifically for female victims of domestic violence and their children.

VI. Conjugal violence and community support

When women become victims of violence, they may seek assistance from formal support services, particularly law enforcement, or from informal support networks, notably family and friends (Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024, pp. 531-533). However, social isolation significantly impedes women's access to both support channels, ultimately resulting in increased rates of violence. Women's lack of engagement in public activities and participation in civic activities further exacerbates their vulnerability and heightens their risk of experiencing violence. Numerous narratives compellingly speak of women who are disconnected from the broader community, often confining their lives to their domestic environments alongside their spouses and children.

Research indicates that numerous men believe that they are rightfully entitled to monitor their wives' lives (Ouchelh, 2024a, pp. 14-15). Before officiating their marriage, or right after it, many husbands sever their wives' connections with their lives prior to marriage. For instance, they make them change their phone numbers, quit school or job, and delete their social media accounts. By cutting their wives' ties with their 'bachelor' lives, these men want their wives to start anew. Severing ties with the outside world can have serious repercussions for women victims of conjugal violence in seeking informal support. Soukaina, a twenty-six-year-old housewife, said:

Although I was a distinguished student, my fiancé asked me to drop out of school. After marriage, he began blaming me for his problems. Now, I rarely see him.

The normalization of violence against women is often justified through cultural narratives that portray conjugal abuse as acceptable or even necessary (Banda, 2019). Many men believe they are entitled to 'edify' and 'discipline' their wives. This belief shapes societal expectations regarding how women should be treated, often perpetuating male dominance and female subservience. Internalizing this belief creates social pressure that

discourages victims from reporting abuse or seeking help, as they may feel obliged to endure their husbands' violence (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013).

Community reactions to VAW significantly influence victims' willingness to seek formal support. Positive responses from family and friends can encourage women to pursue formal assistance, while negative reactions, such as blame or disbelief, can discourage them from disclosing their experiences and taking necessary actions to obtain help (Goodkind et al., 2003; Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024). The social environment surrounding a victim plays a critical role in either facilitating or obstructing her path to safety, justice, and healing. In communities where conjugal abuse is prevalent and normalized, women may feel isolated and unsupported when considering actions against their perpetrators.

VII. Reporting violence and seeking justice

Research indicates that many victims of violence do not seek formal support (Madhani et al., p. 3) and prefer to remain silent (Madhani et al., p. 9). Therefore, despite the introduction of numerous legal provisions aimed at combating VAW and granting victims the right to seek legal assistance, many opt to speak out on the radio instead. This demonstrates that the state-mandated measures still fail to adequately address violence against women and provide the necessary support to victims, thereby perpetuating the private nature of VAW and rendering the official measures ineffective.

Based on women's narratives, several factors deter victims of conjugal violence from taking action against their abusive partners. To begin with, Morocco has not established a robust judicial infrastructure to facilitate women's access to justice, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Additionally, many women do not reach out to formal support systems, particularly law enforcement and social services, due to negative experiences or a lack of trust in those systems, making them believe that asking for help will not improve their situation and may even lead to the escalation of violence (see also Madhani, 2017; Fulu & Warner, 2018). Furthermore, many women struggle to access the judiciary due to high costs. Given their economic vulnerability, hiring a judicial commissioner or a lawyer and attending the nearest court can be unaffordable for many women.

Women are also afraid that taking legal action against their husbands would lead to the dissolution of their marriage, as many Moroccan men would not accept returning to women who have 'shamed' them in public and taken them to court. When a woman chooses to reach out to judicial authorities, it typically indicates that she has severed ties with her husband. Women are concerned that the dissolution of marriage may negatively affect their children, primarily due to their economic dependence on their husbands. For many victims, leaving a marriage leads to losing the only source of support for themselves and their children. Therefore, dealing with the costly financial repercussions of divorce is not a price many socioeconomically vulnerable victims can afford, pushing them to prioritize family needs over their own safety.

