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## Developing Public and Institutional Support Through Research and Advocacy

Sometimes what we don't know can hurt us. Disguised, hidden or silenced, gender-based violence is locked so tightly behind closed doors that nowhere in the world is its impact on society fully understood. So the first step is breaking the silence, exposing gender violence through both state and grass-roots efforts. "If we want to bring violence against women into the open, we have to make both institutions and communities aware," says Duska Andric-Ruzicic, Trust Fund grantee from Bosnia-Herzegovina. "To change it, everyone must feel that it is their problem."

Efforts to make gender-based violence everyone's problem have gained momentum over the past several decades. Women have banded together in global forums to denounce gender-based violence and demand state accountability. Women and men are working within their own countries and communities to prove that violence against women hinders sustainable development by limiting women's contributions to economic and social progress. This approach, brought to international attention by UNIFEM in 1992 with the publication of *Battered Dreams* (Carrillo 1992), emphasizes the responsibility of states that have ratified international conventions to bring violence against women into the open and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

"Breaking the age-old silence brings about societal recognition of gender-based violence," observes Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Trust Fund grantee in the West Bank and Gaza. At least 32 of the 89 Trust Fund projects (approximately 36 per cent) have conducted research on gender-based violence as part of their projects. Of these, research was the primary objective in ten.

Research on violence against women offers a starting point to bring the issue into the public eye, making it difficult for governments and civil society to ignore. It documents the nature and extent of gender-based violence to those who would deny its severity as well as to those responsible for responding to women who experience it. The most effective research combines both quantitative and qualitative data, documenting the reality of the abuse with different sources and presenting it in the voices of women who have survived it. Statistics can make the case, while personal perspectives can evoke empathy and understanding.

Research can also demonstrate to violent men that they too are victims of their own hidden crimes. Sociologist Robert Chambers writes, "Fundamentalist...and male-dominated authoritarian bureaucracies are not yet fossils of the past. Men are empowered and protected by holy text, ritual, hierarchy and secrecy and perpetuate their dominance... . Women are trapped; but so too are men" (Chambers 1997: 222).

While research on gender-based violence can be an effective tool for change, it is not without challenges. Organizations have a hard time gathering the information they need. Valid statistics depend on individuals' willingness to report crimes, and on the ability of authorities to record them accurately. Women's stories require their willingness to speak candidly, which many are reluctant to do. Women often feel afraid or ashamed to tell their stories, believing they are somehow responsible for the crimes committed against them. For many survivors, speaking about their experiences may put them at risk of further abuse. These factors also make it important for researchers to ensure the safety of the women who participate.

Organizations that provide individual or community services are well-placed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Their relationships with individuals are based on regular interaction and trust, and they know the community through their hands-on work. Often they act as the go-between for survivors of gender-based violence and the authorities – particularly in places where officials, who may tend not to believe women, can freely dismiss their complaints. Such organizations depend upon strong relationships with judges, police, hospitals and other institutions.

After the information has been collected, service providers are in a position to take it back to institutions and communities and try to change the way they think about and deal with violence against women. Because they are familiar with the problem and the people, they can present their results in a variety of ways, depending on the institution they want to change. They can meet with editorial boards to influence media priorities, design exercises for group trainings or workshops, stage drama or art presentations in schools, or hold private meetings with key individuals. Information alone will not commit people to action. The ability to use research to bring about change depends on organizations' ability to establish their credibility with the community as well as with state institutions.

The impact of research depends not only on who implements it, but on when it is conducted. Finding the right time to begin is crucial to the process. Some organizations sponsored by the Trust Fund have conducted research during times of peace, when state institutions are well established. Stable political conditions allow them to access official personnel and gain the attention of the media. Conversely, organizations may take advantage of political, social and economic change by acting quickly to influence emerging institutions. In the case of the Palestinian National Authority, for example, women's groups lobbied newly forming institutions to establish a section responsible for women's affairs.

The case studies in this chapter are very different, yet they share remarkable similarities. The first is a research project undertaken to document post-war domestic violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The second represents an effort to "map the landscape" of "honour killings" (or femicide) in the West Bank and Gaza. In both, the organizations drew on their experience and credibility as service providers to conduct research and lobby for change. Both began at a time when countries were emerging from war and violence, however tentatively, and institutions were in their infancy.

In both case studies, as in all of the case studies selected for this book, the women who initiated the projects were particularly important. They persevere in the most difficult times and inspire their colleagues to do the same. The result is a remarkably effective team. Inspiration also works both ways, as the project director from the West Bank and Gaza explains: "We work together, and inspire each other." Similarly, the project director in Bosnia-Herzegovina attributes their success to the strong team that makes up the organization, while members report that the director inspires them to keep going: "We tell her that she couldn't get rid of us if she tried."

*“Institutions don’t have the power to change things just like that, but they do have the power to lobby And we have learned to lobby together. Now it’s not just a group of angry women; it’s a group of angry women, judges, prosecutors and police – many of whom are men.”*

- Duska Andric-Ruzicic, President, Medica Zenica

CASE STUDY :  
**Challenging Post-War Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

“I have a question,” Mirha Nurka begins, standing confidently in front of the 15 male judges. “Who had sex last night, and how was it?”

There is an awkward stir in the room. The men shift in their chairs, or frown in distaste. Several clear their throats. One bursts into laughter. “I’m serious,” Nurka continues. “We’d like each of you to share the details with the group.”

The judges have gathered in Zenica, 70 kilometres north of Sarajevo, for the second day of a workshop on gender-based violence in the district. Mirha Nurka, their trainer, is a member of Medica Zenica, an NGO that is using the results of its research on violence against women to change the way judges, prosecutors, police and health and social service providers respond to abused women. She waits until the silence is almost painful. “You don’t need to answer. But can anyone tell me why you think I asked the question?”

The men, relieved, begin to talk. They spend the next several hours trying to grasp how survivors of sexual assault and rape must feel when they are asked to describe their humiliating experiences in detail, again and again, to a judge and jury.

With the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, people in all parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina expected an end to the horrifying crimes committed against women. Over the next several years, however, staff at Medica Zenica, a women’s NGO and health clinic in the Republic of Bosnia, observed that if anything, the abuse of women had increased.<sup>1</sup> Efforts to bring this problem to the attention of state officials, including those in the ministries of health and social welfare,

as well as law enforcement personnel, fell on deaf ears. Most believed that the problem of violence against women had ended with the war.

**Challenging Post-War Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

**PROJECT NAME:** Research and Advocacy for Women’s Human Right to Live Without Violence

**PROJECT DIRECTOR:** Duska Andric-Ruzicic

**ORGANIZATION:** Medica Zenica

**DATES:** 1998-1999

**TRUST FUND GRANT:** \$48,900\*

**OBJECTIVES:** To conduct research on post-war violence against women and use it to advocate to change the treatment of abused women by judicial and law enforcement institutions as well as social service providers.

\* Additional funding for the publication received from Oxfam

*1 Under the terms of the Dayton Peace Accords, which concluded the war, Bosnia-Herzegovina was divided into two semi-autonomous entities, the Serb-led Republika Srpska and the Muslim/Croat Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. While both are charged with conducting their own foreign, economic and fiscal affairs, they remain under the oversight of a High Representative appointed by the United Nations. Many state institutions remain under the protection of international peace-keepers.*



Duska Andric-Ruzicic, Medica Zenica president, Bosnia.

In 1998, with a grant from the Trust Fund, a team of 13 women from Medica Zenica started a one-year project to document the extent of violence against women in the district, trying to determine whether it had in fact increased since the war. They interviewed women in communities throughout the district, combed through police, medical and judicial reports, and talked with counsellors and social workers in the communities. They documented the nature and extent of the violence committed against women, including domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, as well as the treatment abused women received from police and judicial authorities. At the end of the year they compiled their findings in a book, *To Live Without Violence* (Medica Zenica 1999a).

