TOWARDS A CULTURAL DEFINITION OF RAPE: DILEMMAS IN DEALING WITH RAPE VICTIMS IN PALESTINIAN SOCIETY

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Synopsis — Although rape is a cross-cultural crime stemming primarily from patriarchal ideologies and gender power, the analysis of its effect on victims from various cultural groups remains to be unveiled. This study analyzes dilemmas that face mental health workers when dealing with rape victims within a specific cultural context—namely, Palestinian society. It demonstrates the multidimensionality of the crime and the intricacy of social reactions to rape, the rape victim, and abuse of women, deriving from a sociocultural need to protect and/or control victims. The in-depth analysis suggests that sociocultural determinants, such as the need to silence the occurrence of the rape, preserve female virginity, and privatize the crime in order to safeguard family honor and reputation, revictimizes and weakens the victim. This article argues that there is no universal method of dealing with rape victims and that professionals who are assisting victims of rape need to anchor their efforts within the cultural context, while at the same time treating each victim as a world unto herself. This calls for rethinking at both the sociopolitical and individual levels. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Societies, cultures, and religions differ in their reactions to crimes against women. A given society’s perception of such criminal acts is related to the nature of the society, to the status it confers upon women and to the accepted boundaries of their permissible behavior. Moreover, the values, beliefs, and practices pertaining to all aspects of sexuality are apt to change over time; behaviors defined as immoral in a given period can be considered criminal or pathological in a different era.

The present study examines predominant attitudes toward women and rape in a specific setting and point of history: contemporary Palestinian society. Based on actual cases of rape, it emphasizes the importance of examining and understanding the underlying sociocultural and political context when attempting to deal with and offer help to rape victims. In doing so, this article aims to clarify the impact of sociocultural factors upon the social and psychological reaction of the client, and, in turn, of the helper. Moreover, it stresses the need for mental health workers to look at society’s response in terms of (a) the gender variables affecting the status of the victim before the act of rape, (b) the way this status influences and in some cases controls the social reaction to rape, and (c) how this reaction impacts upon the helping process.

The main intention of this article is to show that there is no universal method of dealing with rape victims and that helping professionals need to anchor their efforts in the cultural context. The importance of studying rape from a culture-sensitive perspective is supported by Richard Quinney’s (1972) claim that personal and social values shape our concept of the victim, and that the victim is actually a social construct used as a means of social control by those in power. Indeed, early work on victimology has shown that: “Responsibility for one’s conduct is a changing concept, and its interpretation is a true mirror of the social, cul-
tural, and political conditions of the given era” (Schafer, 1968, p. 4).

It is the social values that shape our concept of the victims and, therefore, our ways of helping and intervening. It is my contention that efforts to change these values should not be made at the expense of the victim. Rather, the helper needs to be aware of the different power structures that affect social policy as well as the sociocultural construct of the victim. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that, even within a specific sociocultural context, no single model of intervention should be imposed indiscriminately; rather, the uniqueness of each case needs to be taken into consideration.

**CROSS-CULTURAL LITERATURE ON RAPE**

The relation between rape and a patriarchal, gender-biased perception of women’s status has long been a topic of controversy among researchers. While early work on rape (e.g., Amir, 1971) tended to blame the victim, later studies have pointed to the effect of rape myths, prejudicial stereotypes, and misconceptions on the ways in which legal and social actors relate to the crime (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Field, 1978; Griffin, 1979). More to the point, they have emphasized the importance of understanding the patriarchal setting and its impact on criminal acts that subordinate women. Brownmiller (1975), in her book *Against Our Will*, states that rape “is nothing more than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (p. 5). This patriarchal intimidation tends to weaken women’s self-esteem and social achievement and empowers traditional gender roles that are translated into social policy. A gender-biased perception of the victim shifts responsibility for her protection from society to the woman herself (Clark & Lewis, 1977; Field, 1978; Williams & Holmes, 1981). Perceived responsibility for rape mirrors the social, cultural, and political conditions of a given society (Field, 1978; Williams, 1984).

Cross-national research has shown that cultural differences—in terms of public misconceptions of rape and acceptance of rape myths—significantly correlate with restrictive beliefs about the social roles and rights of women (Costin & Schwartz, 1987; Fisher, 1987). In a case in Sri Lanka (Wijayatilalke, 1990, cited in Schuler, 1992) those in power acted as if the crime of rape had never occurred and punished the woman for asking for help. Wijayatilalke (1990, cited in Schuler, 1992, p. 8) tells of a woman who complained to a police officer that she was raped by security guards when she went to a government office. The guards, who were friends of the police officer, claimed that the woman had been loitering, and she was subsequently arrested under the Vagrancy Ordinance for prostitution.

Recently, we have been witnessing growing interest in the relation between the study of rape and sociocultural and legal policies (Barkas, 1970; Kanekar & Kolsawalla, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966; Schultz, 1975). In the West, rape entered the law books by the back door as a property crime against men (Dowd Hall, 1995). In the Mexican system, even though rape is treated as a crime, its legal definition does not include forms of sexual assault other than vagino-penile penetration. Thus, a woman who files a rape charge must produce physical proof of forced vaginal intercourse obtained through a legally approved physical examination. Moreover, if a man marries a minor female he raped, he cannot be prosecuted for the crime. In this way, the legal definition of rape victimizes and blames women seeking legal redress and fails to protect their rights (Cox, 1992).

Thompson and West (1992) clarified the importance of a cultural definition of rape and its sociolegal implications in that it affects the victim’s self-perception, assessment of the event and decision to seek treatment. For example, they found that the African American woman’s tendency to seek help may depend on her assessment of community response regarding rape treatment. Lees (1994), analyzing the effect of legal intervention in Britain, claimed that victims are further traumatized by the judicial system—what she terms *judicial rape*. Bourque (1989) described how the victim becomes emotionally wounded not only by the terrifying experience of the assault itself, but also by the internalization of public attitudes and cultural values regarding the victim; this is likely to diminish her self-concept and psychosocial functioning. In other words, the definition of rape and the social response may become an integral part of the victimization (Williams, 1984).
WOMEN AND SEXUALITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

As elsewhere, the social reaction to rape in the Arab world is strongly related to perceptions of women’s status and sexuality. In Arab culture, sexuality is considered a very private matter, closed to open discourse and inappropriate for the socialization of children. Hence an Arab, especially a female, is perceived as asexual until marriage. Moreover, her sexuality (particularly if she is unmarried) is perceived as an obstacle and a constant threat to her family’s reputation and honor.

