

The protection of women and children from domestic violence

- a challenge to paternalistic societies in transformation

e.g. Syria

Domestic violence as a form of gender-based violence is the consequence of structural power asymmetries in intimate relationships, families and society.

Domestic violence is not only disastrous to the well-being, self-worth and developing of the victimized women and children. It generally enhances violent social dispositions and contributes actively to a culture of violence and the acceptance of unequal relationship patterns. The experience of powerlessness deeply affects the self-esteem of the victims and reduces their capability of being powerful members of an active civil society.

Violence against women and children undermines progress towards human and economic development. Women's participation has become key in all social development programs. True indicators of a country's commitment to gender equality lie in its actions to eliminate violence against women in all its forms and in all areas of life.

The Damascus based project will therefore focus the challenges the protection of women and children from domestic violence brings to Syria as a paternalistic society in transformation.

Until now Syria is like many other countries of the Middle East (e.g. Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Libya) a one-party dominated regime with patriarchal or group-based civil rights. In recent years a limited transition to a market economy was implemented. This transition has been accompanied by limited political liberalization.

The Damascus Spring however was cut short. Formal civil society is until now controlled by the regime through a network of syndical organizations under regime leadership. Even so the role and nature of civil society in Syria has been much discussed in the wake of the country's first conference on civil society in January 2010 where the importance of civil society/independent social forces for social development was explicitly recognized. The new legislation governing NGOs has to prove the government's intention to adopt a new approach to social development, with civil society as an independent partner.

Moreover in the past decade the legitimacy of religiously based family laws that define the personal status of citizens in most Arab states, was questioned by arguing that the state's family law includes patriarchal notions of differences between the sexes as interpreted through religious laws and jurisprudence and therefore accords male and female citizens different legal status. As such, a regime's response towards demands regarding reforms in family law can be seen as a significant parameter for

understanding social transformation and domestic politics in contemporary Middle East.

Therefore the Damascus Project is going to cover a meta-analysis of the discourse on the Syrian personal status code drafts describing an era of renewed struggle for extended civil rights for female citizens in Syria.

Furthermore a survey is given on the legal framework in Syria concerning women's issues and an analysis is to be done of women's rights law enforcement in penal (e.g. domestic violence, marital rape, so called honor crimes) and personal status law (e.g. custody, divorce, inheritance, nationality)

Domestic violence is a complex problem and there is no one strategy that will work for all. Considering the interconnections between the factors responsible for domestic violence – gender dynamics of power, culture and economics – strategies and interventions should be designed within a comprehensive and integrated framework: a multi-layered strategy that addresses the structural causes of violence against women and children while providing immediate services to victim-survivors.

The Damascus Project will therefore generate a network analysis of the infrastructure of protecting women and children against domestic violence, including a survey of government and NGO institutions and standardized interviews with experts. Hopefully it will lead in campaigning on combating domestic violence against women and children in Syria.

The kick-off was made by lecturing in the 6th Summer School on Domestic Violence in November 2010 in Damascus and Cairo. The summer school was organized by the Department of Legal Medicine / University of Hamburg and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and sponsored by the DAAD.