Medica Zenica has raised public awareness about the problem by working closely with the media to publicize their findings. They have used the publication in training with judges, police and lawyers to change the way they respond to abused women in need of help. “The training is necessary for us,” says a judge who participated in the first workshop and is now recruiting his colleagues from other municipalities to participate. “It’s hard to accept at first. But this is a new system, and we need to think of women’s rights in a new way.”

The project, the first of its kind in the country, has already altered the way in which lawyers, judges and police respond to victims of gender-based violence in the district. Once women were almost uniformly disbelieved, their complaints routinely dismissed. Now each police department has several point persons, trained by Medica Zenica, who are responsible for dealing with victims of gender-based violence. And judges have begun to take women’s testimony seriously. Through the training with judges and lawyers, Medica Zenica also hopes to generate a ripple effect: judges and lawyers can in turn influence politicians, and ultimately legislation, to create a system that protects the rights of women at every stage of the legal and judicial process.

### Background: A Problem No One Expected

In the early 1990s, with the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, ethnic tensions increased in the newly independent state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, comprised of Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. By 1994, reports of the widespread rape of Bosnian women as a means of “ethnic cleansing” shocked the international community. An estimated 30,000 women were raped during the three years of fighting (UNDP 1999). In the years following the signing of the Dayton Peace

Accords in 1995, stories of violence against women faded from the public eye, becoming part of the war's tragic history. Yet at women's NGOs and counselling centres throughout Zenica, women encountered a problem they had not anticipated: overwhelming numbers of women seeking refuge from current violent situations (Medica Zenica 1998a).

"After 1995 we started to identify problems that were surprising and not as visible as before the war," says a Bosnian staff member from a local chapter of the International Human Rights Law Group. "The women who came to us opened our eyes to issues we had never really talked about before, like domestic violence."

The women sought assistance from women's and human rights' groups, clinics and counselling centres, but were reluctant to go to the police, and placed little faith in the legal system. As the requests for help continued, women's NGOs and social service providers asked why these reports seemed to be increasing during a time of peace. They were uncertain whether the numbers of women seeking help represented an increase in women experiencing violence, or a newly found courage in women to come forward and tell their stories.

When NGOs and service providers went to the social service ministries for assistance, officials were not convinced there was a problem. Lacking proof that violence against women was on the rise, many ministry officials were sceptical about claims that this was the case. Without data, it was almost impossible to get their help.

### **The Force Behind the Facts: A Research Action Initiative**

In 1998, Medica Zenica's staff members embarked on a research project to understand the causes and extent of gender-based violence. Like many other organizations working on the front lines with women, they were troubled by the influx of victims, and frustrated by the ambivalence of institutions. They planned to document the problem, and identify entry points for state institutions and communities to care for survivors and intervene before the violence starts. "Until 1998 we spoke of violence against women only in terms of the victim and the perpetrator..." says Medica Zenica's director, Duska Andric-Ruzicic. "But we began to ask ourselves, what about the government? And what about society, with all of its attitudes and traditions?"

Medica Zenica compiled data on incidents of abuse using records from district police stations along with those at the Centre for Social Work. Trained field researchers conducted 542 interviews through a quasi-random stratified sampling of women in communities throughout the district. The survey collected demographic information, information on socio-economic status and the incidence of gender violence. It included questions on where victims of gender-based violence go to seek help and women's perceptions about whether gender-based violence was increasing and why. After reviewing 25 police reports of sexual assault and 39 cases of domestic violence from the Centre for Social Work, the researchers followed the details of each case and the institutional process through which the cases were managed. Through interviews

with service providers, including four social workers, a psychologist, a lawyer and a teacher, they tried to gain insight into the reasons for the increase in gender-based violence.

The findings are presented and analysed in the publication *To Live Without Violence*. The book contains chapters on domestic violence and sexual assault along with supporting information on incest, prostitution and abuse of the elderly. In addition, it includes a review of existing legislation aimed at protecting the rights of women. Each chapter concludes with a set of concrete recommendations.

Critical to Medica Zenica's ability to access this information was their reputation with community members and local authorities. They began in the early years of the war by providing free, qualified gynaecological and psychological services as well as on-site accommodation to victims of rape. Over time they extended their services, adding job-training courses and an SOS hotline. They also began to help women who had experienced other types of violence and trauma, including war and domestic abuse. Their members, including both staff and volunteers, grew from 15 to 80. "When a victim of domestic violence or rape comes, we often ask Medica Zenica to intervene," says the Director of the Centre for Social Work, a state-run institution that works with abused women and children

Medica Zenica's reputation stems partly from the way they came together. Although they share a common commitment to women's human rights, they represent all of the ethnic groups that fought each other during the war. While they admit that people are very curious about their membership, most of them say they hardly ever think about it. "In 1995, someone asked for an official count of each ethnic group represented in the organization," says Andric-Ruzicic. "We actually had to count. It happened that the ethnic makeup of Medica's membership reflects the population of Zenica. Our common goal was to support women victims of war violence. So much of the violence was ethnically based, but in the end it's all violence against women."

Some members of the group first came to Medica Zenica for medical treatment or counselling. They now volunteer their services to women who need to connect with someone who can understand their situation. One woman, a former journalist, described being trapped in the western part of the country for four years during the war. At the end of the war, with the country divided, she had no place to go, so she contacted her sister in Zenica. "My sister knew about Medica, and told me I should come," she explained. "I said that nobody could help me, but my sister insisted that I at least try. My first contact with Medica was completely different than anything I had experienced. Things began to change, and I gradually gained the strength to help others in my position."

Describing the organization's work, Edita Ostojic, a staff member, writes, "we spent years in Zenica, drowning in the reality of war. We found an intimate, human response to the hatred and destruction that spilled across the country. After six years of collective work... we have changed. At the beginning we questioned. Now we have answers. At the beginning we were shocked, but we have now formed a vision we wish to share, and hope to build upon" (Medica Zenica 1998b).

### High School Sexual Abuse in South Africa

Sometimes it appears that communities have tolerated violence against women forever and nothing will mobilize them to say “enough.” Yet most often this is due to the feeling that there is nothing they can do to change the situation. One way to break through this is to identify a problem that is just emerging, where people believe they still can step in to stop it. In South Africa, where gender-based violence is rising dramatically, the Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT) project focused on the growing problem of high school date rape. Their goal was to engage teachers and parents in an effort to stop sexual abuse in high school, and at the same time to mobilize the community to participate in a broader awareness-building effort about gender-based violence.

The project team carried out an extensive survey and interview process to find out the kinds of abuse girls were experiencing and how widespread the problem was. Training workshops were organized to enable teachers to identify symptoms of abuse and refer survivors of date rape and family sexual abuse to people who could assist them. Students participated in the sessions to learn how to seek help for their own problems as well as to provide an effective support network to help other students.

The workshops allowed parents and teachers to see the world as teenagers see it. One student opened their eyes wide: “In the ghetto all the good people are poor,” he said. “The criminals are successful, so we look up to them. In a way they become our role models.” Such understanding is an essential first step in devising strategies for change.

### Research Findings:

#### Documenting a Reality

In interviews with women about their perceptions of gender violence, most respondents said they thought it had become worse since the end of the war. The team concluded that while the outcry about wartime rape and other violence against women had encouraged more women to seek help, the violence had also increased in the post-war period. They attributed this increase to the problems of reintegrating families after the war, during a time of political and economic upheaval following the break-up of Yugoslavia and the change to a market-based economy – what team members referred to as the “triple transition.”<sup>2</sup> They documented the insufficient, even humiliating treatment of abused women by medical institutions, law enforcement officials and the judiciary.

Almost one-quarter (24%) of the women interviewed said they had experienced domestic abuse over a long period of time, dating from before the war (Medica Zenica 1999a). The majority reported that they experienced an increase in the incidence and intensity of violence after the war. These findings confirmed what Medica Zenica staff had found in their own observations as well as in talking to other service providers. “What the research gave us is proof of what we already knew,” writes Andric-Ruzicic. “It gave us numbers to take to institutions and the general public to prove that things need to change.”

