

Working Towards Equality: An Analysis of the Effort to Combat Gender-Based Violence in Amman, Jordan

Megan Keeling

This report examines the issue of gender-based violence in Jordan by looking at the methods and impact of the Women's Complaint Office (WCO) in Amman, Jordan. The WCO is a division of the Jordanian National Women's Commission (JNCW) that provides a variety of important services for survivors of gender-based violence while also various educational and lobbying efforts to create a society that is free of violence. Like many women's organizations in Jordan, the WCO faces significant challenges in addressing an issue that is still more or less taboo. The office takes a twofold approach to combating gender-based violence. On the individual level, it works with women to develop a unique solution to each case with the help of its vast network of partner organizations. At the same time, the Women's Complaints Office looks at the "whole picture" of gender-based violence to address it as a systemic social problem. For example, it is currently trying to obtain funding for a project that tackles violations of women's rights in the labor force, in order to reduce domestic violence throughout the country by increasing the economic empowerment of all women.

The Women's Complaints Office

The Jordanian National Commission for Women, which is under the patronage of the royal government and is responsible for promoting women's rights in Jordan, founded the Women's Complaints Office. The Office serves three main purposes: first, to receive complaints about discrimination and violence against women within the home, at work, or in public areas; second, to empower women to take advantage of their rights as guaranteed in the Jordanian constitution, national laws, and

MEGAN KEELING is a senior at The College of William and Mary majoring in English and minoring in Women's Studies. She would like to thank Diana Shalabi and the staff at Jordanian National Commission for Women for their help during her research and internship stay. Megan is looking to join the Peace Corps after graduation.

ratified national conventions; and third, to raise general social awareness of violence against women. According to an interview with Women's Complaints Office manager Diana Shalabi, 49% of the cases received by the Office are of domestic violence. The remaining 51% include cases of workplace discrimination and harassment, sexual violence and assault, and gender discrimination.¹

The Women's Complaints Office is not the only institution available to Jordanian women seeking recourse against gender-based violence and discrimination. A variety of other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government organizations provide services to women. For example, the Ministry of Social Development operates the Dar al-Wafiq shelter, which provides protection to female and child survivors of violence as well as offers psychological and family counseling services. In addition, the Mizan Law Group provides legal counseling and representation for women survivors of violence, while the Institute of Family Health offers comprehensive health care services including social and psychological counseling.²

However, there are several obstacles in the way of women who wish to use these services. The first is accessibility. The vast majority of resources for female survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic violence are concentrated in Amman, making it very difficult for women anywhere else in Jordan to take advantage of these services. Next, services that are operated by Jordanian government institutions are often complicated by bureaucratic red tape. For instance, women survivors seeking to stay at the Dar al-Wafiq shelter need an official referral, or special permission from the Ministry of Social Development.³ Finally, cultural and social pressures make it difficult to address issues such as gender-based violence. Survivors of gender-based violence often feel that they are to blame for the violence committed against them. Social stigma surrounding these issues often make women ashamed to report a case. Because of these obstacles, only 11% of survivors of GBV request help from these organizations.⁴

One of the roles of the Women's Complaints Office is to provide Jordanian women with another option for confronting gender-based violence in their own lives. Any woman currently living within the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan or any woman with Jordanian nationality living outside Jordanian territory is eligible to use the Office's services. Complaints can be registered by fax, email, phone, or in person by

visiting the Office. After hearing the complaint, the case is documented and then analyzed with the help of social and legal specialists. Once the plaintiff's options are identified, the Office discusses them with the plaintiff in detail so she can make an informed decision about the best course of action for resolving the case. Next, the Office identifies service providers among its base of partners in order to best help the complainant resolve the case. Finally, the Complaints Office staff periodically follows up with the plaintiff to ensure implementation of the chosen solution. Throughout this process, the case is documented and stored in the Complaints Office Database, which will be further discussed later in this case study.

This approach to addressing cases of domestic violence offers several advantages to plaintiffs. Because the complaint can be registered in a variety of different ways, this offers a number of options to survivors who may not have been able to report their case otherwise. For instance, registering complaints in person can be nearly impossible for women living with extremely controlling husbands or family members. Also, the Complaints Office strategy of working directly with the survivor is very beneficial for survivors of violence seeking to regain control and autonomy over their own lives. The Office's network of partners also ensures that the Office is able to provide individualized solutions for each case, giving it greater flexibility in responding to cases.