This perception is compounded by the subordinate status of the woman in Arab society. In the private domain, this is affected by her role within a family that is traditional, extended, patriarchal, and hierarchical, encouraging endogamy (marriage between relatives) and allowing for polygamy (e.g., Al-Hassan, 1981; Patai, 1971; Prothro & Diab, 1974). This patriarchy has rendered women an inferior status (Sharabi, 1975), to the extent that the birth of males is preferred to that of females.

The nature of the Arab family also affects the woman’s status in the social and political sphere. The family is considered a social union that is the center of economic and social activities, built on the basis of cooperation and commitment (e.g., Barakat, 1984) in a hierarchy determined by sex and age. The preference of males over females restricts women to the private realm and determines their continuous economic dependency on their male relatives (be it the father, brother, husband, or any other male member of the extended family). This subordination has been translated into legal and cultural codes, leading to an emphasis on early marriage and a focus on the woman’s honor as the main issue that directs and influences social reactions toward any behavior by or against her. Arab women are perceived as the property of men, whom they need for protection (Ahmed, 1992; Al-Saadawi, 1975, 1982; Barakat, 1984; Mernissi, 1987; Said, 1970), a perception that leads to further control and subordination.

Many have pointed to a duality in the perception of the Arab woman’s status. For instance, Fouad Zakaria (1988), analyzing Muslim Fundamentalist perceptions toward women, refers to a duality of women’s emancipation and slavery, of sentiment and reason, of spirit and body, and of how men are perceived. Nawal Al-Saadawi, the well-known Egyptian writer, argues that the need to protect male domination and power has brought about a moral duality in the Arab countries regarding relations between men and women, particularly in respect to women’s sexuality (Al-Saadawi, 1977, 1982). In some circumstances, Arab society perceives women as weak, fragile creatures who need the protection and help of men; in others, women are seen as strong, evil devils against whom society needs protection. Fouad Zakaria (1988) emphasizes the confusion in Arab social and cultural discourse regarding the woman’s sexuality, reflected in an exclusively sex-oriented view of the female, one that gives overwhelming importance to her sexual life, which in turn has prevented women from developing in both the sociocultural and economic spheres (see also Sabbah, 1984).

The factors underlying this dualistic perception of women have been a topic of interest to researchers. Some have highlighted the role played by the religious Islamic background of Arab society (e.g., Sabbah, 1984; Zakaria, 1988). Others see the dual and inferior status of women as a misinterpretation of Islam. For example, Mernissi (1987) argues with Fouad Zakaria’s (1988) perception, stating that neither the Prophet Mohammed nor Allah, as the sources of Shari’a (Islamic canon law), desire anything other than equality. She asserts: “How did tradition succeed in transforming the Muslim woman into that submissive, marginal creature who buries herself in her veil? Why does the Muslim man need such a mutilated companion?” (Mernissi, 1987, p. 194). She believes that “The answer without doubt is to be found in the time mirror wherein the Muslim looks at himself to foresee his future. The image of ‘his’ woman will change when he feels the pressing need to root his future in a liberating memory” (Mernissi, 1987, p. 195).

Some sociologists attribute the subordination of Arab women to social, economic, and cultural factors (for more details, see Al-Said, 1967; Barakat, 1984). In Arab cultural codes and norms, honor is much more than a measure of the individual woman’s moral quality: it reflects upon the entire family and its relations to the community (Warnock, 1990). Therefore, insults to a family’s honor must be avenged in kind or in material compensation.
On the one hand, this emphasis highlights society’s responsibility to safeguard women so as to protect family honor; on the other, when such honor is violated, the female victim is perceived as having failed to protect herself, and she is forced to pay the ultimate price so as to preserve her family honor (e.g., by having to marry the rapist, or even being killed). This dualistic perspective has not only caused further discrimination and subordination of women; it has created a social atmosphere in which people are afraid to discuss any abuse of women (be it sexual or societal).

It must be noted that the low status of women in the Arab world has not been taken at face value. Rather, it was criticized by liberal voices as much as 100 years ago, when Kasem Amin (1970), a pioneering Egyptian thinker, wrote a book on women’s liberation, calling upon all Arabs, regardless of gender, to reject the ascription of inferiority to women and search for better ways to deal with women. In a more recent work, Khaleda Said (1970), author of The Arab Woman: Creature Without an Entity, has elaborated on and argued against the historical discrimination and devaluation of Arab women.

Ahmed (1992) claims that there have been changes in the Muslim perception of women: most Middle Eastern nations have moved or are moving toward adopting the new international political language of human and political rights and toward according these rights to women as well as to men. Yet, despite efforts toward change, Islamic family law remains patriarchal. These laws, which govern men’s and women’s rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody, are perceived as the cornerstone of the system of male privilege set up by establishment Islam (Ahmed, 1992). In addition, the Islamization of the penal code, and in particular the laws governing conviction and punishment for adultery and rape, has had appalling consequences for women. Four adult male Muslim eyewitnesses are required to convict anyone of adultery or rape, and the testimony of women for either is excluded. Women who accuse men of rape or who become pregnant are thus open to punishment for adultery, while men go unpunished for lack of evidence. Moghaizel (1986) pointed to discriminatory legislative measures dealing with what is termed crimes of honor in some Arab countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia). She found that, while the penal code condemned the murderer of a woman, allowances were made if the homicide was related to a crime of honor, and the killer could receive a reduced sentence or even avoid punishment altogether.