#### Reintegration of Families

During the post-war period, the solidity of the family as the basis of social cohesion began to erode. Uprooted families, housing shortages, and changes in the responsibilities of family members created new tensions between men and women. The strain increased aggressive behaviour, fighting and alcoholism – all of

<sup>2</sup> This term refers to the political transition to democracy; the economic transition to capitalism; and the social transition from war to peace.

# TO LIVE WITHOUT VIOLENCE



which heightened violence against women. Yet a strong emphasis on keeping the family intact renders it difficult for women to escape a violent situation and file for divorce. Medica Zenica found that 73 per cent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "For a woman it is most important, whatever the price, to hold the family together" (ibid.).

If a woman does seek to escape, her options are more limited now. Before the war, a woman suffering domestic abuse could seek refuge with her parents, siblings or other relatives. With so many families destroyed by the war, many women no longer have that recourse, and are forced to remain in violent relationships. For Medica Zenica, this makes it even more important that the state provide protection. "The family fell apart during the war," says Andric-Ruzicic. "There is a need for state institutions. For now NGOs have taken over that role, but we can't do it forever."

The publication on  
violence against  
women in Bosnia,  
produced by Medica  
Zenica in English as  
well as in Bosnian.

## Post-War Trauma and Shifting Gender Roles

In combat, men learned to express their emotions through violence. According to the social workers and psychologist interviewed in the study, men experiencing post-war trauma resorted to the same behaviour. In fact, they said, many men had more difficulty controlling their anger now than before the war began (ibid.). By contrast, women suffering post-war trauma from rape and other forms of violence were expected to forget their pain and attend to the needs of husbands and children. For many women in Bosnia, these expectations are not new: self-surrender has long been regarded as a pre-eminent characteristic of a true woman (Sivric 1982).

During the war, with the men killed or away fighting, many women became heads of households and the main means of family support. When the war ended, women were reluctant to give up this position. "When women work in the family it is different than when women are the *only* ones working in the family," says Andric-Ruzicic. "A woman gets money or even humanitarian aid, and she controls the distribution in the household... She may not want to give up her role entirely because she is controlling her life for the first time." As a result, she added, some men resorted to violence to regain their authority.

## **Institutions in the Transition**

Since the war, the government has been concerned with the problems of economic reform and the struggle for political autonomy. As a result, officials in all ministries have paid little attention to the problem of violence against women. Often survivors' cases never even make it to court. Medica Zenica's research confirms that the majority of women in Zenica are reluctant to report incidents to the police. They are deterred by stories of other survivors who have received little to no support, and whose efforts to escape a bad situation have made angry husbands or partners increasingly violent.

If women do choose to seek assistance, the laws aimed at protecting them are not yet sufficient. According to Andric-Ruzicic, in 1998, while Medica Zenica was conducting the research, the state's Criminal Code was revised, allowing marital rape to be prosecuted as a crime. However, the Penal Code still requires that the rape victim personally, not the state, initiate legal proceedings. As many women do not have the financial means to hire an attorney, they are unable to seek any legal redress for this crime. In addition, rape refers only to sexual intercourse: other forms of assault fall into the category of "indecent acts" (Medica Zenica 1999a). Violence against women is not defined by law, nor have there been any official instructions or government policy statements regarding the problem (International Human Rights Law Group 1999).

Moreover, when Medica Zenica presented their research findings at a national conference, Andric-Ruzicic explained, government representatives displayed a total lack of concern. "When we were finished outlining the details of sexual violence, a national-level leader said, 'Yes, I just hate it when people are rude to women.'" Given the cases they were detailing, that seemed a major understatement: "It's a lot more than rude," she responded.

## **Challenges and Strategies: Putting the Research to Work**

Faced with the challenge of gaining the attention of institutions with different priorities, Medica Zenica decided to turn their research into action. They brought the facts to life by using them in a series of training workshops with those responsible for responding to the needs of abused women. They timed their interventions carefully, and developed training sessions tailored to the needs of different professionals.

## **Using Research to Influence Target Groups**

Medica Zenica distributed the report to a wide range of professional organizations along with 105 NGOs throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina. They presented both facts and feelings, using information and sources designed to capture the attention of key target groups. Police, prosecutors and judges were surprised to learn that 60 per cent of the women who reported gender-based violence during interviews had never sought help from the authorities because they did not believe that the system could assist them (Medica Zenica 1999b). The figures also gained the attention of the Minister of Health, whose attitude towards gender-based violence was reflected in a comment he had made during a visit

to Medica Zenica facilities some time earlier: "Women are like gum; you can beat them and they will bounce back." According to Medica Zenica, this man began to look at things differently after learning that one of every four women is beaten by her partner (Medica Zenica 1999a). And even women's groups were startled by the fact that 20 per cent of the women interviewed agreed with the statement, "It is understandable that a husband or boyfriend beats his partner if she does something wrong" (ibid.).

The findings were difficult to ignore. Police, judges and lawyers began asking Medica Zenica for follow-up training and information. One judge in Zenica noted, "We need new education. What is new education? It's not only about the law. It's something about sociology, psychology, systems and traditions."

While the research made a significant impact, it was not without problems. The research team had hoped to expand their information sources, but found that institutions were often reluctant to help. Hospitals were unwilling to share their medical records with the team, even on a confidential basis. The team had not anticipated this problem, and attributed it partly to the competition between Medica Zenica and local hospitals to provide services to women. "We have women here who are doctors and nurses at Medica and work in hospitals at the same time," says Duska. "When we built the Medica team, the best nurses and one of the most renowned doctors started to work with us. I think the hospitals feel threatened by this."

Although they lacked hospital data, they were able to incorporate broad observations about the medical system as practiced in hospitals. For example, rape victims must have a doctor verify the incident through a medical exam. If doctors cannot detect visible cuts or bruises, they tend to doubt the validity of the complaint, and do not look for more subtle injury. Doctors then report their conclusions to police and prosecutors, undermining the women's testimonies and ability to get a fair hearing (ibid.).

### **From Sensationalism to Sensitivity: Working with the Media**

Medica Zenica initially planned to attract media attention to their findings by advertising in a variety of publications as well as on television and radio. Lacking the necessary resources, they instead issued a one-page media bulletin and bombarded the media with press releases and updates on their findings until they got their attention. Soon, TV and radio programmes began calling the organization for interviews.

By using the media to publicize their findings, Medica Zenica got the message out to communities and provided women with information on their SOS hotline and other services. But in dealing with the media, the remnants of a catastrophe from 1994 were very much on their minds. That year, a newspaper had published a list of names of rape survivors along with the names of the perpetrators. Medica Zenica feared something similar would happen with their study. "I do not know if I've had any contacts with journalists in the last seven years which did not contain a request along the lines of, 'could you get me an interview with a woman who was a victim of war-time rape, who was impreg-

nated and had the baby,” says Andric-Ruzicic. “Even if reporters show a genuine desire to help so that these crimes are not forgotten, at the end of the day they still sell their articles to newspapers.”

Medica Zenica pledged not to tell any woman’s personal story, despite media requests. Although they kept this pledge, they ran into problems when a newspaper incorrectly published data on rape cases taken from records kept at the police departments. Understandably, this created tensions between Medica Zenica and the police. Thereafter, they insisted that reporters call them before publishing their stories.

### **Training as a Tool for Change**

After publishing the study, the team began workshops and trainings to address the ways in which women were treated by authorities of all kinds – including specific training sessions for judges, police, lawyers, teachers and medical professionals. The team issued personal invitations to people who had helped them in the research and asked them to persuade their colleagues to attend as well.

Lawyers, judges and police called for information about Medica Zenica’s workshops. In one case a lawyer called them to see if she could participate in a training workshop for police because she had missed the most recent training for lawyers. When the Medica Zenica staff member told her that the training was not for her professional group, she said, “I don’t mind. I just want more information.”