The Women's Complaints Office relies on a system of referrals and partnerships in order to provide a wide range of services. The Complaints Office can connect women with expert legal representation and services to help them build a case against their abuser. Additionally, it can help women find affordable mental, reproductive, or general health care services. However, some of the most important connections that the WCO offers are other NGOs and governmental institutions that can provide loans, scholarships, or job training opportunities. Through financial independence women are afforded the opportunity to support themselves and their children after separating from an abusive husband. Networking and partnerships with other organizations in Amman and throughout Jordan is an important tool in taking on a variety of different cases and offering individualized solutions.

The referral system is an important part of nearly all GBV response services in Jordan. According to the United Nations assessment on violence against women in Jordan, “the referral system is in many ways informal and based on existing personal/professional networks.”⁵ An informal connection system uses traditional cultural ways of doing business for the purpose of offering a vast range of services. However, using an informal referral method means that there are few established procedures or protocols to ensure accountability and effectiveness. At the Women’s Complaints Office, the referral system is an institutionalized part of the services it offers to women who have experienced gender-based violence and discrimination. Having an effective referral system is not only crucial to providing services for complainants, but also to fulfilling the Office’s broader goals of raising awareness of violence against women, educating women on their legal and civil rights, and lobbying governmental institutions to change or enforce laws pertaining to women’s rights.

Gender-based Violence in Jordan

Gender-based violence is defined by the United Nations as “violence that is directed at a person on the basis of gender or sex. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.” The term “violence against women” is slightly broader, and is defined as “any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual and psychological harm to women and girls, whether occurring in private or in public.” This includes harmful acts such as early marriage, honor crimes, and inheritance rights deprivation cases that are not specifically violent but negatively affect women’s human rights. “Domestic violence” (DV) refers to “various behavioral patterns from a member of the family against other members, which directly or indirectly inflict psychological, physical, verbal or sexual harm.”⁶

There are currently no official statistics on the rate of domestic and gender-based violence in Jordan, which makes it difficult to gain a definitive understanding of how often these cases occur. The following statistics are based on UN reports and other independent studies done

on women in Jordan and throughout the region, as well as numbers from reported cases from the Family Protection Department. According to one study done by NCFCA and USAID:

- The Family Protection Department's data for 2006 reported 1764 cases of violence (430 violence against females)
- The Ministry of Social Development data for 2006 reported 1200 cases of violence against women
- In 2006, the National Centre for Forensic Medicine reported 120 sexual assaults on women including 18 cases classified as honor crimes
- The Jordanian Women's Union (JWU) data for 1999 – 2006 registered 775 cases that used the shelter services
- Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI) data for 2007 reported 225 cases for women who requested their legal services.⁷

However, these numbers seem somewhat low, especially when compared with other data collected. According to an NCFCA study, as many as 40-60% of Jordanians have reported verbally or physically abusing a family member. A separate study suggests that as many as 87% of women in the Jordanian province of Balka have experienced some form of intimate-partner violence in the last year. Emotional abuse was the most common form of abuse, at 47.5% of the female population, while 19.6% of women experienced physical violence.⁸ Although emotional abuse is far more prevalent than physical violence, many women do not consider it to be domestic violence, which means that reporting rates of this kind of abuse may not reflect the actual prevalence of the situation.⁹ The most data available on gender-based violence seems to relate specifically to domestic violence—as stated earlier, 49% of the cases received by the WCO are domestic violence cases, meaning that the remaining half of cases include all other forms of violence and discrimination. However, without more information, it is impossible to know whether this is because DV is the most common form of GBV in Jordan, or if it is just the one that is reported the most.

What causes gender-based violence to occur?

The WCO operates under the theory that violence is a learned behavior, and violence against women is the result of a broader system of gender inequality that negatively affects women in all aspects of their lives. Gender inequality is based on a series of social norms, or set of attitudes and beliefs, that shape the way a society understands sexual violence. These norms, as defined in a report by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, include limited roles, objectification, oppression, disparate power dynamics, toleration of violence, attribution of blame to victims, and notions of privacy that foster secrecy and silence.¹⁰ While definitions of these norms were developed in the context of preventing sexual violence in the United States, they are broad enough to provide insight into Jordanian society as well.