**WOMEN AND SEXUALITY IN PALESTINIAN SOCIETY**

As part of the Arab world, Palestinian women have faced the same oppressive patriarchal forces mentioned above, affecting the social perception and definition of their role in society. At the same time, their status has been elevated somewhat as a result of the unique political history of Palestinians, characterized by life in the diaspora and under occupation. Within this context, Palestinian women have taken an active role in the political struggle of their nation, especially during the Intifada (popular uprising). This has changed social perceptions about the importance of the woman’s role in society in general and in the national political struggle in particular. Sayigh (1992, p. 24), for instance, discusses the means Palestinian women have used in their struggle for the education of girls, the abolition of arranged marriages, the right to rear their own children, the right of access to “male” professions, and the right to form or join public bodies. Moreover, the Intifada has brought nearer the prospect of the Palestinian state, and gender equality has been included in the state’s Declaration of Independence (November, 1988). Although it was generally felt that the political situation had a positive effect on the status of the Palestinian women, some researchers (see, e.g., Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1993, 1998) have cautioned that the Intifada served to further victimize and abuse them.

Notwithstanding the active role Palestinian women have taken in the political struggle, their status continues to fall below that of their male counterparts, mainly because their lives remain framed in an ideology of family, honor, and chastity (Warnock, 1990). Here, too, a dualistic perception of women is observable. On the one hand, women are admired for their power in the political struggle—they are ukh al rijal (the sister of men), or as the proverb
goes, *mar’a bi-miit zalameh* (“a woman is equal to a hundred men”). On the other, this very activism is feared owing to the intense sociocultural importance ascribed to women’s purity and honor. By participating in the struggle, Palestinian women could become open to exploitation and abuse by the enemy. The continuous political oppression has not only raised social sensitivity to the need to prevent violation of women’s purity, but sometimes even led to fear and paranoia of sexual abuse and rape. A study conducted during the Intifada showed that fear of sexual harassment and rape and, in turn, of losing family honor, was an extremely stressful factor, particularly during political disturbances (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1993). It should be noted that social discourse on the sexual abuse of women for political reasons (*al-iskat*) has reinforced this dualistic perception of the women’s role: while women’s organizations and social activists emphasize the need to empower women socially and politically, family members take special measures to protect their women from outsiders—for example (according to the author’s clinical experience), imposing early marriage on their daughters or forcing them to become religious and wear the veil.

In sum, despite changes in women’s status and role in both the Arab world in general and Palestinian society in particular, women are still considered a politically and culturally sensitive issue, and societal perceptions of them remain contradictory and ambiguous, particularly with regard to their sexuality. This, in turn, renders women an inferior status, which has been translated into discriminatory legal and social regulations that contribute to their oppression and subordination.

With this background in mind, the present study points to the need to consider social acts in general, and the crime of rape in particular, in terms of the sociocultural, legal, and political apparatuses of a given society in a given period of time. Specifically, this article argues that definitions of and responses to rape victims are a product of public attitudes within the society in question. While the crime itself is not a culture-specific phenomenon, it is shaped, defined, and reacted to differently in different cultures. Thus, a sociocultural and politically sensitive analysis could not only contribute to the understanding of rape, but also help in building culture-sensitive policies to combat such crimes.

**THE STUDY**

This study derives from the clinical experience of the author in working with Palestinian rape victims living in the Israeli occupied territories of the West Bank (East Jerusalem included) and the Gaza Strip. It is based on in-depth analysis of the content and context of 22 case studies of raped women who sought the author’s assistance personally, or who were brought to her attention through the hot-line service she established for Palestinian women in distress. Hence, the cases that form the basis for this study could be construed as a sample of convenience. It also should be noted here that no data are available on the number of cases of females who are raped but do not seek help. The article scrutinizes the factors affecting the decision-making process when dealing with the trauma of rape. Moreover, it examines the alternatives offered to victims and resources available to cope with the problem. Its main thrust is on the way the sociocultural context imposes moral/ethical dilemmas that impinge upon the after-effects of the crime. It also focuses on the difficulty of adopting a “universal” method of dealing with rape that is applicable to all cultures.

*The role of definition in shaping the reaction*

I was alone in the house. It was a very cold day, and I was cleaning the house and singing a national song that I like, which tells about the need to carry on with our heads raised high, asking for peace and freedom. Suddenly I heard a knock on the door. I thought it was Mom coming back from the market. I ran to open the door for her so I could take the heavy shopping bags from her tired hands. But it wasn’t Mom . . . It was our neighbor Wajeeh who wanted to borrow sugar. I went to the kitchen to get him some sugar and did not think much of the request because we borrow things from them when we need to.

Wajeeh followed me into the kitchen and began to stare at my body. Suddenly he wres-
tled me to the floor and climbed on top of me. It did not take much effort, since I am only 10 years old and he is 19. I was so scared . . . I tried to stop him . . . but I lost my voice, I lost all my power. I think I've lost all my power ever since. He pulled down my skirt and pants and did something very painful to me. He then got up and left me on the floor.

While he was on his way out, Mom and my eldest brother (15 years old) came home. They knew what happened from the moment they looked at him and at me. They both started beating me, and I thought they were going to kill me. They kept repeating “In-shallah tmuti” [it is best for you to die].

From that day, I became a prisoner of the house, a prisoner of fear. No one knew about my rape except my Mom and brother and Wajeel’s parents. They didn’t want to tell my Dad because they were afraid he would kill both Wajeel and me. They all agreed that I would remain at home until I reach the age of 14, when I will able to marry Wajeel legally.

My Mom said that I am fortunate to be alive. She said that Wajeel’s parents were good to agree to my parents’ proposition of forcing him to marry me. Mom keeps blaming me for dishonoring my family and curses the moment she gave birth to me. My whole family keeps asking: “Why did you open the door?”

I am so angry at myself . . . I keep blaming myself for being imprisoned in the house and not playing with my girlfriends or going to school. Oh God. Why did I open the door?

This story powerfully exemplifies how the very sociocultural definition and perception of a “raped girl” (or woman) shapes and constructs the social reaction. The victim’s status is extremely low, and her feelings, interests, and future are discussed only within the context of the impact the event has on her family. The focus is not on the victim’s needs, her agony or her psychological trauma, but rather on her family’s societal trauma. The battle becomes one between families. The power of the idea of “family honor,” as well as the need to protect and preserve it, defines the victim’s status and rights and frames the options that are open to deal with the problem—in this case, marrying her own rapist.