In developing their training sessions, Medica Zenica tried to find ways to influence judges, police, lawyers and health-care providers without challenging their professional knowledge and expertise. The staff stated at the beginning of each session that the purpose of the training was to give participants the perspective of survivors. “The main thing we say is that we won’t teach you how to do your job, because we don’t know your job,” Andric-Ruzicic explains. “But we will teach you how it looks and feels to be on the other side. We will teach you about trauma and its consequences, and help you strengthen your communication skills so that you can help them.”

The training combines information and interactive learning, using role-plays to encourage professionals to see situations from another perspective. A judge who took to the role-play right away, describes a colleague who had a hard time accepting that role. “He kept asking how he was supposed to say something with the mouth of somebody else. We tried a couple of times. After a while it became much easier for him.”

Other exercises challenge the way in which participants make decisions, especially the judges. Everyone is asked to choose one coloured stone from a pile of stones, then explain the reasons for their choice. “For the first time in my life I was in a position when I had to answer why something was my choice,” admitted a judge after one of the workshops. “No one ever asks me after a sentence to explain why I have made a decision.”

### **Linking Institutions with Each Other**

Medica Zenica planned to train each group of professionals separately and then to link them together in a network so that women are assisted throughout the entire process – from the moment they go to the police station to the time their case goes to trial. After one round of training with police, judges and lawyers, changes became visible. The Zenica police departments altered the system for women who file a complaint of sexual assault, rape or domestic violence. In the past women were required to explain their case first to the officer at the reception desk in a room full of people, then again to an investigating officer. After the workshops, police stations identified key officers who were trained to assist women in these types of situations. They would then help a woman through the process by giving her a private room, assuring her safety and limiting the number of times she is asked to repeat the story.

Members of the organization began to notice other changes. They recalled accompanying a survivor to court after one of the workshops for judges. It was the usual scene: a woman sitting in front of a judge, trying to mutter the words of her story. But soon after the case opened, everyone realized that something was different. The judge was listening carefully, watching her intently. “It’s okay,” he said to her. “I know it’s difficult. We are here to help you.” Even Medica Zenica staff members were shocked.

The staff anticipates that with the shift to a market-based economy, with increased unemployment and economic insecurity, the incidents of rape and domestic violence will continue to increase. Because women are no longer so reluctant to report such abuse, more cases will end up in the police and court systems. “In 1997, there were 25 cases of rape and domestic violence reported to the police in Zenica. It will be interesting to see how many we have over the next few years,” says Andric-Ruzicic. She also expects that the system will be better prepared: “Now the cases have higher priority and every police department in which we have done the training has changed,” she says.

Medica Zenica also expects that their work with judges and lawyers will influence politicians and ultimately, legislation. Although the NGO itself had few contacts in the ministries, they knew that Parliament often seeks the input of judges and lawyers in developing new legislation.<sup>3</sup> They are currently working to strengthen the ties between the different groups they have trained. A follow-up seminar will convene judges, lawyers, police and health-care professionals to form a network that will work together to eliminate violence against women.

### **Timing Is Critical**

When asked why Medica Zenica had not begun working with educational institutions, Andric-Ruzicic responded, “It’s better to wait. Right now there is a big fight between the three nationalities about curriculum... Like all of the things we do, we must wait for the right moment. And this is not it.”

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*3 In the process of transition, the number of women in Parliament has drastically decreased, largely with the elimination of a quota system (UNDP 1999).*

### Monitoring a Domestic Violence Law in Malaysia

Research does not end with the passing of a law. In Malaysia, the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) embarked on a research and monitoring project to find out what changes had come about as a result of the 1994 Domestic Violence Act. By following several different women through the process of reporting a crime and seeking redress, the project sought not only to determine how women were being treated but also to empower women to use the findings to become advocates in their own cases.

"We went with women through every step," says WAO executive secretary Ivy Josiah, "from riding the bus with them to the nearest welfare office all the way through to the courts to see exactly what they had to go through...." The group found that there were still problems in the way women were treated at all levels.

With the results of their research in hand, WAO has begun advocating for changes in the law, expanding it to cover mental abuse, threats of violence and stalking. More importantly, they realized that for things to change, women would have to advocate for themselves. WAO is empowering women to do just that – to stand up to judges and welfare officers, to demand protection orders directly from the presiding judge. As a result, reporting of domestic violence has increased by 300 per cent. "Their active participation is vital," Josiah says. "As a society, we haven't built up a sense of our rights and of outrage when they are violated."

Conversely, when asked why Medica Zenica chose to support legislative reform, she answered resolutely, "If we don't jump in now, when are we going to do it? Now is the time to intervene."

For Andric-Ruzicic and her staff, good timing is not only knowing which issues to tackle first, but when the moment is right. Recognizing the importance of education in changing future generations, they waited for the right moment to get violence against women into the curriculum when the new educational institutions were being formed. In an environment still rife with social, economic and political change, Medica Zenica takes every opportunity to ensure that women's human rights will be included in the blueprints of the emerging state.

### Conclusion: The Next Steps

Medica Zenica's work started with an attempt to understand a growing problem that many in the legal and law enforcement institutions either did not believe existed or did not care about. Their research documented the fact that violence against women had not ended with the war but was widespread and increasing. Their media and training strategies successfully brought this reality home to the police and judicial systems, helping them take responsibility for change.

The Medica Zenica project has also reached the eyes and ears of international organizations. With support from the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, the American Bar Association, Oxfam and other organizations, Medica Zenica has launched a follow-up initiative that allows them to continue their training and expand it to involve teachers and education officials as well as legislators. "We are still in the process of learning," says Andric-Ruzicic, "but we were brought together by a common goal. We will keep on pushing the government to do better, and follow them every step of the way."

"Femicide is an urgent and alarming social problem. By breaking the historical, social silence on the issue we hope to strengthen society's responsibility to prevent the crime, and place femicide on the agenda of policy-makers."

- Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Project Director  
Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling

### Mapping the Landscape of Femicide in the West Bank and Gaza

<b>PROJECT NAME:</b>	Femicide—The Legal Victimization of Women in the Arab World: Palestine Case Study
<b>PROJECT DIRECTOR:</b>	Dr. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian
<b>ORGANIZATION:</b>	Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling
<b>DATES:</b>	1998-1999
<b>TRUST FUND GRANT:</b>	\$50,000
<b>OBJECTIVES:</b>	To document femicide in the West Bank and Gaza and use it to change the way the practice is viewed by the entire society, focusing on families, religious and community leaders, police and lawyers as well as women themselves.

### CASE STUDY :

## Mapping the Landscape of Femicide in the West Bank and Gaza

He barely acknowledged her when the meeting began, noticing only that her sleeves were not quite long enough to cover her arms. "Shame," the *mukhtar* (traditional religious leader) said, and turned to the two male researchers who accompanied her on the interview. The research team, headed by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, project director at the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), was interviewing the *mukhtaras* part of a project to uncover hidden facts on the practice known as "honour killing," which makes it acceptable for one or more male members of the family to murder a woman or girl suspected of betraying her family's honour. Women are killed for a range of reasons, including actual or suspected premarital sex, rumoured infidelity and even for merely reporting rape or sexual abuse.

Still ignoring Shalhoub-Kevorkian, the *mukhtar* explained to the two men the story of a 14-year-old girl in his village who had been raped. The entire community was talking about the incident, causing her family a great deal of humiliation. According to him, the girl was making matters worse by refusing to marry the perpetrator – a means of restoring the family honour. His sympathies were clearly with the family who had come to him for help. His solution was captured in the words of a father whose daughter was in a similar situation: "Be married or be buried" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999).

Shalhoub-Kevorkian was aware that as a *mukhtar* this man had great influence, both with the family and in the community as a whole. She knew the matter was a grave problem for the family, and that the *mukhtar* took his responsibility

seriously. She waited for the right moment to address him and asked him to explain how he typically helps victims in such cases. Turning to her for the first time, he said, "I can see by looking into a girl's eyes if she was raped or if she wanted it." He went on to explain the "rule of the shoes," a method of proving whether a girl or woman is innocent or not. According to this rule, if her shoes were on at the time of the rape, she tried to prevent it; if they were off, she gave her consent.



**Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, femicide project coordinator, West Bank and Gaza.**

Shalhoub-Kevorkian calmly persisted, countering his arguments with reference to Shari'a (canon) law and Arab proverbs. The *mukhtar* admitted that he did not want to give the family permission, even tacitly, to kill the girl, but the family had come to him with the problem, and he had to help them find a solution. Shalhoub-Kevorkian began to suggest alternatives. Together they found a way to ensure the girl's safety by sending her to Jordan to live with her extended family. The *mukhtar* was apparently relieved to have found an acceptable solution, and not have the girl's death on his hands. He has begun talking more often with the women at WCLAC and has asked their assistance in other cases of potential femicide in his community.

Not all cases end like this one. In fact, until recently, the issue of "honour killing" was rarely discussed and there was very little information about the practice. With a grant from

the Trust Fund in 1998, WCLAC conducted a study to uncover the extent of the practice and the services available to women who are threatened with it. The research is the first of its kind in the occupied territories, and WCLAC is using the results to bring femicide to the public eye, improve services for potential victims and lobby for legislative reform.

In July 2000, the group, together with the Jordanian Women's Union, received a new Trust Fund grant to continue their research, train young women and judges, and review cases from rape crisis centres. While WCLAC expects it will take many years to eradicate the practice, they hope that the research will reveal the urgency of the problem to secular and religious authorities as well as to the general public. For Shalhoub-Kevorkian, helping even one woman is worth the work. They are people in life and death situations and deserve compassion, she says. "Listen to the individual women," advises Shalhoub-Kevorkian. "Hear their stories and learn from them."

### **Background: Killing Women in the Name of Honour**

During an interview with WCLAC, a well-respected community leader said, "Do you think it is difficult to get rid of a woman who violated her honour and the honour of her family? Women in this society know very well that behaving contrary to social norms could lead to their death..." (WCLAC 2000). Women are responsible for maintaining their families' honour, even when they

## Jordanian Activists Campaign to Eliminate “Crimes of Honour”

In Jordan, the National Campaign to Prevent Violence Against Women included an essay competition for young people. A 15-year-old girl wrote: “I am boiling with anger, and there is a scream that I have suppressed for a long time. I keep asking myself, What crime did I commit other than just being female? ... I wish I could even change my society for another, one that looks at me as a human being....”

A 17-year-old boy echoed her: “I am not a girl, but I can feel the pain they are going through by listening to the news every day. It is really painful to know that in the place I live, they treat some girls like they are not human beings... .” (UNIFEM 1999:15).

Inspired by these outpourings, a number of women’s NGOs, led by the Human Forum for Women’s Human Rights, carried out a campaign to repeal Article 340 of the country’s Penal Code, which allows men who kill a female relative to receive lenient sentences. Activists point out that the article not only contradicts Islamic law, which states that men should protect women, but in fact is a holdover from the French Penal Code, adopted by the Ottoman rulers in the 19th century and copied into national laws at the end of the Ottoman Empire.

The campaign sought to combine pressure from civil society with high-level support for legislative change. To do this, they first did research to uncover the nature and extent of “crimes of honour,” interviewing judges and lawyers, women survivors, and both women and men in prison. Documenting their accounts with police and court records, the organizers brought their campaign alive with the words of some of the killers, currently serving their short sentences. The men reiterated that they would kill again if need be, adding that the family’s honour can only be cleansed when “washed with the blood of the one who tarnished it.”

The research had an immediate impact. King Hussein gave public support to the campaign while Princess Basma joined in the protest marches. To date, the measure to repeal Article 340 has passed the Upper House of Parliament on two separate occasions, only to be rejected by the Lower House. But each time, the protests grow louder, and public outrage grows more widespread. Activists hope that soon, Article 340 will be eliminated.

are the victims of abuse. Ironically, at the same time they are viewed as weak, and in need of men’s constant care (Ruggi 1998).

In the West Bank and Gaza, as in other parts of the Middle East, Turkey and Pakistan, femicide stems from the patriarchal construction of honour. The Arabic term *ardh* refers to land and women’s sexual purity, both of which are seen as prized possessions belonging to men. According to Birzeit University professor Sharif Kanaana, laws governing “honour killing” stem from patriarchal society’s interest in control of family power structures rather than sexual behaviour: “What the men of the family, clan, or tribe seek control of in a patrilineal society is reproductive power” (quoted in Ruggi 1998).

A woman’s chastity is considered the property first of her father and then of her husband. If she or someone else violates that property, her family’s honour is tarnished. One way to restore it is through the woman’s execution, although sometimes the woman can be spared if she marries the man who has violated her. For many women, these amount to the same thing: a 16-year old girl, raped and forced to marry the rapist, described her life as “a living death” (WCLAC 2000).

Throughout the Occupied Territories, the resolution of such cases is subject to overlapping, and often competing authorities. The lack of national sovereignty and a history of rule by outside authorities, including the British and Jordanians as well as the Israelis, has blocked the development of national laws and institutions in Palestine. Things have begun to change somewhat since the 1993 Oslo Agreements, under which the West Bank and Gaza are administered by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), and the establishment of the Palestinian Legislative Council, an elected legislative body, in 1994. However, while new laws and institutions are beginning to be established, many aspects of life are still influenced by more traditional systems of social control, including tribal law, which some communities refer to when addressing civil, family and social disputes.

Tribal law stems from a combination of pre-Islamic customs, Shari’a law and civil law.

Contrary to popular belief, the practice of “honour killing” does not have roots in the Qur’an. Rather, it derives from the early French Penal Code. Adopted by the Ottomans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the code was subsequently incorporated into different state penal codes at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Modern rules of evidence do not apply: despite the provision in Shari’a law that proving a case of adultery requires the testimony of four witnesses, traditional leaders depend primarily on their intuition to ascertain whether a woman is guilty of dishonouring her family.

Two principles, *sutra* and *dabdabeh*, govern the practice of femicide. *Sutra* is the act of draping something from view. If a family believes a girl or woman has done something to dishonour them, but it has not yet become public, they will use *sutra* to regain their honour. This may entail arranging for the girl to have a fatal “accident” if she refuses to marry her rapist or accept some other oppressive marriage arrangement. *Dabdabeh* refers to the need to prevent a scandalous situation from worsening once the dishonour is disclosed. In such cases, a cover-up measure must be found. According to a frequently quoted Arab proverb, “*El-khammeh ma ilha ila el-tammèh*” (the best way to treat filth is to bury it). Because such resolutions are difficult to find, and are clearly outside the scope of most legal systems, courts often call on traditional community or religious leaders in cases that threaten family honour.

In one case, for example, a three-year-old girl was brutally raped by a male relative of her mother in a political vendetta against her father. Because of the seriousness of the crime, as well as its political aspects, the rape was reported to the PNA, which prosecuted the case in Security Court and sentenced the rapist to life in prison. As a result, the entire community learned of the crime, making *sutra* impossible, and the PNA called in traditional leaders to resolve the problem of the insult to family honour. They did this through *dabdabeh*, by awarding financial damages to the girl’s family and hanging a white cloth over their home, to show that the girl’s honour had not been tarnished. None of these solutions dealt with the damage done to the girl – and none of those charged with dealing with the case saw her welfare as a priority.

The example shows the limits of the legal system in such cases; so long as the Palestinian authorities are reluctant to challenge beliefs in the concept of family “honour,” their ability to address femicide is severely limited. Most cases of femicide never make it to court. When they do, those who have carried out the murder are likely to receive at most a six-month prison sentence.