The Women's Complaints Office dedicates a significant part of its resources to education and advocacy efforts in order to confront gender-based violence by changing social norms. One example of this is the Women's Complaints Office's strategy of targeting educational efforts and counseling services towards men and boys. However, men are not the only people who perpetuate violence and attitudes that condone violent behavior toward women: roughly one third of Jordanian women surveyed in the study on domestic violence in Balka justify or accept domestic violence against women. Many studies have identified the social construction of masculinity as a major reason why men commit violence against women, and possibly why women justify it. For instance, the report on violence against women in Saudi Arabia suggests that violent behavior against women is considered normal, based on prevailing social assumptions about men and women. The study claims that because male social value is placed on a man's ability to support their family economically, there is "an increase in violence levels against women in social classes where unemployment is rampant, or where the work performed is not conducive to self-fulfillment." In addition, the study points out that men who experience "insecurity, low self confidence and embedded beliefs of incompetence" are more likely to commit violent behavior against women and other family members.¹¹ This claim is supported by evidence that points to an increase in violence in refugee communities or in families who have recently migrated from

a rural to an urban setting.¹² For these reasons, the Women's Complaints Office targets certain educational efforts towards men and boys in order to change concepts of masculinity that lead to violence against women. Some of WCO's services, such as the family reconciliation counseling, are directly targeted towards male abusers in order to change their behavior.

While the above reasons for violence can apply to any patriarchal society, there are a number of factors specific to Arab societies that create a distinct cultural environment in which GBV takes place. For instance, a report on violence against women in Saudi Arabia identifies a number of cultural assumptions about gender that result in inequality between men and women. The report states that "the Arab female child enters a world of allocation of roles and functions that does not happen automatically, but rather as a result of what the family, and later on the school and society, afford her ... Her society ... is a continuous reminder of the male's value reference and her subordination to him at the same time."¹³ The study points out that female children are treated differently within Arab families from the day they are born. Boys are given more privilege while girls are consistently undervalued. In addition, the study identifies "legacies," or popular expressions that constantly reinforce the superiority of males. These expressions include, "Break a girl's rib and she grows four new ones," "Women support, men protect and uphold," and "Consulting women is a shame, even if they are open-minded."¹⁴ The evidence found in this study suggests that majority of gender socialization within Arab societies occurs within the home and family, rather than from outside media or institutions. This is an important distinction to make for organizations working to combat and prevent violence against women because efforts must then be targeted towards changing the way families treat their female and male children.

"Honor culture" is another culturally distinct factor that encourages GBV in Arab societies. In this cultural framework, the sexual purity of women is the most important factor in maintenance of a family's honor. In her analysis on the "honor ideology" found in Palestinian culture, Diane Baxter stresses that "a woman can wreak havoc with her family's honor even if she is merely suspected of acting in a sexually inappropriate way."¹⁵ The importance placed on women's sexuality within the honor culture means that all her actions are scrutinized and policed. Therefore,

her sexuality becomes the most important part of her identity. Baxter writes: “what frequently gets a family into trouble is allowing behaviors or expressing attitudes that are viewed by neighbors and friends as undermining the sexual regulations in the honor complex.”¹⁶ This means that a woman’s every action must be controlled in order to maintain the appearance of her sexual purity and her family’s honor. Violence against women who have violated, or are suspected of violating, their family’s honor can sometimes face brutal, violent punishment, which is condoned by other family members and the community at large.

Dealing with crimes of honor can be tricky for a Jordanian NGO, especially one closely related to the government like the WCO. Because the honor ideology is ingrained particularly into Bedouin tribal culture within Jordan, targeting honor crimes could seem like an attack on tribal heritage, identity, and autonomy. Although the majority of cases of violence against women are not related to crimes of honor, ignoring honor crimes can be a dangerous concession in the fight against violence against women as a whole. However, the Women’s Complaints Office and JNCW can target attitudes within society that reduce a women’s social value to her sexuality or that allow women to be treated like the property of the men in their family. For instance, by influencing the amendments to the Personal Status Laws in Jordan, JNCW can help women achieve more personal autonomy from their husbands and families by increasing their individual legal and civil rights. Changing the rights of women in legislation can have a positive effect on cultural attitudes towards women. While these strategies do not directly address honor crimes, they do help combat some of the prevalent social norms that allow honor crimes to exist unchallenged.

The importance of economic empowerment

A study on domestic violence in the province of Balka suggests that women are more likely to experience or justify cases of domestic violence if they also are experiencing economic disempowerment or instability.¹⁷ For this reason, a significant part of the Women’s Complaints Office’s work is to help women gain financial security. This work includes tackling the issue of violence and discrimination against women in the workplace. While the majority of cases received by the Office relate to domestic violence, the Office also takes complaints from women in the labor force as well.

Women's participation in the Jordanian work force is strikingly low—only 15% of the work force is female. While the total Gender Pay Gap of 8% between men and women looks good on paper, one must take into account a number of factors that skew this data. For instance, when women do participate in the labor force, it is usually in higher-paying jobs that require higher education. However, within these fields, the GPG can reach up to 30%.¹⁸ In addition, the work environment can often be hostile for female employees. While there are no official statistics on sexual harassment or assault in the workplace, 11.9% of the Women's Complaints Office cases were related to workplace discrimination.

