

# Implementing Psychosocial Methods to Reinforce Legal Rights Awareness Trainings



**ARDD-LEGAL AID**

Arab Renaissance for  
Democracy & Development

*Psychosocial Support Service ARDD-Legal Aid & Family Guidance  
Awareness Center (FGAC).*

*June, 2014*

## **Abstract**

The Psychosocial Service of ARDD-Legal Aid and the Family Guidance Awareness Centre (FGAC) developed and informally tested the effectiveness of the addition of a psychosocial skills training component to women's legal awareness training sessions. This paper describes the trainings and the anecdotal results of these pilot studies in Zarqa, Jordan.

Joint psychosocial-legal awareness training sessions were developed after observations that there are often large gaps between providing information on legal rights and the actual use of the information in women's daily life. An adjunct psychosocial session was designed to empower women through culturally sensitive assertiveness skills training, so they could make better practical use of the legal rights information, allowing participants to translate the information from awareness raising sessions into action (no matter how small) in their daily lives. The psychosocial session was devised by ARDD-LA clinical psychologists, and 'train the trainer' sessions were held with FGAC lawyers and social workers, who in turn conducted pilot testing sessions with women from the community of Zarqa, Jordan.

Informal results showed that adding psychosocial training in assertiveness and self-esteem skills to more traditional methods of legal awareness raising information provision may be a promising new approach to helping women's access to justice in developing countries. Results suggest it is likely that longer information and longer psychosocial training sessions (2.5 hours each rather than one hour) result in the best outcomes, so long as there is a sufficient break between sessions to overcome fatigue.

Although overcoming the gaps between legal rights awareness and the actual use of this knowledge in daily life will always be an enormous challenge, quotes from women in this study strongly suggest that women may be able to better make use of legal information if provided with a supportive, skills-based psychosocial session as an adjunct.

To better ensure that these sessions are conducted thoughtfully, effectively, and without unintended negative consequences, however, we recommend more testing and research. In particular, longitudinal research where women are followed up over time to see how well changes generalize to their everyday life, to test for unintended negative consequences (such as retaliation from spouses), and to see whether changes last over time is necessary before rolling out this approach in a more widespread manner.

## Background

There is a general agreement that access to justice is a human right. The UN has explicitly stated: "Access to justice is a basic human right as well as an indispensable means to combat poverty, prevent and resolve conflict."<sup>i</sup> However, for many people around the world human rights violations are part of daily life. This includes discrimination, sexual violence, domestic violence, psychological violence and harassment. Research shows that between 16 to 50% of woman's are experiencing violence in the world.<sup>ii</sup> This violence has an immense impact on the psychological wellbeing on individuals. There is a positive relationship between sexual violence, domestic violence and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression disorders.

Research in Jordan with students has showed high numbers of violence, 86 % reported to have experiences with one type of family violence. The most prevailing types of abuse in their families were intimidation, emotional abuse and physical abuse. About half of the group had reported their mothers were victims of abuse.<sup>iii</sup> Unfortunately, not everyone has access to justice. Women often cannot access justice because they lack knowledge of their rights or they are ignorant of the ways in which they can insist on claiming them. Especially, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has lagged behind regarding the awareness of legal rights for women.

Legal empowerment is an important source of development in which individuals can utilize the law to advance their own rights and role in society. The availability of legal aid services and the legal awareness contributes strongly to legal empowerment, ensuring justice for all citizens and contributing to a more peaceful and secure society. Therefore, raising awareness for legal rights of

women is highly needed in Jordan. Legal awareness sessions intend to empower women through equipping them with information about their rights and responsibilities and the tools they can use to improve their social condition. It aims to encourage people to gain the skills and knowledge that will allow them to overcome obstacles in life and help them develop within themselves or in the society.

However current legal awareness sessions only focus on information provision and do not help women use this newly learned knowledge in daily life. It does not address underlying factors about *why* women do not access justice frameworks. For instance, in Jordan, cultural aspects play an important role in the lack of using legal aid services. Commitment to families is very strong, and problems are often viewed as internal family matters. Outside parties may be viewed with suspicion because it is thought they could harm reputations or cause dishonor within the family. Furthermore, the Arab culture may be viewed as a 'masculine' culture where the rights of men are seen as more important than the rights of women.