Fatima, a divorced woman from the rural suburbs of Casablanca, shared an informative story illustrating that reporting spousal abuse is not feasible for many women. She stated:

My husband is 20 years older than I am, and we have three kids. He is severe and unsupportive. Although he provides for the kids, he is a bad parent because he allows them to watch adult content. However, I've never considered filing for divorce; in contrast, he has. He explained to the judge that I was extravagant.

Fatima does not consider filing for divorce because her husband treats the kids well, and they love him. She strongly believes that she is the only one responsible for the family's stability, which makes her endure abuse rather than jeopardize her kids' future. Although Fatima's husband hurts her badly, she emphasizes that he provides for the kids. For her, maintaining her marriage takes precedence over her mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

Many women stay in abusive relationships because they hope that their husbands will change. One of the things these women do to bring about this change is by getting pregnant. Some women have reported that despite their husbands' bad treatment, they decided to get pregnant to evoke their husbands' paternal emotions, hoping that becoming parents would strengthen their marriage. However, in many cases, women's lives deteriorate once they become pregnant. Because these women have no home to return to along with their children, as their parents are deceased, elderly, or poor, they are unable to find support for themselves and their children. Hoping for change, even through pregnancy, reflects these women's inability to take charge of their lives to escape abusive relationships, as they know they have no one to rely on for support.

Recognizing this weakness, many men escalate their abusive behavior, driving their wives toward self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or even attempts to end their lives. Hanane, a mother of three, is married to an alcoholic

addict and an extremely abusive husband. She believes that her life under his roof is more a matter of destiny than choice. She stated:

My family tells me to bear with him until the children grow up. His mother provides for us, yet he kicked me during my postpartum period while calling me names. He once told me, "I have stayed with you longer than I should," [implying that their time together is over and his desire for her has diminished]. My father has prostate cancer, and I cannot tell him. [...] My husband has uttered divorce three times; am I his legitimate wife or not?

When a child is born, the house is expected to be filled with joy and celebrations to welcome the new family member. For husbands like Hanane's, the birth of a baby adds another heavy straw to their collapsing marriage. It is clear that Hanane's husband was not ready to start a family, both financially and emotionally. His abusive treatment might indicate his inability to take full responsibility for his family. Uttering the "divorce formula" three times was meant to pressure Hanane into filing for divorce, which would allow her husband to avoid paying compensation to his wife. Divorcing Hanane orally is not legally effective because her husband has not followed the appropriate legal procedures under the supervision of the judiciary. However, oral divorce can create a serious dilemma, as many view it as religiously valid. From Hanane's account, it can be inferred that her husband is unable to pursue a legal divorce due to its high cost. It is evident that Hanane's husband has lost affection for her; however, he cannot divorce her due to financial reasons. Similarly, Hanane cannot file for divorce because she cannot bear its financial repercussions. The short exchange below summarizes this limbo:

If you want to sue me, then just do it, Hanane's husband told her once.
I will never sue you, Hanane responded.

Hanane's relationship with her husband has reached a dead end because she can neither endure his abusive treatment nor begin her life anew. Although conjugal violence is a crime, many women do not pursue legal action against their abusive husbands. While some may fear their husbands' retribution, others are reluctant to incarcerate their husbands and the fathers of their children, which may have an impact on their financial situation. Hanane, for example, seems to have a compelling reason to 'justify' her decision not to sue her husband. She stated:

What the court will provide me [bridal alimony and child support] will not be sufficient to support myself and my child. I am afraid that if I leave the house, I will not find a job.