The discrimination women face in the public sector exacerbates violence and abuse within their homes. Because discrimination against women is tolerated in the workplace, it is more difficult for women to achieve economic stability independent of their husbands or families. The Women's Complaints Office addresses this by not only providing economic services for women, such as loans and job training opportunities, but also by running campaigns and leading educational initiatives within the public and private sectors to create a better working environment for women in the labor force. Helping women become economically independent not only facilitates escape from abusive family situations but also allows women to become more visible, active members of public life, challenging the social norms that women must stay home and remain the property of their husbands and families.

The Women's Complaints Office Database

One of the major challenges to addressing gender-based violence in Jordan is the lack of a concrete data set reflecting the frequency and prevalence of the issue. For this reason, the Women's Complaints Office is setting up a National Database in order to consolidate figures from throughout the country. As mentioned previously, part of the response method for receiving complaints in the Office involves documenting the case for the database. This is done with respect for the privacy of the survivors and in adherence with the Complaints Office Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics was created to guarantee that the Office remains a trustworthy, reliable resource for Jordanian women, especially considering the stigma still attached to reporting gender-based violence. The Office

also plans to make the database accessible to all organizations working to combat violence against women in Jordan. A National Database would help address some important gaps in the data on gender-based violence. Because most data comes from health centers and family violence prevention centers, it generally concerns domestic violence. For instance, data on sexual violence committed by someone outside the family is very scarce. Without gathering more information, it is impossible to know if this kind of violence does not occur as often as inter-family violence, or if this crime is just severely under-reported. Improved data on this type of violence would help the Women's Complaints Office know where to target its services and efforts to help reduce and prevent sexual violence.¹⁹

What are women's rights in Jordan?

Compared to many women in developing countries, Jordanian women enjoy a broad range of constitutional and legal rights, and in many aspects of the law, women have equal rights to those of men. Women are permitted to vote and to be elected to public office. In addition, women are guaranteed equal rights and opportunities in education, employment, and professional and civil contracts. However, women's access to these rights is often limited, and many women are not able to use their rights to improve their personal security. Jordan has also ratified the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which means that it has made an international commitment to gender equality, and is held accountable to this by submitting annual reports documenting its progress. However, Jordan has several objections to CEDAW on the grounds of conflict with Sharia'a law.²⁰ Jordanian legal code, like many laws in Islamic countries, is based primarily on the Holy Koran.

There are a number of codified legal inequalities between men and women in Jordanian laws that contribute to women's inferior social status. As in all Islamic marriages, the wife has the right to equally participate in creating the marriage contract, and is responsible for including clauses that give her the right to divorce or to forbid her husband from engaging in polygamy. In addition, Jordanian law stipulates that "the husband must maintain his wife and treat her well; the wife owes obedience to her husband."²¹ The term "obedience" includes restrictions such as the women must live with their husbands, must obtain permission to work

outside the home, and must apply for a passport. The wife retains rights over her own property, and unlike her husband, she is not obligated to use any of her income to support her family—any money she earns independently belongs to her alone. However, the husband is considered legal guardian of the children. The wife is only granted custody.

Either the husband or the wife is permitted to petition for divorce on the grounds of “discord and strife causing such harm as to make cohabitation impossible”.²² The case goes before a judge, who tries to reconcile the couple. If this is unsuccessful, the case goes before two arbitrators who gather evidence on the marital situation before making a decision to permit a divorce. One arbitrator is chosen from each side of the family. However, if there are no suitable arbitrators, then two “fair, experienced men” are chosen to make the decision.²³ Because women are excluded from becoming arbitrators, and the nature of the terms “fair” and “experienced” is highly subjective, female candidates for divorce are at a disadvantage.

If the arbitrators determine that the wife is in the wrong, she is granted a divorce in exchange for a price at least the value of her dowry, if not more. If the husband is found to blame, the wife is granted an “irrevocable divorce,” and she can ask for, but is not guaranteed, monetary compensation.²⁴ In some cases, women also have the right to a divorce in which they are granted separation, no questions asked, if they are able to pay back the price of their dowry. This law places wealthier Jordanian women at a significant advantage in obtaining a divorce.

In terms of labor laws, women are guaranteed maternity and childcare leave without any negative ramifications for their job. In addition, conventions from International Labor Organization and CEDAW require equal pay and prohibit any discrimination based on gender. However, given the low number of women active in the workforce and the extremely high rate of actual pay disparity between men and women, it is clear that these laws and conventions are not being enforced.