Within this context, direct overt blame is placed on the victim for having been raped. As this 10-year-old’s father cannot blame her explicitly, because he must remain “unaware” of events (otherwise, family honor would dictate that he take radical action against his daughter and her assailant), he ascribes responsibility for the “catastrophe” to another female—his wife. The girl’s mother constantly repeats his harsh words to her daughter: “An honorable woman knows how to raise her daughters. Mothers are to be held responsible for any dishonorable behavior by their daughters.” In this way, the young girl and her mother are continually blamed for the dishonor to themselves and to their entire family.

Another illustration that clarifies the social response to the rape victim involves a case in which the father argued with the doctor for hymen repair, one of the alternatives considered acceptable for dealing with the outcome of such crimes. When informed that surgical repair was impossible in this instance, the father’s response was: “How am I going to face the public? . . . In our culture, we say Waitha bulitum fastatiru [if you are faced with misery or calamity, cover it]. There are only two ways to hide the calamity: one is to kill my daughter; the other is to perform the hymen repair and not tell anybody about the incident. If you won’t do the hymen repair, you’ll be the reason for her death. This is a waliiee [dependent female] with broken wings.”

Categorizing an abused individual as “female” goes beyond gender identification; it is a definition that carries social, cultural, economic, and political connotations. Being a raped woman reinforces these connotations and carries even more intense social myths. Owing to her sociocultural background, the Palestinian victim is virtually always held responsible for her victimization. Even if she is not, she is still the one who pays the ultimate price in order to deal with such a crime.

The honor of virginity or the virginity of honor

In all cases in the study, victims were obsessed about whether they had lost their virginity (whether the hymen was damaged). To them, this meant losing all they had. In one
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A client who had lost her husband on their wedding night (marriage not consummated), but who was raped subsequently, had an anxiety attack following our discussion of virginity. She said:

You mean, I lost my virginity? When my husband died on my wedding day, I was not as upset as I am now. All I was proud of was that he died, but I stayed a virgin. He didn’t touch me. Everyone kept saying, “she is still a *binet*” [a virgin, as opposed to *marah*, a non-virgin woman]. It was the only thing left for me to be proud of after my husband’s death. It was the only hope, and I’ve lost it. I had nothing except my virginity.

The supreme importance of staying a virgin is clearly illustrated by the mother of a 15-year-old girl who was raped without full penetration. The result was that the victim became pregnant, yet she was still technically a virgin. When the mother learned from the doctor that her daughter was still a virgin, she asked him whether he could perform the abortion without losing the hymen. The doctor agreed to abort by means of a cesarean section. The suffering of the victim and the amount of pain she had to endure were disregarded. The main issue was to rescue the hymen. The mother eventually convinced her daughter that saving her hymen was of utmost importance.

Virginity also played a significant role in the case of a woman who was raped by her fiancé in an attempt to force her to marry him. She explained to me that he knew the mentality of the people in her society. They would accept and rationalize the marriage because she had lost her virginity:

After I was raped, I became a second-hand, used thing. Nobody would agree to marry a second-hand woman. He knew that by opening me [an Arabic word denoting the first sexual intercourse in which the female loses her virginity], I would have no choice but to agree to marry him.

The emphasis placed on virginity can get so extreme that the victim, or her family members, feel that its loss removes her reason to live. In one case, a 16-year-old raped by one of her newly married cousins was driven to attempt suicide by her loss of virginity, as well as by her pain and her fear of telling others. Following her first suicide attempt, she stated:

Nothing is left for a girl after she loses her virginity. All I see is my deep need to die and to run away from my shame (*a’ar*). He forced himself on me, and I couldn’t even stop him. Death is the best solution for dirty girls like me. How can I look in my father’s eyes without feeling the shame and fear? How can I look into my mother’s eyes when I know that she’s planned for my wedding all her life? What is she going to do with all the embroidery she prepared for my wedding? There is nothing I can tell them . . . . all I can do is kill myself and bury the secret of my rape with me.

The victims themselves are not the only ones who consider death as a “solution” to the problem of their rape; their caregivers also share the same perception. In one case, a 17-year-old victim ran away from home because her uncle knew about the rape. As she related to the hot-line service in tears and considerable pain:

They want to kill me . . . they want to burn me and throw me in the well. . . . I haven’t done anything bad to anybody. . . . Do you think I should be slaughtered . . . should I be killed, do you think I deserve that? I didn’t know what rape is. I didn’t know what his act meant, and he is my oldest brother, my own brother . . . it never crossed my mind that he would ever hurt me. Today, when my uncle asked him, he said that he suspected I am having an affair with someone. How could he do such a thing to me? . . . When he said I am having an affair, I knew this was my end. I feel like he’s killed me . . . I ran away because I am scared of dying. . . . But I know one day they will kill me . . . I have no other choice but to be killed. . . . Do I?

**Neutralizing social responsibility and criminalizing the victim**

In most of the cases studied (20 out of 22), both the victim and her family stressed that the social and legal reaction to the rape would focus blame on the victim and her family. In one case, the brother of one victim stated: “People have no mercy, and if anyone ever learns of the rape, that will be the end for the whole
family. I will never be able to find a husband for my daughters, and the shame and dishonor will stay with us as long as we live.”

Even in the single case in which the victim felt she was not to be blamed and was willing to turn to informal social control agents to punish the rapist, her mother’s and brother’s reaction was a point-blank refusal to ask for external intervention. In the words of her brother: “This is our problem, our mussiba [catastrophe]. We wish she were dead. I wish the earth would crack open and swallow me up. Anything but to be in this situation.”

The hardships and fear of social disgrace following public knowledge of the crime is salient in one victim’s story:

I was in my aunt’s house. Her son Salim was a very calm and good looking man. My mom always wanted him to marry me. When we were making cookies for the feast, my aunt asked me to go to the storage room, in the lower level of the house, and bring semolina. I went there. On my way out, Salim came. He started talking to me and telling me that he adores me. He asked me to come back to the storage room, he wanted to discuss something very important with me. I went upstairs, gave them the semolina, made a couple of things, and then went back to Salim. Salim was waiting for me. He started hugging me, telling me that he wants to marry me. I told him that I love him too. We both agreed to meet the next day. We met four times. On the fifth time, he went too far and he was very violent. He raped me. I didn’t scream or shout, I was scared that my aunt and the family would discover us. I left the storage room, and Salim never approached me. Two weeks later, I met him in my uncle’s house. I asked him to marry me, and he said that I am mara ra-khisaa [a cheap trashy woman], and he is not interested. A month later, he got engaged to my own sister. I couldn’t find a way to tell anyone in my family. I tried to hint to my mother, but her reaction was hai ismi wenasib, this is fate.