Therefore, there are many barriers for women accessing the justice systems, such as psychological, cultural and financial barriers. A recent study in Jordan showed a strong tendency within families that violence against women is a personal and familial issue rather than a social and legal problem. Expression of issues towards the community or to outside parties is thought to cause harm, stigmatize families and damages families' reputation<sup>iv</sup>. Women may have feelings of shame, depression and fear of intimidation. For instance, women who get divorced are experiencing immense psychological pressure. If they decide to use their rights to get divorced, they may lose their only source of income and may lose their children since parents often force them to leave them with the husband while they have to move back to their original family. Furthermore, divorced women may be stigmatized and socially ostracized because of accusations of

being rebellious and not caring about her family and children. These issues cause high amounts of stress. Women usually deny their needs and minimize the significance of the situation and they are hesitant to ask for help in order to avoid the feeling of shame and stigma.

In addition, further research addresses issues on why people are not seeking help. They found a great percentage of women who believed that violence against women is justified and beneficial<sup>v</sup>. Women who grew up with abuse, violence and repression are often normalizing, accepting and justifying violence regardless how much they suffer<sup>vi</sup>. This prospect of being rejected from parents, being socially ostracized, the possibility of losing one's children, and the low likelihood of finding employment means many women remain married, even in violent marriages.

### **Traditional models of women's legal awareness raising sessions**

Current approaches to legal awareness raising provision tends to simply present information on women's rights, and ignores the complexity of women using these rights in their lives in the culture in which they live. Awareness trainings provide information about domestic violence, child custody and their rights regarding divorce and alimony. But providing information so they are aware of their rights does not address other more difficult realities that make accessing the justice system unattractive to women. In fact, it is possible that by only providing information sessions without supporting women to use or helping them address issues about how realistic it is for them to use them, may actually be disempowering or harmful for women. These represent significant shortcomings of traditional information based awareness raising trainings.

## **Rationale for the project**

It was determined that providing psychosocial support and basic assertiveness skills training for women empowerment through skills teaching to be able to make *practical use* of the legal rights information. It aims to allow participants to *translate* the information they have been given in the awareness raising session *into action (no matter how small)* in their daily lives.

It is important to note that the aim was not to completely change the way women thought or behaved, but rather to make small adjustments to such things as their belief in their own rights, acceptance of their own situation, understanding the practical limitations of their rights, and their ability to make better decisions based on the information they were given in the legal sessions. We thought that combining legal knowledge with self assertiveness training may help women to make small steps towards improving their access to the justice system including being able to discuss their rights with other women, perhaps helping them come to have more say over family decisions, etc.

## **Implementing the program at FGAC**

From previous work, we understand that women from Zarqa, a city in the north of Jordan, are generally not very aware of their legal rights or they don't know how to use their rights. They are restricted through customs, traditions and a traditional culture of shame. In addition they tend to waive their rights in inheritance and they don't invoke their rights of holding properties. FGAC is working in Zarqa to empower women socially, economically and legally. In addition, they provide psychosocial support and counseling to both children and women. One of their major programs is empowering women who are subject to violence through providing them with awareness of human rights in general, their legal rights and means to deal with violence inflicted on them<sup>vii</sup>.

These awareness sessions are traditional legal awareness raising sessions, as described above. They have an information oriented approach, with no practical tools. Creating awareness of legal rights among Jordanian women is laborious and costly. Firstly, the overall knowledge of the women is small; it takes much time to tackle the deep and broad problems in society. Secondly, the problem is spread across different layers in the population, this makes it challenging to find the entire women population and lastly, many professionals are needed to reach the goals.

### **Psychosocial element**

To fill the gaps within the existing legal awareness training, FGAC and the Psychosocial Service at ARDD-LA came up with a new initiative. The aim is to use psychosocial approaches to enhance the impact of the legal rights

awareness raising training. To achieve this, ARDD-LA provided trainings to lawyers from FGAC, who are providing legal awareness trainings to women. The trainings were culturally adapted through a local Jordanian psychologist who developed a culturally sensitive session module with feedback from other local professionals.

