

Marital violence among Albanian women in Berat: Their voices, pain and experiences

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Abstract: Violence against women in Albania is a serious human rights issue, and yet it is not a topic discussed openly in society. This study aims to investigate the seriousness of the problem within Albanian society with the purpose of providing valuable data on grounds. This research is based on case studies of women's experiences in violent relationships in Berat, Albania. Participants include fifteen married Albanian women who were once or currently being abused in their homes during the time of their interviews. A qualitative methodology is utilized for analysis while data collection is undertaken from the case study approach. Specifically, the research focuses on the forms and factors that cause marital violence, as well as coping strategies employed by the victims. Interviews with the participants indicate that most of the typical forms of abuse are prevalent in their abusive relationships. While the factors that trigger marital violence in Albania vary from cultural, social, and economical to interpersonal, findings dismiss the myth that marital violence is a problem limited to the poor or the uneducated. In fact, the cultural factor contributing to the less-than-ideal treatment of women comes from the traditional patriarchal Albania norms. Against this backdrop, research suggests that what pushes traditionally inclined men is not so much the patriarchal tendencies alone but, much like other social ills found in Albania today, the economic and social changes that are gripping the country.

Keywords: *marital relationship, violence, women, abuse, patriarchal society,*

Introduction

The family is a central feature of every society. It is an enduring institution that nurtures and protects its individual members and provides them with a sense of belonging and security. However, the family also has its dark side. In some societies, this institution is ridden with conflict and violence-problems that pose both a threat and a challenge to national and global society (Coltrane and Collins, 2001¹). One of the most widespread forms of family violence is marital violence against wives. In 2000, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported that one woman in every three was subjected to violence in an intimate relationship (Mooney, 2000²). Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that up to 70% of female murdered victims were killed by their male partners (Amnesty International, 2004³). In Albania, violence against women is a serious human rights issue, yet it is a topic that is not discussed openly in society. Historically Albanian society has regarded domestic violence as a personal problem, and a phenomenon that belongs “behind closed doors” (Gjermeni and Bregu, 2003⁴). In 1995, a survey of men and women across Albania conducted by Shoqata Refleksione (an Albanian women’s association), found that 46.3% of rural women, and 36.3% of urban women reported intimate partner violence, and 28% and 16.4% respectively reported sexual violence. Furthermore, the Albanian Reproductive Health Survey conducted in 2002, found that of those women who reported intimate partner violence, 30.4% experienced verbal abuse, 8.2% reported long-term physical violence, and 2.9% reported being forced to engage in unwanted sex. Researchers found little difference according to residence or age, although younger women were more willing to report physical violence.

The statistics above demonstrate widespread marital violence against women in Albania, and extensive social problems relating to the family and marriage, which deserve increased attention. More sociological studies are needed to examine the factors that cause marital violence in the country and the coping strategies used by the victims.

Despite an increasing awareness of the phenomenon of marital violence in Albania, in general there is a very limited research available on the topic of marital violence in the country. As such, there is a need to conduct further investigation on this issue in order to fill the gaps in knowledge about the subject. The broad research questions that guided this study are as follows:

- What are the forms of violence that married Albanian women experienced at the hands of their spouses and how did they experience it?

¹ Coltrane, S and Collins, R (2001), *Sociology of Marriage: Gender, Love and Property*, 5th ed., Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA.

² Mooney, J (2000), *Gender, Violence and the Social Order*, PALGRAVE, Hampshire, NY.

³ Amnesty International, (2004), *It's in Our Hands: Stop violence against women*, Amnesty International Publications, London.

⁴ Gjermeni, E & Bregu, M (2003), *Monitoring Media on Domestic Violence 2001–2002*, Albania: Women’s Center Tirana, Tirana.

- What are the cultural, social, and economic causes of their violent marital relationships?
- What are their ways of coping as victims of such an abusive relationships?

Although there is a considerable amount of literature on the subject globally based on research carried out in other societies, a study conducted in the Albanian context would be the first of its kind. Unlike other societies, Albania was under communist rule for 50 years, and during this period, there was an enormous gap between women's theoretical emancipation and the circumstances of the everyday life. With the fall of communism in 1991, the country experienced a period of deep and dramatic change, with serious consequences on society. Therefore, a study of violence against women in such a unique socio-cultural setting would generate distinct information.