Hanane's husband is clearly aware that she cannot defend herself or take legal action against him, mainly because her family is unable to support her and their child. Furthermore, Hanane lacks an income-generating skill that would help her find a job if she were to consider starting anew. Hanane's situation is common in Morocco due to the economic and social difficulties many families face. Rather than encouraging their daughters to complete their education and pursue careers, many parents choose to marry them off to have fewer mouths to feed and economize on their scarce resources, making their daughters victims of arranged marriages that may turn into abusive relationships. Hanane, a victim of an arranged marriage, stated:

I cried on my wedding day. I got pregnant too soon. I had to pay for my husband's drugs and gambling, and tolerate his cheating. Whenever I sought my parents' help, they would force me to go back to him for fear of the social stigma of divorced women. Unlike most husbands, he was not happy when he became a father.

Likewise, Karima, a twenty-seven-year-old wife from Agadir, stated:

Because my parents wanted to get rid of me, they married me off before I could finish schooling. Once my husband proposed, my parents accepted; that's why I didn't have time to get to know my husband.

Women's reluctance to take action against their spouses can lead to serious consequences. In many cases, women do not foresee extreme violence until it occurs. Research shows that women's tolerance of abusive behavior correlates with higher rates of anxiety and depression (Do et al., 2013). Hanane's heartbreaking story exemplifies how enduring violence can lead a woman to socioeconomic and psychological ruin. She felt trapped between the hammer (an abusive husband) and the anvil (unsupportive parents). Although she ultimately obtained her divorce, she has not yet managed to overcome the repercussions of her husband's abuse. Many victims of conjugal violence choose to report their experiences due to fatigue, the severity of abuse, the abusive

partner's negligence in fulfilling marital obligations, and trust in family members (Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024). However, this decision sometimes occurs late. Hanane, for example, quit her marriage, burdened with a child to support and no family to assist her. She began inflicting pain on herself by cutting her flesh. Now, she feels lonely and helpless as she must earn a living, take care of her child, and heal.

VIII. Exit strategy

Women and girls in precarious socioeconomic conditions cannot always make their own decisions. Many parents view their daughters as minors who cannot choose whom to marry or when to do so. Furthermore, daughters are often seen as financial burdens on their families. Statistical data support this perception. In 2022, 1 in 4 young Moroccans (1.5 million) aged between 15 and 24 were in a NEET situation (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), with 72.8% of them being females (Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental, 2023a, p. 7). Girls who have dropped out of school and have not joined the workforce often consume their families' scarce resources rather than contribute to their accumulation. Furthermore, many families fear that their daughters may reach an age when it becomes difficult for them to attract suitors, leaving them without a job or a husband (i.e., provider). These factors push many families to marry their daughters off before attaining legal maturity.

Since many women and girls have not chosen whom to marry and when, leaving the marital bond is not always their decision. These women are uncertain whether their families will care for them and their children if they do. This partially explains why they stay in abusive relationships, and when they choose to leave, it is often very late. Fatima's story vividly illustrates this struggle. Speaking painfully, she said:

If I take the kids with me, they will get hungry; if I leave them with my husband, they will be neglected.

Help-seeking behavior is articulated in three stages: identifying the problem, making the decision to seek help, and selecting a care provider or support source (Liang et al., 2005). Structural barriers play a role in this process, as women often face various social, cultural, and economic obstacles before deciding to seek support. Fatima's situation, for instance, highlights the complexity of women's experiences. While Fatima recognizes that her husband fulfills his financial responsibilities toward the children, she criticizes his failure to embody responsible fatherhood by not intervening to prevent their involvement in indecent behaviors. Thus, despite being aware of the problem, she fears losing her only provider if she seeks formal support.

Women's narratives show that the most common reaction to spousal violence is endurance. Many victims have nowhere to go if they choose to pursue legal action; if they do and reach out to their families, they often feel unwelcome. They also endure the pain because they hope things will eventually improve. However, more often than not, women's lives deteriorate due to their sense of helplessness and occasional false hope. Ilham said:

I did not sue my husband because I did not want to send him to jail. He once told me, "Forgive me if you want, or don't forgive me." Some people held me accountable for what had happened to me. I started thinking about killing myself. My husband didn't feel remorseful. Forgiving him when he caused my miscarriage has led to all of this [escalation of violence].