The Penal Code in the West Bank and Gaza follows that in Jordan, as do Criminal Court procedures. In cases of gender-based violence, two provisions of the Penal Code, Articles 340 and 98, favour the accused and underline the state’s ambivalence towards victims. According to Article 340, a male who kills or injures his wife or another female relative is exempt from legal penalty if he apprehends her in the act of fornication with another male. But the need to provide four witnesses, standing only as far away as “the thickness of a piece of paper,” means the article is rarely used. Under the more commonly invoked Article 98, the killer can receive a reduced sentence if he was in a state of rage when he committed the murder.

Lacking protection from local and state institutions, women often seek

support from their families. But the community's belief in the importance of family honour puts enormous pressure on the family: if dishonour is discovered they feel as if they are caught in a trap with no way out. As a result, they are often desperate to find a way to avoid scandal. Moreover, girls are taught from a young age that honour is the most important value in society, and that bringing dishonour to the family will effectively end their lives. For this reason, Shalhoub-Kevorkian explains, girls seek their families' support. "Most Palestinian women are unwilling to assert their rights if they believe it will estrange them from their communities, families, and society. They prefer to have their rights respected and acknowledged by their families" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999). Many families will offer this support, she adds, providing they see some viable alternative.

### Mapping the Landscape of Femicide: A Research Initiative

With statehood on the horizon, and the establishment of the Palestinian Legislative Council in 1994, women's NGOs have been working together to ensure that the current provisions regarding the punishment of honour killing do not become codified in the new laws. To do this, however, they need reliable statistics. WCLAC's research project was designed to penetrate the layers of secrecy and complicity that make such statistics so hard to obtain.

In 1997, the PNA attorney general stated that he suspected that 70 per cent of all murders in Gaza and the West Bank were honour killings (Ruggi 1998). However, WCLAC discovered that police and court records are themselves unreliable, since they normally record what fathers, brothers or uncles report as the cause of death, usually suicide or accident. Death certificates, which may be issued by a *mukhtar* as well as a doctor, are often no more helpful, since they usually merely record the family's explanation. In one case, WCLAC uncovered a death certificate of a 26-year-old woman that stated that the cause of death was old age (WCLAC 2000). While such cases provide convincing circumstantial evidence, finding proof that femicide has taken place is almost impossible. Finding a way to get behind the closed doors of communities was imperative.

When WCLAC started the project, they had reason to believe that femicide was not only widespread but increasing. Known throughout Gaza and the West Bank for their work with women victims of violence, WCLAC was often called upon for help in cases of femicide. They started the first hotline for women who have been sexually violated, or suspected of otherwise dishonouring the family, and followed up on each case. In 1993 they opened a Social Services Unit to provide counselling to women have been accused of violating family honour.

WCLAC is part of a coalition of women's organizations in the West Bank and Gaza known as the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, which deals with women's human rights issues. Following the Israeli occupation in 1967, women began to organize to provide vitally needed services to communities lacking everything from health care to sanitation. These groups formed the basis for the early women's movement, which emerged in the Occupied Territories in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the popular uprising

known as the Intifada, which began in 1987, women fought alongside men to resist the occupation, winning new respect and authority in the process (Ruggi 1998; Azzouni 1999).

While this period marked a turning point for women's visibility and activism, it also marked the rising power of the fundamentalist parties, which reinforced traditional gender roles. Women's voices were heard in the fight for independence, yet in their own fight for equality, they were ignored. During an interview, Amal Khrieshe, general co-ordinator of the Palestinian Women's Working Society, another WATC member, asked, "What does it mean to be a leader in the political arena...if I have to keep silent about my sufferings and my fears; if I have no rights over my body and my life; if I can't decide on my marriage; and if I can't control my education...?"

Although the effort to document honour killings is supported by WATC, the WCLAC research project is breaking new ground. Violence against women is still a relatively new issue for the women's movement in the West Bank and Gaza, one which most people are reluctant to discuss candidly (WCLAC 2000). While some groups may disagree with WCLAC's approach, their findings will open up advocacy opportunities for all of the women's groups.

Based on their experience as service providers, Shalhoub-Kevorkian and the project team began by broadening the definition of femicide, changing it from an act of killing to a process. In this way they sought to highlight the perspective of women and discover different points at which to intervene. To document the process, they analysed information from a variety of sources, including women and girls who came to the Centre, families of victims, health officials, *mukhtars*, police, judges and an attorney general. They completed questionnaires, carried out guided interviews and copied records from the police and court systems. The final research report includes more than 100 pages of data on femicide, including number of cases, types of cases, analysis of the causes, and individual stories.

### Research Findings: Bringing Femicide into the Open

WCLAC's findings confirmed their expectations. They showed that the number of women killed in the name of honour may have increased over the last three years, and that women believe their situation has become more oppressive. WCLAC suspects these changes may be attributed to, among other things, frustration with the lack of progress in achieving a Palestinian state, the rising power of fundamentalists, and the reluctance of the PNA to address gender discrimination at the highest levels.

Examination of police and court records reinforced WCLAC's belief that most cases of femicide are never reported. When they are, they are most often dismissed as accidents. Police departments recorded a total of 39 cases from 1996 to 1998 – grossly underdocumenting the magnitude of the problem. In addition, death certificates showed that 85 per cent of female deaths over a three-year period were attributed to fate – not an accepted legal term. While the implications of this finding cannot be confirmed, it suggests that femicide was the actual cause of death in many cases. Interviews with police showed that most of them believe there is little they can do to dissuade communities

from the practice. One police officer admitted that he suspected murder was more likely than suicide in the deaths of women but added, "The girl is dead. Why cause more pain? *Sutra* is the best way."

Many cases of potential femicide go unreported because women are either afraid to seek help, or they internalize the shame of their actions, believing that they deserve their fate. WCLAC's study shows that one-half to two-thirds of women are reluctant to go to the police. Nearly 90 per cent of WCLAC's clients expressed a degree of self-blame for the abuse inflicted upon them. WCLAC staff attribute this to cultural beliefs that portray women as seductive and hold them responsible for men's sexual behaviour. Police often echo the family and community leaders, asking: "What have you done to provoke this abuse?"

The report emphasizes the need for a data bank where information on cases can be documented. It proposes training for judges, lawyers, police and government officials. And it urges all service providers to treat each case as unique, responding with a combination of social, legal, medical and therapeutic services. "There is no cookbook approach to the problem," says Shalhoub-Kevorkian. "We need to protect and meet the individual needs of each woman or girl who comes to us for help."

## Challenges and Strategies:

### Changing Perspectives to Save Women's Lives

WCLAC's project combined research with intervention to document femicide and save women from what society deemed their destiny. They worked with sympathetic individuals in families, communities and institutions, identifying people who were willing to help the women who otherwise had no hope. Often it is difficult to know how to begin. Shalhoub-Kevorkian writes, "We did not know with any assurance how to proceed in cases where the life of a female is threatened" (WCLAC 2000). Nevertheless, they found methods of reaching people on their own terms and of working with them to find an acceptable solution.

### From Honour to Outrage: Reframing the Problem

According to the socially accepted definition, "honour killing" refers only to the actual murder and denies it as a crime. It ignores the process that leads up to the execution, and the pervasive oppression of women that perpetuates the practice. Persuading people to think of carefully planned crimes against women rather than the protection of family honour challenges society's understanding of the practice and offers several points of intervention.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian and her team look at the practice of femicide as a process, one that moves from a "living death to an actual death." This process starts with rumour and threatened disclosure and escalates to physical and psychological abuse, death threats, and ultimately, murder. Such a definition highlights the pain as well as the responsibility of the family and the community in the crime. "Killing a family member is a crime that is based not only on a family member's decision, but also stems from social pressure and the family's fear of social scandal," explains Shalhoub-Kevorkian.

Dividing the process into its component parts helps service providers

identify different points of intervention. Reaching families and community leaders before they make the decision to proceed with the murder is a key entry point. Once the murder has been planned, there is no way of knowing when and how it will take place. In order to make it seem accidental, the family usually waits for a period of time, committing the act when the girl or woman least expects it. Intervening early can make all the difference.