According to Abraham (2000⁵), “addressing marital violence without examining the experiences of different categories of women, leads to false assumptions that there is homogeneity in women's experiences of violence,” (p.xi). Marital violence cuts across race, ethnicity, and class with devastating effects. The complex ways in which ethnicity and class intersect with gender must be examined if we are to make progress in addressing this problem. Furthermore, an understanding of violence would be incomplete without an account of the experiences of those who are often deemed “invisible others” because of their ethnicity, race, class, and legal status (Abraham, 2000: xi).

The present study will shed light on the realities and complexities of violence against women in Albanian society, helping to transform this problem from a private matter into the sphere of public concern and to translate that public concern into a broad social consensus. However, this can only be done effectively if data on this phenomenon are accessible from victims with different backgrounds.

Research Method

This study focused on the experience of marital violence among married Albanian women in Berat city. It employed the qualitative case study approach, which seeks answers to questions by examining various settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings (Berg, 2004; Crabtree and Miller, 1999⁶), and which also searches for a deeper understanding of the “lived experiences of the phenomenon” (Marshall and Rossman, 1999⁷). Hence, the use of the qualitative study method was an appropriate method for this study based on the assumption that the real life situation of abused women is best described by the women themselves. Furthermore, with case studies, our primary task is to understand the case.

⁵ Abraham, M (2000), *Speaking the Unspeakable, Marital Violence Among South Asian Immigrants in the United State*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

⁶ Berg, B (2004), *Qualitative Research Methods for Social Sciences*, 5th ed., Person Education, New York, Crabtree, B & Miller, W (1999), *Doing Qualitative Research*, CA: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

⁷ Marshall, C and Rossman, G (1999), *Designing Qualitative Research*, 4th ed., CA: SAGE, Thousand Oaks.

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According to Stake (2004⁸), although the process will assist in teasing out relationships and probing issues, these ends are secondary to understand the case. The majority of the work was devoted to interpretation, because the goal of this study was to develop a rich understanding about each participant's experience.

The research was conducted at the Kristal Center for Women and Girls at Berat, city. Berat is a city located in south-central Albania. It is considered one of the oldest cities in Albania, with settlements dating back to at least the 6th century BC. It has a unique cultural heritage, and historical importance.

The Kristal Center started its activities in May 2000. The Center aims to help and give advice to women and girls in the city of Berat who are victims of violence. It offers psychological, legal and medical counseling, which can be done by phone or face-to-face, to the victims of domestic violence. This study targeted abused married women, who were residents of Berat city and who registered for help at the Kristal Center. According to Babbie (2001⁹), the population should be the first consideration prior to searching for the sampling frame. From the outset, the specific aim of this study was to draw on a sample of victims of intimate partner violence. However, since this subject is still considered something of a taboo in Albania, drawing on the right population was very challenging. Nevertheless, with the help of the staff from Kristal Center, fifteen respondents were selected as the unit of analysis. A purposive sampling method was employed in order to allow and ensure the right selection of participants based on their experience and knowledge of the issue under the investigation in the present study (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Rubbin and Babbie, 1997; Blaikie, 2000¹⁰).

The primary data sources used in this study include the in-depth interview followed by key-informant, focus group discussions and the survey method. With regard to data captured during qualitative interviews, Kvale (1996¹¹) remarks that it "is literary an interview, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest, where the researcher attempts to 'understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation'" (pp.1-2). According to Kumar (2005¹²), conducting an interview is a more natural form of interacting with people than making them fill out a questionnaire, do a test or perform some experimental task. In this study, the process of interviewing the respondents continued until the data became saturated and the information started to repeat itself.

The purpose of using focus group discussions was to validate the information gathered during the in-depth interview and gain internal validity by increasing the analytical

8 Stake, R (2004), *The Art of Case Study Research*, Sage, London.

9 Babbie, E (2001), *The Practice of Social Research*, 9th ed., Wadsworth Thomson Learning Inc., Belmont, CA.

10 Miles, M and Huberman, M (1994), *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2nd ed., SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.
Rubbin, A and Babbie, E (1997), *Research Methods of Social Work*, 3rd ed., Brooks/Cole., Pacific Grove, CA.
Blaikie, N (2000), *Designing Social Research*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

11 Kvale, S (1996), *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks: CA.

12 Kumar, R (2005), *Research Methodology: A Step by Step Guide for Beginners*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, London

generalization that has both philosophical and methodological significance in this qualitative case study. According to Berg (2004) this method is an innovative strategy for gathering information which otherwise would be difficult to obtain. In the present study, the focus groups were arranged with five respondents per group, purposefully selected in order to provide for a diversity of ages, socio-economic backgrounds, and diverse views and opinions.