A 3-hour session plan was designed for use by the social workers with the women. Among other things, this session plan was designed with the following specific goals:

1. Helping participants to understand the meanings of the term 'assertive.' (In Arabic, the direct translation of this word is not widely understood so some time is spent discussing the concept).
2. Helping participants to understand differences between 'assertive,' 'aggressive,' and 'passive' and to appreciate the negative aspects of being 'passive' and 'aggressive.'
3. Helping participants to identify those occasions when it might be useful to use assertiveness skills – i.e. in order to meet their valid needs.
4. To help raise self esteem by assisting them in identifying things they like about themselves.
5. Encouraging women to take on empowering values which underpin assertiveness – self-respect, recognising their own needs, ask for what they want, and to not be overly responsible for others, etc.
6. Teaching specific skills in assertive communication skills – how to make 'I' statements, the broken record technique, and skills in saying 'no'.
7. How to make use of non-verbal techniques to meet one's needs – including eye contact, body posture and voice tone, etc.
8. Teach women how to use common problem solving techniques to raise the likelihood that they consider all their options before taking on a particular course of action.

9. For those women who are resistant to the idea of the benefits of women being assertive - to try to shift their perspective even if the shift is subtle.

ARDD-LA local clinical psychologists also conducted ToT sessions with FGAC lawyers and social workers. Lawyers (who facilitated legal awareness sessions) received information about assertiveness skills and tools on how to support and reinforce women during their decision making processes. The training aimed to improve their knowledge about the psychological barriers women encounter to help them in the legal awareness sessions. These skills and a more intensive training were given to social workers, who were to facilitate the psychosocial sessions.

### **Findings from ToT sessions**

After the ToT sessions, lawyers and social workers provided positive feedback that the training was helpful, applicable for daily use and well structured. The lawyers felt they much better understood how to reinforce women to make personal changes.

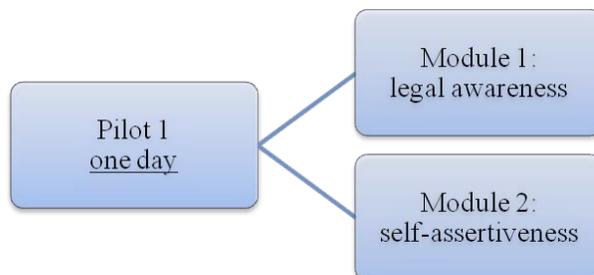
There were some concerns from lawyers, however, that women would not find the training acceptable, especially from those who were in families with conservative men. There were concerns the women would find the assumptions underlying the training to be unacceptable and that implementing some of the assertiveness skills in some women's families would put them in danger. Therefore, after hearing lawyer and social worker concerns, the session plan was adapted further to encourage participant women to reflect on how easy it would be for them to implement assertive changes in their own personal life, thinking about how they could do this in the context of their own families, whether it would

be safe to do so, and discussing with them the notion that change needs to be long-term and taken step by small step.

## Pilot testing

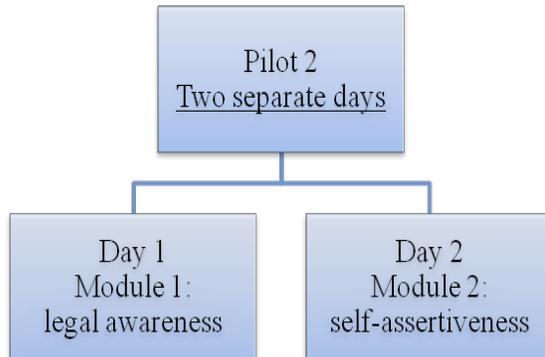
FGAC then conducted two pilot studies, in order to test two different implementation methods. The first method, Pilot 1, involved conducting both legal awareness and psychosocial session on the same day. Specifically, it involved the provision of a one hour information session (lawyer administered), followed by a 30 minute break, and then a one hour psychosocial session (social worker administered).

Figure 1: Pilot Study 1



The second method, Pilot 2, had spread the modules in two days. On the first day, participants had received 2.5 hours of information from the lawyer about their legal rights. Then after several days, the participants came back and they received 2.5 hours of psychosocial training from a social worker.