I know I am responsible, I know that no one will understand the circumstances. I lost my pride, my virginity, my whole future. Now I will spend my life paying the price for my mistake. I must refuse to marry, I have nothing to offer anyone. Worse than that, I have to see him with my sister, and not be able to tell her that he was my love. To tell her that he is a criminal, he stole all I have, and now he is stealing her from me, and building her life on a lie. A big bad, killing lie.

I am responsible. I lost all I own, all I have. I lost myself.

Even though she is aware that her rapist committed a crime and is responsible for his actions, this victim is convinced that no one will understand or support her. In fact, she considers herself responsible as well: the act of meeting a man alone, even her own cousin, is against social, cultural, and religious norms in Palestinian society. She now sees her choice to meet with him, because she believed his declarations of love, as a reflection of her own misjudgment, as choosing the wrong and sinful path. More ominously, the victim feels that she will have to pay for her “mistake” the remainder of her life.

The strong feeling of self-blame, repeated by virtually every victim studied, together with the fear of telling anyone (including father, mother, or other close relative), is indicative that the crime of rape is experienced as more of a personal, female problem than a sociocultural or political one requiring formal social intervention. The need to personalize and feminize the problem, rather than criminalize, legalize, and publicize it, is affected by the social definition and perception of rape and its victims. One of the women in the study aptly described the situation: “No one ever asked me how I feel or how I spend my nights. All they kept asking is what did you wear, why did you open the door, why didn’t you defend yourself? Couldn’t you scream?” Social reaction to the rape is based on the amount of social harm the crime imposes on the collective honor. This concentration on social harm causes members of Palestinian society to question the victim’s behavior (how she dressed and walked, why she left the house, why she did not wear a veil) rather than examine the offender’s criminal act. Indeed, in order to accept the fact that a crime of rape has actually happened, evidence is demanded of the victim (screams, signs of a struggle) rather than against the offender. These and other questions make it almost impossible to obtain legal
The moral dilemma of speaking up

Speaking up means the ability and desirability of the victim to tell family members (internal resources) or external social resources (social workers, therapists, police) that she has been raped and is in need of support and help. Only 2 of the 22 victims interviewed shared the trauma of their rape with some other person before turning to the clinician; the remainder were apprehensive and reluctant to inform anyone. The helpers, for their part, basically dealt with all 22 cases in a confidential and discreet manner. In deciding whether or not to speak up, the main concern was the need to safeguard the victim’s life, as the fear of being killed was present in all cases. The crime was disclosed only when the helper was confident that informing family members (those who may be supportive) would not pose any risk to the victim.

Victims expressed a clear reluctance to speak out to state officials, who represent their political enemy (Israeli authorities in occupied territories). The interviewees constantly voiced their unwillingness to turn to the Israeli police for fear of being further abused and victimized. One stated that she heard a story from one of her schoolmates about a girl who had told a local police officer that she was being physically abused by her father. She was then sexually abused by the police officer himself for political reasons, in order to enlist her as a collaborator. She felt responsible for imprisoning five shabab (young political activists) as a result of her collaboration with the Israeli intelligence services. Given that the data for this study was collected prior to the Oslo agreement and the advent of the Palestinian Authority, it is difficult to ascertain whether this reluctance to speak to officials will be maintained.

Victims also exhibited immense fear of seeking the help of informal social control agents, such as prominent persons in the community (e.g., heads of clans and social conciliators), as this increased the risk of social disgrace and dishonor to their families and endangered their lives. One victim explained her silence as follows: “If the mukhtar (clan leader) ever finds out, not only will I be killed, but all my sisters will pay the price of my mistake. Everyone in the village will refuse to marry any of the girls in the family, and that’s in addition to the high probability that my father will divorce my mother . . . and God knows who else will be divorced.”

Disclosure of the rape, even to close family members, has far-reaching repercussions for the entire family—nuclear and extended family alike. Many marriages in Palestinian society are of reciprocal exchange (i.e., willingness to offer a female member of one family to a male of another family is conditional on the willingness of the other family to offer one of its female members in return). Moreover, many of these marriages involve a union between close relatives, especially cousins. In the words of one victim: “If anyone knows about my calamity, I will destroy all chances for my sisters and close female relatives to get married. If people know about my rape, no one will be willing to come close to us, or become a close relative.”

The situation is exacerbated further because, in most cases of rape, the offender is a close relative. Hence, it is difficult for family members to take an objective stance regarding the rape. In one of the cases encountered, two families were divided between supporters of the victim and supporters of the offender. Men married to women whose families supported the “opposition” divorced their wives—sisters, aunts, or close relatives of either the victim or the offender:

I feel so bad. My aunt will get divorced and be deprived of her children because she is my father’s sister. My own sister is married to the rapist’s uncle, and I am sure she faces the same destiny. As a counter reaction, my brother might have to send his wife back to her family and threaten to divorce her. My uncle might do the same . . . I tried my best not to speak out or ask the assistance of any of my family members . . . I knew that I should protect those who love and have stood by me all my life, but I never thought that I would end up causing the pain of divorce to so many men and women in my own family.

Another factor contributing to the victims’ silence was their fear of male family members. This is best exemplified by the story of a 16-year-old rape victim, who called the hot-line asking for help to get an abortion. She ex-
Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian explained that she would be killed if she disclosed the crime to anyone in her family. Her eldest sister had been severely beaten by her brother simply because he saw her talking in the street with a male classmate; he considered this improper behavior that defamed the family honor. She explained how harsh and strict their father is, and how much her mother fears him. Therefore, she did not trust her mother to keep her secret. She believed that her mother would tell her father, who would in turn kill her and perhaps her rapist. The neighbors would then shun them. As her brothers and father are highly respected people in the area, she was afraid of causing any harm to their efforts to build their reputations.