Cultural norms often hold wives accountable for their husbands' violent behavior, making their forgiveness an obligation rather than an act of mercy. However, this forgiveness can be perceived as a weakness, which may lead to continued acts of violence. Abusive husbands may fail to recognize their wives' kindness, resulting in an escalation of violence that can reach extreme levels (see Fulu & Warner, 2018, pp. 7-8). Conjugal abuse often starts with seemingly minor acts, such as verbal insults or a slap, but when left unchecked, it can escalate into severe physical harm. Due to the lack of widespread societal consensus on condemning marital abuse, husbands often do not expect opposition and remain unconcerned about potential legal consequences.

Overall, while pursuing justice is an effective way to deter husbands or prevent the worst from happening, women show remarkable resilience in the face of conjugal violence. Due to socioeconomic vulnerability, a lack of supportive families, and limited access to justice, many women are forced to endure their husbands' violence, hoping that this time will be the last.

IX. Concluding remarks and implications for policy and practice

Morocco has implemented several measures to combat violence against women as part of a comprehensive gender-sensitive policy. The adoption of Law No. 03.103 in 2018 marked a significant advancement in protecting women both within and outside the home. However, women's narratives reveal that this legal provision still falls short in addressing conjugal violence, and many victims do not receive adequate protection. Women who turn to radio programs to share their stories raise questions about the capacity of the judiciary and law enforcement to support them. Programs such as *Biqalbin Maftouh* and *Samiru al-Layl* provide alternative pathways for victims to make their voices heard and, at times, receive support from empathetic listeners.

Conjugal violence is a complex issue, so understanding its causes can inform effective interventions. To tackle this problem, several recommendations can be made. First, legal reforms should strengthen the existing laws against spousal violence and ensure effective enforcement. These provisions should guarantee that women who report violence are protected from retaliation and do not risk being left homeless. For effective implementation of these measures, there is an increasing need for collaboration among policymakers, the government, local authorities, the media, and NGOs to develop and implement policies and programs aimed at preventing domestic violence.

Second, socio-cultural expectations are fundamental in shaping attitudes towards conjugal violence, as they create an environment where such behavior is normalized and justified. Addressing these beliefs is integral to reducing this phenomenon and creating a safer household for women. Efforts must focus on changing these beliefs, especially because women have become leaders and decision-makers in various fields. Launching awareness campaigns, educational reforms, and media programs should help change societal attitudes and educate the public about women's rights and the legal consequences of violence. In this context, religious sensitization can help address violence against women. The role of religious leaders in influencing women's willingness to seek help for conjugal violence is significant, as they can provide essential support and foster positive change within the community.

Third, family and community reactions play a crucial role in shaping women's willingness to seek help for domestic violence. These reactions may discourage outside intervention in family matters, reinforcing the belief that they should remain private. Many women fear 'exposing their dirty laundry' to the outside world and becoming the subject of gossip, even when they face harmful acts. This fear continues to hinder the government's efforts to alleviate conjugal violence. Therefore, fostering supportive community networks is crucial for empowering women and encouraging them to speak out and seek help. The media's role is integral to raising awareness and challenging harmful gender stereotypes that often perpetuate conjugal abuse. Through targeted campaigns, the media can foster public understanding, reduce stigma, and encourage victims to speak up and seek help. In doing so, it becomes a powerful tool for prevention and promoting a cultural shift toward reporting violence rather than keeping quiet.

Fourth, several instrumental steps can help alleviate domestic violence. For instance, the government should boost a gender-sensitive budget reserved for victims of conjugal violence to offer them protection against retaliation. Furthermore, support services have become integral mechanisms to address domestic violence as they can provide accessible resources for victims, including shelters, counseling services, and legal assistance to help them heal and raise their children in the most favorable conditions.

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