Figure 2: Pilot Study 2



## Results

### *Results pilot 1*

FGAC evaluated and compared findings from both pilot studies. Women from pilot study 1, with both (shorter) sessions on the same day, on the positive side, reported that they could make an association between legal rights and how to apply this knowledge in daily life. It was also informally judged that there was an increase in knowledge about legal awareness from pre to post evaluation. For example, one woman said that because of the assertiveness session she was able to support her daughter in her choice to first finish her college before marrying and also to convince her husband that there will come another opportunity [for his daughter to marry]. The women also reported that it was easy for them to participate in two sessions on the same day, with regards to transportation and time.

However, facilitators and participants felt they had too limited time for the sessions. It was felt that one hour for the legal awareness raising, and one hour for the psychosocial training did not allow them to cover all the information, and they felt they did not have sufficient time to discuss topics of interest and to ask and answer questions.

### *Results Pilot 2*

Informal results after Pilot 2 suggested that participants and facilitators were happier spreading the sessions out across days, and having longer sessions. Similar to Pilot 1, women reported that could make an association between legal rights and how to apply this knowledge in daily life. There also appeared to be an increase in knowledge about legal awareness from pre to post evaluation. There was enough time to present all details and participants were able to process the information and to come up with questions during the second session (2.5 hours length). There was also time for women to discuss their issues and questions after the sessions.

There were few negatives reported for Pilot 2. However, unfortunately no data was available on the 'drop out' rate for Pilot 2. 'Drop out' - where participants attending the information session and then not attending the follow up psychosocial session - may have been a problem for this pilot test and should be evaluated further in future studies.

## Quotes

Below are some quotes of women who have participated in both the legal awareness and assertiveness sessions:

- Miss Nadia (45): 'This program is very good, we finally can speak about difficulties we face and the need for awareness'
- Miss Mustafa: 'I made progress in the way that I am dealing with issues because of this lecture'.
- Miss Kother (50) 'Because of the assertiveness session I was able to support my daughter in her choice to first finish her college before marrying and also convince my husband that there will come another opportunity.'
- Mother of Mohammed: After I participated in the sessions, I brought my parents to the center to convince them, that it is my right to not let my husband beat me.

## Ensuring 'No Harm'

One limitation of both pilot tests, which should be addressed in future research around this issue, is that women were not systematically followed up after the session, to test for generalizability to their homes (i.e. did they actually use their knowledge at home?), generalizability across time (i.e. did the results last?), and – importantly – whether there were any unintended negative 'side effects.' For example, we would want to be very certain that women were not coming to unintended harm as a result of these sessions. One such example of this would be if a woman inadvertently provoked retaliation (from her husband or some

other member of her family) for any newly expressed assertive behavior. Although we were at pains to address this carefully in our training and with the women themselves, this is nevertheless a very important issue and one which needs to be addressed further if we are to be sure to 'do no harm' to the women we seek to help.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, adding psychosocial training in assertiveness and self-esteem skills to more traditional methods of legal awareness raising information provision may be a promising new approach to overcoming the problem of lack of generalizability and lack of relevance for women in developing countries. Although based on only informal testing methods, results suggest it is likely that longer information and longer psychosocial training sessions (2.5 hours each rather than one hour) result in the best outcomes, so long as there is a sufficient break between sessions to overcome fatigue.

Of course, overcoming women's lack of access to justice in developing countries, reducing the gaps between legal rights awareness and the actual use of this knowledge in daily life will always be an enormous challenge. Although it is unlikely that one session on self assertion going to erase generations of social immobility, rights violation, and disempowerment, quotes from women and anecdotal reports suggest women may be able to better make use of legal information if provided with a supportive, skills based psychosocial session as an adjunct. By having trainers who are able emphasize, support, and listen to women's practical challenges using their legal rights in daily life can make a small but significant difference in women's lives. This small difference can be the first step leading to more significant change in the long term.

To better ensure that these sessions ‘do not harm,’ are conducted thoughtfully, effectively, and without unintended negative consequences, however, we recommend more testing and research. In particular, longitudinal research where women are followed up over time to see how well changes generalize to their everyday life, to test for unintended negative consequences (such as retaliation from spouses), and to see whether changes last over time is necessary before rolling out this approach in a more widespread manner.

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