As shown clearly in the previously cited cases, the ability to disclose the trauma is affected by the sociocultural message that advocates maintaining such information as confidentially as possible. The common “solution” of hymen repair is largely indicative of a sociocultural need to silence the abuse, provide the facade that it never occurred and allow the victim to marry without being accused of being a nonvirgin. The need to privatize and keep the abuse a secret is meant to protect not only the victim, but other family members (particularly females) from the social stigma of crimes of honor.

One particular case is notable because it serves as the exception to the above rule. It involves a 20-year-old woman who was savagely raped by her fiancé after she tried to oppose the betrothal that had been forced upon her. Several attempts at suicide led her parents to support her rejection of the groom, who interpreted such rejection as a threat to his manhood (tiksir rejoultu). To avenge this perceived damage to his manhood, the fiancé, with the help of his brothers, not only kidnapped and raped the woman, but also spilled acid on her face and body in order to scar her permanently. The victim was unable to talk, see, or otherwise communicate with anyone for more than a week following her trauma and suffered a severe nervous breakdown.

The horrendousness of the act evoked a severe reaction within the village, community, political circles, and women’s organizations and factions. Not only was there public support for the victim, but the offender and his family were subjected to extreme punitive measures. The entire vineyard of the offender’s family was destroyed and monetary compensation was awarded to the victim. Furthermore, the offender and his accomplices were evicted from the village permanently.

As for the girl, a women’s organization managed to hospitalize her, enabling her to rest and attend to her physical and psychological injuries. One of the main factors that eventually helped her cope with the trauma was the intervention of the Women’s Legal Aid and Counseling Center, which encouraged family members, and particularly the girl’s parents, to provide continuous support, love, and care. In this case, despite the pain and embarrassment caused to the family by the crime, and even though three family members divorced their wives as a result, disclosure of the crime helped the victim to cope.

DISCUSSION

The topic of rape and its effects is an intricate, multidimensional one. As the case studies have shown, social, cultural, and political variables play major roles in defining and coping with acts of rape in Palestinian society. Of particular salience is how prevailing patriarchal and sexist attitudes within that society are reflected in its manner of dealing with rape. Social reaction is heavily influenced by such cultural values as family honor, social shame, family reputation, and female virginity. The usage of such terms is a covert method of further political, social, and cultural degradation of women. Thus, the findings point to the importance of the sociocultural context in cases of rape, rendering the definition of the victim as a social construct (Quinney, 1972).

The social definition of rape has also had some bearing on the applied (Jordanian) legal code: it has transformed the definition of rape from a criminal offence to a crime of honor (mainly the honor of males). Although rape offenders may receive capital punishment if convicted, the unwritten legal code permits killing the victim in order to “cleanse” the disgrace, shame, and dishonor brought on her family. The legal code allows judges to reduce sentences of offenders who justify their criminal act according to “honor-related” excuses. Furthermore, criminal justice officials generally sympathize with such offenders. In other words, the written and unwritten codes com-
promise the life of the victim to restore (male) honor.

There is a contradiction between the definition of society, the family, and, particularly, males as the victims of rape, versus the need to focus on the true victim and her psychological state and emotional needs. This contradiction makes the process of helping and assisting rape victims a major dilemma. Helpers are forced to walk a thin line. On the one hand, in order to help the raped woman, the clinician needs to take into consideration existing sociocultural means and resources—values (e.g., family honor), beliefs (female purity), characteristics of the family (patriarchal), family members who could lend support. On the other hand, consideration of these very factors tends to encourage silencing of the victim and denial of the crime, owing to the heavy social consequences of publicizing the event. This, in turn, makes it difficult for mental health workers to help promote and heal the victim’s psychological state of mind. Focusing on the cultural values of “honor” and “shame” predisposes the victim and helper to search for alternative solutions (e.g., not disclosing the event, hymen repair) other than those dictated by professional protocol (e.g., seeking legal action) or personal desire (e.g., punishing the offender).

The sociocultural context was found to have strong power not only over the definition of the crime and its victims, but also over viable coping strategies. Social, cultural, and political milieus were found to be so intensely oppressive that any proposed solution becomes a two-edged sword. In order to better understand this effect on the helping process, we now focus on three main dilemmas (preserving victim’s life, hymen repair, voicing out) that both victims and helpers faced in coping with such a crime. These dilemmas not only made healing a slow and very painful process, but also sent an implicit message to females that if faced with such a problem, they are to be blamed and punished.

Preserving the victim’s life: A two-edged sword

The helper’s task of offering legal, familial, and psychological aid to rape victims was found to contradict the need to protect their lives. Although nondisclosure of the rape protects the woman from the threat of death, it also sends an implicit message to the rapist that his crime will go unpunished. Furthermore, it absolves society of the responsibility of dealing with such crimes. Hence, the question of whether to solicit the support of the family or community was a problematic issue, especially to the victim. Victims were preoccupied with the threat of being killed, and demanded measures to ensure that their lives would not be compromised. At the same time, the focus helpers placed on preserving the victim’s life hindered their efforts to seek social support for her. The loss of social support and assistance made victims further blame and hate themselves, feeling totally alone, without understanding or sympathy from those closest to them. These feelings of neglect, fear, and loneliness increased victims’ vulnerability and sense of helplessness, leading them to develop severe anxiety and depression symptoms, even pushing some to attempt suicide. Such strong feelings are aptly reflected in one victim’s words:

I wish I could scream and shout; I wish I could ask my father to hug me and promise he will protect me, he will avenge me; I wish I could tell my brother so that he would kill him, and in turn I will regain my honor, my dignity; I wish I could share the pain of my
rape with my mother; I wish someone could cry with me . . . I wish . . . I wish, but why wish? . . . I am not even allowed to cry. I am talking only to myself. I wish I was killed. Being killed is easier than carrying all this pain alone. I wish I was killed, but I feel I am already dead.

Such a feeling of utter isolation was also expressed by victims who underwent hymen repair—another measure used to “erase” the crime and spare the victim’s life. One victim who got married 2 months following the repair of her hymen expressed anger that, in order to safeguard her life and that of all females in her family, she needs to keep this horrible secret from her own beloved husband. This anger caused her to suffer continuously from depression and psychosomatic illnesses. Her helpers were trapped between the need to work with her husband and family in order to help her cope with her trauma, on the one hand, and the need to hide the rape, on the other, for fear that its disclosure could cause familial discord and much suffering to many people involved.