With regard to the key-informant method, the researcher applied this approach to face-to-face conversations with the staff from the Kristal Center. The interviews were utilized in gathering information pertaining to violence against women in Berat. Whereas the survey method approach was used to gather data related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents such as age, marital status, number of children, level of education, etc.

Results and Discussion

The findings from this study show that the 15 respondents all experienced occurrences of marital violence in their own unique way. The voices of each of the respondents indicated that marital abuse is a painful and damaging experience, and is an issue that continues to demand urgent attention. The forms of violence and abuse permeate every aspect of these women's lives, making it difficult for them to function in society. These women were confused as they attempted to come to terms with being hurt by someone they expected to be caring and protective.

Forms of Violence Experienced by Abused Albanian Women

The stories of abuse and violence uncovered during the interviews with the fifteen respondents, brought to light several types of abuse and violence, such as physical, sexual, emotional, social and economical abuse.

The findings show that almost all of the respondents experienced physical violence. Although, the form of abuse differed from person to person, they all indicated that they did not fight back when their husbands physically attacked them. According to the women, they were expected by traditional custom to show obedience and respect for their husbands as heads of the households. In Albanian culture and according to social codes, men have the right to control women's behavior by any means necessary. Some women reported that, after incidents of physical abuse, their husbands asked them for forgiveness, and they thought the abuse would stop. However, the abuse continued and as time went on, it increased in frequency and severity.

In explaining some of these behaviors affecting marital violence, one must reflect back on Albania culture. This culture in Albania is exemplified by what traditional Albanians refer to as the Kanun. The Kanun in its original function was to maintain the status quo of a peaceful community in a largely patriarchal society based on universal principals for maintaining law and order in community. Nevertheless, the Kanun was a doctrine drafted by men, and its influence may explain many behaviors such as why women in Albania tend to accept abuse rather than fight back.

Sexual abuse is another form of male control, used in an effort to gain the woman's complete submission in an abusive relationship. Some of the women in this study experienced rape or forced sexual relations, yet they are not willing to label their experience as rape. This could be a sign that the concept of marital rape is rather absent in Albanian culture. Indeed, in Albania, the traditional normative order socializes men to believe in their sexual prowess and socializes women to believe in the need to fulfill their husband's sexual desires, without really addressing their sexual needs. To Albanian women, sex with their husbands is an obligation to be fulfilled that has nothing to do with their willingness to do so. At the same time, men are socialized to form expectations of their sexual needs and assumptions of female accessibility that justify forcing sexual access within the context of

marriage. Given this cultural ideology, many Albanian women who are subjected to sexual violence by their husbands find it hard to reveal the abuse.

Due to the lack of awareness on the issue, women may not even realize that their husband may actually be committing an unlawful act, and talking to social workers or trying to fight back would not even cross their minds. The findings in the present study are consistent with the previous studies of Babani (2003¹³) and Abraham (2000). The fact that Albanian women are not familiar with the concept of marital rape is one of the main reasons behind the conclusion that the extent of sexual abuse is greater than it is reported.

From the in-depth interviews done, the findings show that all women experienced a high level of emotional abuse. Previous studies done in Albania by Haxhiymeri and Kulluri (2000¹⁴), in the area of family violence, revealed that psychological abuse is often associated with physical abuse. The current study adds support to this theory by suggesting that emotional abuse and physical abuse are intertwined with each other and, as a result, the majority of respondents who experienced them simultaneously were unable to distinguish one form from the other.

Factors that Trigger Marital Violence and Abuse

In Albania, marital violence is a complex phenomenon that is caused by different, yet interrelated factors. In the current study most of the respondents stated that a number of personal factors caused men to turn to marital violence, such as: low self-esteem, immaturity, feelings of inferiority, lack of empathy, and jealousy. With regard to social factors that incite violence in their relationships, respondents rendered alcohol abuse as one of the main causes, followed by infidelity, drug abuse and gambling addictions.

Although the relationship between alcohol, drug abuse and spousal violence is controversial, a considerable body of research has revealed that abused women described their husbands as having problems with alcohol (Walker, 1980¹⁵); (Dutton, 2007¹⁶). The results of the present research showed that the majority of women were quick in identifying that violence against them tended to be more severe when alcohol was involved. In some cases, women asserted that there was an absence of violence when men were not intoxicated. The respondents perceived and explained that men drink to assert their manhood, forget problems, or escape the reality of married life or the world in which they live.