WCLAC tries to convince everyone they work with that it is not honourable to kill, it is honourable to help the victim (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999). They believe that by doing so they can encourage those responsible for protecting women to be more sensitive and those charged with promoting women's rights to be more active. While the Ministry of Welfare has recently drawn up a plan for safe homes and shelters for abused women, it has few resources and limited support. Asked about femicide, a Ministry representative explained, "We know this is a real problem, and I am aware that we have tons of girls and women who need a safe haven, but we have nothing to offer.... We as a Ministry are not yet ready to deal with such issues" (ibid.). In addition, their mandate is limited to women and girls under the age of 18.

### **Combining Research with Services**

WCLAC's research team included the project director, consultants and WCLAC staff known as "helpers," those who work directly with cases of femicide. The helpers are familiar with methods of intervention that help protect potential victims, and are often able to get behind closed doors. Working in communities where femicide was suspected in the past, the research team tried not only to identify cases where women or girls were threatened but to find a way to work with families, officials or *mukhtar* to find alternative solutions that the woman or girl and the families could accept.

The work of the WCLAC team is a daily struggle between life and death. From the moment a woman's case reaches their ears, they know that the murder could take place at any time. Many of their efforts are directed towards getting the woman's family to commit to her protection. If the potential cause of dishonour has not yet become public, they set up meetings with the family and try to persuade them that *sutra* can be carried out in ways that protect rather than harm the victim – sometimes bringing along an Islamic leader to lend weight to this approach.

One of the most innovative approaches in this regard is the use of formal contracts, drawn up and signed in the presence of a community or religious leader, that commit the family to refrain from killing and instead protect the woman or girl. While there is no guarantee that the contracts will be honoured, WCLAC staff go to some lengths to increase the likelihood that they will be enforced. They try, for example, to bring not only several different family members but also religious and community leaders to a meeting, at which the girl describes her plight and the contract is drawn up. At the end of the meeting, everyone signs the contract, binding them to a group commitment. In one case, in which a young girl was being abused by her father, the contract was signed by a religious leader and the governor, who threatened to bring legal sanctions if anything later happened to the girl (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999).

### Legal Assurance (Agreement)

We, the undersigned, holding I.D. number(s)

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I.D. Number \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_ I.D. Number \_\_\_\_\_

Promise legally and be held responsible towards the aforementioned group (community) of individuals:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

To assure the safety of \_\_\_\_\_, holding I.D. number \_\_\_\_\_, that she will not be molested physically, sexually, and emotionally, and not to impose changes on her private or public life which are in contradiction with her rights and basic needs (school, work, freedom of movement, freedom to decide, etc.).

We are also committed to protect her life by not allowing any individual within her family or community to kill her, or to suggest or provoke her to commit suicide.

We also commit and ensure that representatives of the above named community, composed of an attorney from the legal department (Centre) and a social worker from the social department, will make follow-up visits to the victim on a minimum average of once or twice monthly according to the condition and need of the girl (victim).

The Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling will provide support to the victim and work with members of the family to ensure that the greatest possible degree of physical, sexual, and psychological safety are provided to the victim.

In the event this legal assurance is violated, the Centre will take legal or other necessary action (if and as fit).

#### Signatures

Name	I.D.	Relationship	Profession	Signature
1.				
2.				
3.				

A sample contract often used in interventions by WCLAC staff in Gaza and the West Bank.

Sometimes, in order to protect the girl or woman, the helpers suggest that she, not the family, change her behaviour. In one case, a girl refused to wear a veil to school. Her brother told her that if he caught her leaving home without the veil he would kill her. When the team learned of the case, the girl had become a prisoner in her own home, unable to finish her college courses. They intervened by suggesting that she agree to wear the veil; this way, they argued, she could go to school, receive an education and try to use her knowledge to change the role of women later in her life. The girl agreed and was permitted to attend school again. While they recognize that such solutions may reinforce gender roles, they insist that their primary goal is to protect the lives of women and girls.

In another case, WCLAC was asked to assist a young rape victim by identifying a safe place to have her hymen reconstructed, to prevent her family and future husband from knowing that she was not a virgin. While the hymen reconstruction contradicts Shalhoub-Kevorkian's strong beliefs in women's rights, she wholeheartedly agreed to help. "Our priority is saving the lives of these women," she said. "I tell people that feminism can go to hell if it means sacrificing the individual."

### **Speaking the Language of Those We Wish to Change**

The WCLAC team's ability to intervene in cases of femicide requires that they establish their credibility with various authorities, including police and judges as well as community and religious leaders. They adopt a variety of discourses, depending on the person or persons they think is best positioned to intervene. They arm themselves with knowledge about the Qu'ran, Shari'a law, Arab proverbs, and court procedures. They use the information to engage interviewees in a conversation about the problem and demonstrate that they understand it from the other's perspective.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian's understanding of Muslim tradition is particularly important in her work with community and religious leaders. As a woman advocating for change, she is frequently perceived as a troublemaker. Often she begins with a reference to the Qur'an or a Hadith (saying of the Prophet) to dispel any animosity: "Allah said that if you cannot change with your hands, change with your words. And if you cannot change with your words, change with your heart."

During interviews, the team uses a friendly, semi-structured approach and proceeds at a pace that is comfortable for interviewees. They remain patient, even when ignored. When working with cases of femicide, male counterparts usually accompany female helpers in order to facilitate access and ease the conversation with male family members as well as community or religious leaders. They emphasize the positive aspects of tradition, to try to get everyone to support a resolution that protects a woman's life. Yet they are also prepared, in the event of an emergency, to be more forceful, calling on the police, or even the district governor, to accompany them to a family's home. "I have gone to people's homes and refused to leave," says Shalhoub-Kevorkian. "If we know that a woman is about to be murdered, we do whatever we can to save her."

### **Working with Sympathetic Individuals**

The WCLAC team spent hours meeting with individuals, often returning repeatedly for meetings. By listening carefully to the views and responsibilities of each person, they were able to identify individuals in families, communities and legal and law enforcement institutions that were sympathetic to their mission and to establish personal relationships with them. These relationships proved invaluable to their efforts to save potential victims from femicide. They also provided a basis for future work to change the perception of femicide throughout society.

Families were critical, and often the most difficult to work with. Believing that a violation of a female family member is a violation of the family, all family members feel their lives are ruined. In one case, a father whose daughter

was raped said, “he not only raped my daughter, he raped all of us...and we are no longer a family.” Knowing that disgrace is imminent if the suspected incident is known, they have a vital need to keep it quiet – whatever it takes. In cases of rape or sexual assault, this usually means the woman or girl must suffer in silence, knowing that to bring charges is to bring disgrace. “The families are scared and confused, caught in a trap that is relentlessly closing,” Shalhoub-Kevorkian says. Men are just as trapped as women, she explains, since according to the codes of honour, one cannot remain a man if he remains silent toward perceived sexual aggression against females. “But if you know how to open a dialogue and offer help,” she adds, “if you present feasible alternatives, it is possible to change their minds and save a woman’s life.”

Often one or more family members will try to find a way out of the trap by going to a community or religious leader, to ask for his guidance. This gives these individuals the power of life or death: if they agree with the family that femicide is the only way, they will help them cover up the crime by certifying an “accident” on the death certificate. But some of them have begun to look for other solutions. In the case of *mukhtars* though guided by Shari’a law, each interprets the rules differently, and their power is contingent on the size of their community (ibid.). As a result, some *mukhtars* are more willing than others to cooperate with WCLAC. The team has begun to seek out these individuals, to try to encourage them to consult with someone at the Centre when trying to decide on the proper course of action.

With police it was the same. While many viewed honour as “the most important element in society,” WCLAC found that at least a third of those interviewed were very critical of the “tribal” notions that govern such crimes, especially at a time when they are trying to build a modern state. “We are in a new society,” one said. “Tribal codes and norms are obsolete.” Another agreed: “If tribal notables continue to address crimes committed against women, why do we need a police force?” (ibid.)