Clearly, the trauma of rape entails not only the psychological burden carried by the Palestinian victim, but also public attitudes that painfully affect how she is perceived and treated by others (Al-Saadawi, 1983). In her book *Women at Point Zero*, Al-Saadawi (1975) showed how the internalization of social expectations of females defines and dictates even the feelings of the victim’s close relatives. Hence, the dilemma lies in the fact that, by preventing the killing of rape victims, one does not necessarily prevent psychological and emotional wounds. On the contrary, in the attempt to preserve the victim’s physical life, the helper often felt she was jeopardizing the raped woman’s psychological well-being.

**Hymen repair: A two-edged sword**

The issue of hymen repair is an excellent example of the importance of female virginity in Palestinian society. The great weight placed by the victim upon restoration of the hymen is a culturally internalized value that reflects not only her perception of the importance of the hymen, but more so the social beliefs regarding the cultural value that virginity carries in society. The social panic that might follow any case of rape made victims focus on the issue of hymen repair, a procedure intended to save her and her family from the social disgrace that could ensue if the crime becomes publicized.

This is a clear example of how the woman’s sexuality and body affect and control her past, present, and future. Similar situations can be found in other cultures and societies. For example, when Iranians wanted to execute women for supporting the Shah, they first raped them to prevent them from going to heaven (as they believe that a virgin always goes to heaven). Malaysian families have a greater tendency to blame the victim, feel more ashamed, keep the rape event secret and even alienate the victim when she is a nonvirgin (Fernandez, 1992). Families and friends in such societies feel that the nonvirgin victim created guilt, shame, and fear, and that her marriage marketability and future could be greatly affected. In our case study, it was clear that for victims and their family members, the loss of virginity was as painful as the loss of life. Social reaction to the violation of virginity and family honor shook the social stability and threatened the power and control of patriarchy. Male family members felt the need to restore the social stability and their weakened power through measures such as forcing the rapist to marry the victim, killing the victim, or as one father put it: “wiping her off the face of the earth” (*amh’iha a’an waf’h al-basita*).

The focal need to silence the abuse by reconstructing the hymen presents a tremendous dilemma for therapists in the Palestinian setting. The importance placed on repairing the hymen makes the healing and coping process more difficult. By mourning over the loss of her hymen, the victim is retraumatized. The only means to help her cope with this trauma is to suggest surgical reconstruction of the hymen. Recommendations of hymen repair, however, constitute indirect endorsement of the importance of virginity—a cultural issue that needs to be confronted. They reinforce the view that a woman is worthless once she loses her virginity. Yet, while feminists may not consider hymen repair as therapy, it must be seen in the Palestinian context as one of the only alternatives available to preserve and protect the life of the victim.

While fully aware of the importance of restoring the hymen, helpers also knew that such
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A procedure could induce additional stress and anxiety, increasing feelings of degradation. As one woman aptly put it: “After I got to the clinic, I started crying non-stop. I was so scared and frightened... It was so hard for me to sit in that chair... to open my legs once more against my will... that for me was another kind of rape.” Another victim stated: “Every time I felt the stitches, I became more determined that the moment I leave the clinic, I will go directly and kill the rapist. It was his [the rapist’s] fortune on that day that I found my brother in his shop. Had my brother not been there, I would have definitely killed him and killed myself afterwards.” This problem is further complicated when clinicians suspect that the procedure is unsafe or could actually lead to revealing the victim’s secret, endangering her physical survival. Indeed, victims tended to perceive clinicians as potential sources of threat in the future, given that they are often the sole individuals who know about the abuse and could use this knowledge to blackmail the victims.

The victim’s acceptance of the need to undergo this painful operation for sociocultural reasons beyond her control is based on her belief that by regaining her virginity she can return to a normal lifestyle without the threat of death (looming over her head). Thus, hymen repair ought to be perceived as her sole savior from the trauma of rape and her only means of physical survival. On the other hand, any emphasis placed on this option weakens the victim and leads her to believe she is a hostage to her sexuality. It forces her to endure additional pain, while her attacker is relieved of all responsibility and avoids punishment.

Hymen repair is patriarchal by nature, reflecting men’s need to regain their honor. Such a reaction seems to reflect the refusal of the patriarchy to acknowledge its failure to safeguard and protect the female member of society. Hymen repair means that no one will know she was raped. When performed successfully, it means that there is no longer a problem. Other cultural and social alternatives for coping with rape—such as forced marriage, silencing of the victim, even killing her—seem to serve a similar purpose. All are aimed to protect the male from the social “shame” he faces if the incident is publicized. Thus, the problem here is not the victim’s suffering and pain, but rather that which will be caused by social reaction if the incident becomes known to the public.

Voicing out: a two-edged sword

To tell or not to tell was a question deliberated upon by helper and victim alike. The need of the raped woman to hide her victimization and trauma added more pain and agony to the criminal incident, as it led her to lose her voice. This loss of voice has been found to be true in other cultures and countries. For instance, Montano (1992) found that, in Bolivia, the victim tends to keep silent to avoid the psychological pain of criminal procedures and the physical pain of medical procedures. Mernissi (1987) claims that in the Arab world, women are socialized to hide things, for speaking up tends to further weaken their power. In A Diary of a Non-Realistic Woman, Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifa (1992) shows that Palestinian women are under continuous social and cultural pressures to refrain from voicing their inner pains and agonies. Cultural norms and values lead these women to the conclusion that it is best to conceal things. The art of keeping secrets and hiding behind lies is not a reflection of their weakness or evil, but rather reflects men’s failure to cope with the reality of women’s lives.

As the case studies have shown, Palestinian patriarchal cultural values, women’s status in the society, and the specific characteristics of the Arab-Palestinian family (i.e., the importance given to family honor, shame, family ties), together with the specificities of a given rape crime, made the victim’s and helper’s decision to speak out a very complicated and dangerous one. On the one hand, helpers felt that inaction and silence might protect the victim from being killed. On the other, not speaking out or publicizing the problem sends a message to the offender that he can repeat his crime without fear of punishment or social reprisal. In some cases, the therapist knew of the offender and knew he had raped other women in the past, yet was unable to reveal his name to the authorities and warn the public. In addition, failure to voice the trauma and cope with the crime on a personal/victim level was found to add pain to the raped woman. One victim stated: “What kills me is that I am not responsible. He did it because he wanted to fight and
put down my father (ye-watti rass abui), but I can’t say anything to anybody.” This caused frustration to the rape victim and gave her the indirect message that she is alone and cannot seek help. This feeling is deeply rooted in the cultural codes whereby a female who suffers from any crime against her honor cannot trust anyone, not even her closest relatives.