13 Babani, A (2003), *Dhuna Ndaj Grave ne Shqiperi; Studim Explorues, Botim i UNICEF* [Violence against women in Albania; exploratory research], PEGI,Tirana.

14 Haxhiymeri, E and Kulluri, E (2000), *Mapping of Existing Information on Domestic Violence in Albania*, The National Committee of Women and Family & UNICEF,Tirana.

15 Walker, L (1980), *The Battered Woman*, Harper & Row,New York.

16 Dutton, D (2007), *The Abusive Personality: Violence and Control in Intimate Relationships*, 2nd ed., Guilford,New York.

Besides alcohol and drug abuse, gambling was another factor that prompted violence and abuse against women in Berat city. However, the findings revealed that in contrast to alcohol abuse, where the husbands reacted differently if they had not been drinking, in the case of gambling, the abuse was still the same and the partners kept their anger for longer periods of time, making it difficult for the wives to cope with constant violence.

While the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife is an important aspect of marriage, extra-marital relationships are not tolerated in many societies. In the present study, infidelity on the part of the husband made the situation more intense in cases where the wife confronted the husband with the truth, and had proof about his extra-marital relationship. Furthermore, the respondents stated that the extra-marital affair brought a variety of problems into the family and the relationships, including financial problems, and a loss of trust and respect for their husbands.

The economic changes in Albania that took place during this last twenty years have strongly influenced the life of Albanian families. Poverty, unemployment and emigration are some of the economic factors mentioned by the respondents in this study. As the findings show, unemployed men feel disoriented, reduced in status and wounded in self-respect. They are immensely tense, and unhappy with themselves and their lives. Unemployment not only produces low self-esteem, but it also brings about financial worries and frustration. Poverty and unemployment reduces the ability of men to provide for their families, which leads them to lash out on women. The end result of the tension, frustration and stress associated with unemployment in men, in most cases, leads to marital violence.

Since the demise of the communist regime, when restrictions to free movement were lifted, Albania experienced massive flows of internal and external migration. For immigrants, the new environment, new social attitudes, and role expectations were not familiar, and as such they had to adapt and adjust. Throughout this adjustment process, immigrant families experienced high levels of stress. This stress had an impact on the equilibrium and atmosphere in the family, resulting in conflicts. Hence, the findings support the previous research (Burazeri et.al; 2006¹⁷) that immigration is believed to be one of the vulnerability factors contributing to marital violence in Albania. Moreover, the findings showed that individuals within immigrant families experienced various disorders such as depression and deviant behavior, along with substance abuse, which in the long run affected their relationships.

It is also important to recognize that Albania is a patriarchal society. As manifested in this study, patriarchy is conceptualized as one of the factors leading to an acceptance of spousal violence. Ten out of 15 interviewed women believed that their abuse was based on the patriarchal mentality of their husbands. The women indicated that they suffered violence at the hands of their husbands because these males had been brought up to feel superior to their female counterparts. The roots of the ill treatment of Albanian women by their husbands may again be found in the customary law of the Kanun. According to the Kanun, the man is

¹⁷ Burazeri, G et al., (2006), *Domestic Violence: A Presentation of the Existing Situation in Albania*, Gender Alliance for Development Center, Tirana.

entitled to beat and publicly scold his wife if she does not obey him and ‘the husband beating wife is not blamed’ (Kanun, neni.43, Chpt.XII. Fox, 1989¹⁸). These complex cultural and traditional variations exist in different regions of Albania, despite the disparities reflected by the situations of women who live in these different regions. In the north of Albania and in rural areas, the Kanun has a stronger influence, while in the south and central parts of the country, these traditions are more liberal.

Coping Mechanisms

Before considering the discussion on coping, it is noteworthy to mention that coping and experience are intimately tied to one another. According to Abraham (2000¹⁹), coping with resistance can be seen as the counterpart to domestic violence, because violence and resistance are constantly interacting with each other.

The findings of this study show that there are various coping strategies used by the respondents. Four of them mentioned the help and encouragement they receive from their family to leave their abusive relationships. Others mentioned that their families listened to their grievances and supported them emotionally, but did not give them support when they mentioned that they wanted to leave their abusive husbands. The respondents reported that their families encouraged them not to question the whereabouts of their husbands, and they were constantly reminded that they should respect their husbands’ place as ‘head of family’. The respondents indicated that their families encouraged the victims to handle their marital problems privately within the family, sometimes with the help of elder people or a close third party. They noted that they were socialized not to talk about their marital problems and indicated that their own parents in some cases modeled the same behavior.