Moreover, police are often the first to learn of a rape or other violation. While many of those interviewed stated that there is little they can do to protect the women, others said that they had found ways to intervene, offering shelter or taking them to the hospital and notifying the Centre before calling the family. For Su’ad Abu Dayyeh, a WCLAC staff member, this cooperation between the police and women’s centres is a great step forward in combating femicide: “When they feel they cannot help, they contact us,” she explains (quoted in Ruggi 1998). WCLAC and other women’s centres now coordinate with police officers, providing workshops for officers who deal with abused women (ibid.).

### **Conclusion: Expanding Their Efforts**

Mapping the landscape of femicide does not provide a blueprint for changing it. WCLAC obtained the information needed to document femicide and shared it with those who will work to eliminate it, including other members of the WATC.

As they move into the next stage of their project, working with the Jordanian Women's Centre, WCLAC plans to make a special effort to reach young women, the group most likely to be victimized by femicide. At the same time, they try to remain in contact with the women's families they have worked with, who often face new problems. Many of the women accused of threatening their families' honour remain locked in prisons for their safety, or estranged from their families and communities. Shalhoub-Kevorkian describes the case of a 12-year-old girl who was raped and subsequently imprisoned to keep her from being killed. For years she would stand outside the prison courtyard, hoping to see the girl. Finally, three years after the rape, the prison gave her permission to visit. She and the girl agreed that WCLAC will start working with her family to try to help her leave prison.

### **The Power of Research: Lessons from the Two Case Studies**

The two case studies presented in this chapter provide several critical insights into the ways in which research can be used effectively, in both communities and institutions, to promote a rights-based view of gender-based violence and culturally accepted crimes against women. The studies show that research projects carried out by service providers share a number of strengths. First, these NGOs draw upon their position in the community to access sources that are otherwise closed, documenting the problem with many different kinds of evidence. Second, they combine research with advocacy, targeting key individuals in both communities and institutions to change the way that women are perceived and treated. Third, they adhere to the conviction that research should always be used to empower its subjects, rather than to simply support a cause.

### **The Role of Service Providers in Action Research**

Service providers can use their relationships with community leaders and institutional representatives to help them obtain information that is difficult for research institutions to find. In Gaza and the West Bank, WCLAC team members were allowed behind the closed doors of homes, and were respected by police and judges as well as *mukhtars*. Because of their reputation, police officers, judges and the attorney general provided them with access to records, reports and files. In Bosnia, Medica Zenica was known in the district and trusted by women, allowing them to collect personal experiences. Police and judges provided them with the reports they requested because they were familiar with them and their services. As a result of the information they gathered, both organizations published reports that are the first of their kind.

Gathering information on violence against women often depends on the ability to create a sense of respect and comfort between researchers and interviewees. WCLAC and Medica Zenica used their experience as service providers to build on the trust they had established with women, and create a sense of empathy in the individuals they hoped to change. In their interviews they established a friendly environment, and used language and references that appealed to interviewees.

### **Combining Research with Advocacy**

Those who best understand the needs of victims are usually the most powerful advocates of change. Through their hands-on work with survivors of gender violence, service providers

gain legitimacy with both the survivors and those responsible for their protection. This enables them to give voice to the survivors, reaching those with the power to change the way they are treated, both by legal and law enforcement authorities and by society as a whole.

In the process of giving voice to survivors, projects can also draw on these voices to reframe or redefine the problem of gender-based violence. In the West Bank and Gaza, WCLAC reframed the culturally accepted practice of “honour killing” as femicide, a carefully planned crime against women, focusing on the several stages in a process rather than the final act alone. In this way they not only challenged the ability of courts to dismiss it as an act of justified rage, but also identified points at which they could work with police or community leaders to successfully intervene. In Bosnia, the challenge was less a matter of reframing the problem of gender violence than of showing that it was not limited to a single context, in that case, war. In both cases, the projects focused on the way women experienced not only the violence but their treatment at the hands of those from whom they sought help.

With their findings in hand, NGOs can work to change state or local authorities or members of the community. Finding ways to make the information accessible and significant to those in authority means including information that pertains to them and their responsibilities. WCLAC and Medica Zenica documented their findings with records from courts, judges, lawyers, police departments, and interviews with service providers and communities. As a result, their report reached a large number of people in all of these groups and revealed possible entry points for intervention. In both cases, the organizations used their findings to persuade individuals that it is every institution’s responsibility to stop violence against women.

### **Never Sacrifice the Individual for the Cause**

In the process of raising public awareness there are times when protecting individuals means sacrificing a publicity coup. Alternatively, in attempting to save an individual, activists may find they agree to behaviour that may set back their efforts to resist all types of women’s subordination equally – examples include hymen reconstruction or agreeing to wear the veil in public. For Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Andric-Ruzicic the priority is the safety of each woman they serve. When faced with a decision to either help the individual or fight a battle on women’s human rights, both women choose the individual, without a second thought. If a single person’s life is in danger, the question isn’t whether to retreat, but how.

### **The Broader Perspective: Using Action Research in Trust Fund Projects**

Both of the projects described in this chapter began with a need to document a problem of gender violence that was not widely recognized. In order to get people to take them seriously, especially those with the power to change the situation, the women’s groups needed to prove that their perceptions were valid: records and interviews in every community confirmed the reality of widespread, gender-based crimes. While many of the Trust Fund projects had research as one component, ten of the projects defined research as their major objective. Like the two case studies in this chapter, they all started with a conviction that research has two main purposes: to document reality from the perspective of women and to use research findings to advocate for change on the part of those who hold power.

In moving from research to advocacy, several Trust Fund projects focused on reframing the problem of gender-based violence from the point of view of the person experiencing it rather than the culture that condones it. In Turkey, for example, an NGO called Women for

Women's Human Rights used an explicitly women-centred approach, defining gender-based violence as "any act involving the use of force or coercion intended to promote hierarchical gender relations." They also broadened the term to include not only physical but also social, economic and psychological violence, portraying the problem as one of a "cycle of violence."

Research projects were designed to document not only the scope of gender-based violence but also its causes and consequences. Projects in Viet Nam, Suriname and Fiji combined their research into the nature and scope of gender-based violence with an effort to understand the causes. Each explored a different possible cause. The Centre for Family and Women Studies in Viet Nam sought to understand the cause of violence against women by focusing primarily on men, carrying out in-depth interviews with perpetrators, while the National Women's Movement in Suriname looked for causes by examining the relationships between men and women. Finally, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre sought answers by looking at community attitudes toward women and men. Other projects focused on consequences. In Ghana, the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre carried out a research project not only to determine the incidence and types of gender violence but also to document its effects on women's physical and mental health.

Two of the projects focused on monitoring and improving service provision. The Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre in Ghana carried out a survey in order to determine what services were available for women experiencing gender-based violence and what was needed. They produced a report which they distributed widely, both through NGOs and through the media, which helped make women aware of existing sources of help, and urged them to campaign for more. Finally, they drew upon their findings to work with the government to draw up a comprehensive programme of services for victims of gender-based violence. The Women's Aid Organisation in Malaysia carried out research in order to monitor the implementation of the 1994 Domestic Violence Act, which mandated certain services for women. They documented the procedures a woman has to go through in order to register a crime and pursue a case in court and her treatment at each stage. They publicized their results through the media, pointing to the inadequacies in the system and demanding improvements.

While all of the projects sought to combine research with advocacy, not all of them managed to carry out the advocacy component, owing to lack of resources or appropriate skills, or even as a result of forces outside their control, such as war or civil unrest. The most effective were those that did not conceptualize the work in two separate stages, but integrated advocacy into the research from the very beginning, targeting individuals with power, building relationships of trust, and suggesting alternative views of the problem they were seeking to document. These projects demonstrated the ability of community service providers to realize the full potential of research, understanding that the way in which facts are used are often as important as the facts themselves.

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