As mentioned earlier, there was one case in which the rape was made public and, owing to the horrendous circumstances (including kidnapping and scarrring the woman with acid), community support was widespread. Such understanding of the victim clearly cannot be achieved in all situations involving rape in Palestinian society, especially when the element of “blame” is unclear. In the above-mentioned case, it was clear in the minds of community members that the victim did not bear any responsibility for the rape because of the injuries she suffered and because her fiancé had accomplices. Hence, a conciliatory approach could be followed. Victims who do not incur physical injury are vulnerable to innuendoes and suspicions that they may have “provoked” the rape, or else did not resist it as fiercely as was expected of them.

In short, the question of speaking out and seeking support in the Palestinian context poses a dilemma. Given the nature of Palestinian society and its predicted social reaction to rape, helpers and victims were left with no alternative (at times) other than (to maintain) silence. Telling of the event exacts a heavy social price (perhaps even the life of the victim), but remaining silent deprives the victim of her voice, pain, and trauma and may impede her recovery. Advising a victim not to divulge a criminal act implies that her emotions and psychological state of mind are unimportant—that what matters is society’s reaction to the incident. If nobody knows about the crime, it is as if nothing ever happened. Not to tell is to suffer the agony of hiding a serious trauma. In the words of one of the victims:

If someone commits a crime against a man, or against property, everyone will condemn it and direct their anger against the criminal. If someone beats or harm an animal, people will react with anger. But if someone commits a crime against a woman, raping her, taking all she has, the only thing this damned society gave to her to be proud of, the only source of honor, dignity and respect . . . she has no right to say anything. Am I responsible for being raped? Why should I die a hundred times a day knowing that I can’t tell my own father, knowing that he [the rapist] is the friend of my own brother, and the husband of my own sister . . . Why?

Speech is not only an important object in healing the trauma, but also reduces guilt feelings and increases the possibility that the victim will regain control over her physical and sexual life. Disclosure of the trauma was a principal tactic adopted by the survivor’s movement in the United States (Bass & Davis, 1988; Bass & Thornton, 1991). Western literature has underlined the importance of speaking out: “Survivor strategy must continue to develop and explore ways in which we can gain autonomy within (not over) the conditions of our discourse” (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 287).

The dilemma facing helpers in Palestinian society revolves around whether speaking out is an appropriate solution or even an option within the patriarchal Palestinian sociocultural context. Are there specific measures that should be taken into consideration when doing so? What is the price? And who pays it? This dilemma arouses the feeling that the physical act of rape is not the only problem; added to it is the unending pain and degradation of societal rape that undermines the very basic rights of any human being.

CONCLUSION: SCRUTINIZING RAPE THROUGH A SOCIO-CULTURAL LENS

The direction we need to take in order to cope with the hardships and dilemmas raised in this case study must take into account the need to analyze patriarchal reaction to the crime of rape through sociocultural and political lenses (Bourque, 1989; Thompson & West, 1992; Williams, 1984). Studying abuse of females through such lenses allows members of society, including policy makers, to re-evaluate existing modes of social reaction (formal and informal) to the crime of rape, and expose (the prolonged amnesia regarding) practices that result in women’s continuous oppression. In this respect, two equally important aspects of the is-
issue need to be re-examined: the sociopolitical level and the personal level of the victim.

At the sociopolitical level, there is no magic formula for addressing the complex dilemmas cited above. Societies the world over have tried to create policies to combat rape. Those policies have been aimed at deterring offenders from raping and deterring members of society from reacting in a manner that increases the victim’s pain. Various modes of intervention have been constructed for specific societies at a specific time and place. Importing solutions from other cultures, even if they increase awareness, might prove to be problematic. Copying models of intervention without in-depth examination of their applicability to a given social setting might not only inflict additional pain and problems, but might also imprison helpers in unrealistic and nonapplicable theories and methods. The findings of this study suggest that Palestinian legislators should revise the existing legal codes pertaining to crimes perpetrated against women. Furthermore, Palestinian policy-makers should formulate intervention strategies to combat such crimes.

At the clinical, individual level of intervention, the question is what action must be taken when faced with a case of a raped woman. Helpers need to keep in mind that each victim is a world unto herself, and that the raped woman’s evaluation of the situation must be respected (Thompson & West, 1992). Consideration of the victim’s sociocultural, personal, and psychological makeup is of main concern. Consequently, Palestinian helpers should constantly apply various discovery methods, searching for the appropriate mode of intervention for the specific case—one that would, if possible, cut the victim’s “losses.” It is our belief that helpers could utilize the existing social and cultural resources positively in order to reduce the pain inflicted on Palestinian women victims.

The underlying philosophy, at both the personal and the political level, is that we should not ask the victim of rape to fight our battle as social activists, to carry the burdens required to cause social change and thereby pay a high personal price. Crimes against women, including rape, are not “women’s” problems, but rather social problems. As such, it is society’s responsibility, and not that of the victim, to re-examine and reshape the sociocultural and political context in order to combat such crimes.

The present case study has illustrated the dilemmas and hardships faced by victims of rape and the clinicians who aim to help them. In discussing such dilemmas, we find that intervention and helping strategies can cover a wide range of options—from publicity of the crime and the planning of social actions (such as organizing public campaigns, marches, and demonstrations) to total silencing; from forcing the victim to marry her rapist to punishing the offender and giving full support to his victim; from threatening to kill the raped woman to making every effort to save her life (by hymen repair, abortion, silencing her abuse, and providing support). This large spectrum of options increases the therapist’s responsibility for and commitment to seek the most suitable solution for the individual victim. In doing so, we must reassure the victim that we, the helpers, do hear her voice, even if Palestinian society is not yet ready to hear it. We must reinforce her personal strength, stressing that it is the fragility of the society that forces her to keep her rape a secret, and not her own weakness.

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