The respondents in this study also used avoidance and denial in order to escape a further escalation of anger in their partners, by practicing different tactics such as trying not to collide with their husbands, controlling their own tempers, keeping quiet, avoiding provocations, etc. Most of the respondents found personal strength and developed their own resources in order to cope with their difficulties. They used optimism to reframe their situations and overcome them, for example they focused on their partners’ good behavior and positive qualities, and tried to convince themselves that abuse was something normal in a relationship. It is important to mention that almost all of the interviewed women were willing to accept the abuse due to their commitment to their children. The findings are consistent with the previous research by Babani (2003²⁰), in which she states that women believed they had to be patient and obedient for the sake of their children.

Social withdrawal is another way of coping with abuse. Most of the respondents were very alert to the community opinion about them. Five of the respondents reported that they

¹⁸ Fox, L (1989), *The Code of Leke Dukagjini*, Gjonlekaj, Publishing Company, New York.

¹⁹ Ibid. 5

²⁰ Babani, A (2003), *Dhuna Ndaj Grave ne Shqiperi: Studim Explorues*, Botim i UNICEF [violence against women in Albania :Exploratory research], PEGI, Tirana.

were ashamed to leave their marriages because they were worried about how society, friends and others would perceive them. According to Albanian culture, not succeeding at your marriage is perceived as a failure; therefore to avoid exposing their marital problems, respondents minimized interaction with others. Furthermore, the interviewed women indicated that the notions of honor, or 'nderi' in Albanian, and shame, or 'turpi,' prevented them from telling even their closest relatives about the violence they experienced for the fear that it would bring shame and dishonor to their families.

Spiritual coping was yet another strategy used by Albanian women dealing with violence and abuse in their relationships. The findings indicate that eight of the women interviewed, were able to cope with their situation through their belief in God and prayers. Although the spirituality that these women experienced may have been very superficial, it played a profound and practical role in their lives. In fact, a few women admitted that they would have preferred to forgo living had it not been for their connection to spirituality. Regardless of how this spirituality was manifested, it was clear that it was an essential element in their lives and that it brought them comfort.

The various strategies used by women to cope with abusive situations have clearly produced benefits and reduced harm. Yet, possible determinants for selecting the strategy include women's personal sources, types of relationships, the frequency and severity of abuse, and the stages of crises and abuse.

Limitation of the Study

First regarding the qualitative research this research is non-experimental and therefore has a high degree of subjectivity. There are some biases that exist in sampling method. The sampling was small, and as with all qualitative researches, this presents challenge to replication and the finding cannot be generalized to a larger population.

Furthermore, the study is not representative of all the women who have experienced violence and abuse in their marital relationship. In addition, the region of the country from which these respondents were recruited should be taken in consideration when interpreting the results. The culture of Berat city is unique; it is very traditional and small city when compared to some other parts or cities of Albania. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to women who reside in other parts of the country.

Next, another potential limitation of this study is that it presents the battered women's view, yet absent are the perspective of their partners.

Lastly, the study is retrospective rather than prospective. Respondents' account of their abusive experience may have been distorted by memories.

Conclusion

This research was intended to explore the dynamics of abusive marital relationships in Albanian women in Berat city. According to the findings, there is a complex interweaving of

cultural, social, economic and interpersonal factors that place Albanian women at increased risk of marital violence. In this respect, the findings dispel the myth that marital violence is largely a problem of the poor and uneducated people and indicates that abuse cuts across all socio-economic boundaries.

In spite of changes that occurred during the period of communism and changes that have taken place in recent years, the attitudes towards women and acceptance of their subordinate status in marriage still exist. The interviews with women identified the long-term tragedy that has imbued the lives of women, some of whom are deeply scared by hidden pain, but at the same time revealed the resistance by many of them. Although, the respondents identified multiple causes for their abusive relationships, the dominant causes were the social problems that emanate from a society caught between tradition and modernity as Albanian society is right now.

Nonetheless, the consequences of marital violence affect the victims, their families and the entire Albanian society. There should be no excuse for such violence. By giving voice to Albanian women and encouraging their empowerment; and by understanding the local culture in relation to meaning of the marital violence and its individual perceptions, attitudes and responses, appropriate interventions can be developed to help in reducing and preventing marital violence in Berat City and in Albania as a whole.

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