Part of the mission of the Women’s Complaints Office is to lobby for *de jure* and *de facto* improvements for women’s rights. A recently proposed project of the WCO is to promote labor rights for women in Jordan. In doing so, the Office hopes to improve women’s economic empowerment as a preventive strategy for reducing their risk factors for GBV. The goals for this project include raising awareness among women about their existing

labor rights and lobbying the Jordanian government to ratify an additional two ILO conventions, which would further protect women from job discrimination. The project also aims to launch educational programs in public sector companies, targeting specific industries to encourage them to hire more women.

The Women's Complaints Office Database, once launched, will prove to be extremely valuable in lobbying and education efforts. With a solid set of facts showing the current situation of gender-based violence in Jordan, the WCO will be more effective in confronting the Jordanian government with proof of gender inequality resulting from ineffective or poorly enforced laws. In addition, the Database will bolster educational efforts by providing a set of statistical data whose visibility can legitimize the problem of violence against women.

The direct services the Women's Complaints Office offers to survivors also play a major role in helping women take advantage of their political and civil rights by providing them with another avenue through which to seek recourse against violations. The accessibility of the Office and the wide variety of services it offers to Jordanian women make it a powerful tool for women in ensuring that their rights are enforced. However, getting women to come forward to report violations of their rights is a significant challenge for the WCO. The relatively high number of women who believe a husband is justified in using violence against his wife—nearly one third of women, according to the Balka study—reflects the fact that many Jordanians still do not view domestic violence as a human rights violation or a violation of Jordanian law. In addition, many women do not consider emotional or economic abuse to be domestic violence, which reduces the number of women who will report these types of abuse. These attitudes must be changed in order for Jordanian women to take full advantage of the legal and human rights they are guaranteed as Jordanian citizens. Other cultural and social barriers, such as the stigma attached to reporting gender-based violence impede women from reporting harmful incidents. Women are still blamed for provoking sexual assault and harassment because these events have negative effects on their family's honor. The combination of these factors silences survivors and prevents women from seeking justice for these violations.

Conclusion: What's next for the Complaints Office and Jordanian Women

The Women's Complaints Office has taken on a massive responsibility: it fights for women's rights by both serving individual survivors of GBV and takes on the social norms that permit GBV to exist more or less unquestioned in Jordan. Despite the advances made by the WCO and the Jordanian National Commission for Women, it is clear that Jordanian women still have a long way to go before gaining true gender equality. The system of inequality that supports gender-based violence is pervasive, influencing men and women in all aspects of Jordanian society. Therefore, the WCO's use of a system of networks and referrals is crucial to achieving its rather lofty goals because it reflects the fact that combating gender-based violence and inequality must be based on the efforts of the entire society.

By taking on the issue of violence and discrimination in the workforce, the WCO is not only helping women become economically empowered and self-sufficient, it is also working to increase women's participation in public life. Increasing women's public participation is an equally important effect of economic empowerment because it helps change perceptions of women in Jordanian society by normalizing their equal participation with men in the economic sector.

Starting a thorough database is another very important first project for the Women's Complaints Office. The database would consolidate the cases of all organizations working with cases of gender-based violence. However, any database is only able to document cases that are reported. Using studies and surveys are still the best method of collecting data on the unreported cases that make up the majority of gender-based violence in Jordan. For this reason, the WCO's educational and awareness-raising efforts are equally as important as its direct services.²⁵

In patriarchal societies, gender-based violence is simultaneously normalized and stigmatized. GBV is considered an inevitable risk of being a female, as evidenced by the nearly one third of women in Balka who consider it acceptable for a husband to beat his wife. At the same time, it is incredibly shameful to be a victim of this type of violence, and both survivors and their families would often rather remain silent than face the stigma attached to pursuing a GBV case. By taking on the deeply rooted gender inequalities in

addition to providing services that have an immediate impact on the lives of survivors, the Women's Complaints Office has the potential to make a difference in the lives of individual women and improve the rights of Jordanian women as a whole.

Notes

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- ³ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁸ Dr. Abdallah Naseer, Ahmad Al Hussein, Dr. Aisha, Ali Jadallah, and Dr. Fatima, "Forms of Violence against Women: A Perspective from the Saudi Arabian Society." *United Nations Development Fund for Women*, (National Press: Amman, Jordan, 2006), 571.
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 752.
- ¹⁷ Muhammed Al-Nsour, Marwan Khawaja, and Ghadah Al-Kayyali, "Domestic Violence against Women in Jordan: Evidence from Health Clinics," *Journal of Family Violence*, 24 June, 2009, 572.
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- ²² *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²⁵ Women's Complaints Office, "Labor Complaints in Jordan," 2010.