

Wife Battering, Formerly A Well-Kept Secret In Israel, Has Begun To Come Out Of The Closet, Says An Authority

Wife battering — until recently a well-kept secret in Israel — is now stirring public debate among women's groups, social workers, mental health officials and members of the judiciary, says an American authority on domestic violence.

Dr. Lenore Walker of Denver, a clinical and forensic psychologist who spent many hours interviewing and evaluating O. J. Simpson before and during his trial, says that although abuse of women by their husbands is as commonplace in Israel as in the rest of Western society, it has been hidden from view because of a traditional reluctance within the Jewish community to acknowledge its existence.

Dr. Walker, who is regarded as one of the world's leading experts on domestic violence, has visited Israel regularly since 1981 to conduct seminars and to study women's roles. She says the O. J. Simpson case, which is closely

as a legal defense in the U.S.," the American psychologist says. "Here, she probably would have been set free on self-defense grounds. In Israel, which has inherited many of the patriarchal mores of traditional Judaism, there is still some reluctance to limit the right of husbands to treat their wives and children in any way they see fit."

However, the growth of a substantial Israeli middle class and the spread of women's organizations are helping to bring domestic violence out of the closet and into the light of public attention, Dr. Walker observes. Even in the ultra-Orthodox community, a growing number of women are beginning to react to domestic abuse and have even formed their own support group of battering victims.

Dr. Walker notes that when Is-

rael is faced with a national crisis, tensions mount and family violence increases. An average of 20 Israeli women are killed each year by their domestic partners. Stress surged during the year of the Gulf War, and the number of deaths from abuse more than doubled. However, except for reported deaths from domestic violence, data on wife battering in Israel are not collected in any systematic fashion, Dr. Walker notes.

There currently are five shelters in Israel for domestic violence victims, partly funded by the Israeli government, which is also planning 15 counseling centers. A shelter for Arab



women. But cultural differences made it difficult to counsel both groups at the same time in the same shelters she explains.

A very promising development has been the reaction of Israel's civil judiciary, says the clinical psychologist, who spoke on "battered woman syndrome" at a workshop for Israeli judges last fall in Jerusalem. She calls them "highly receptive and involved." Dr. Walker has been invited to return to attend the next judicial conference next October.

At the same time she expressed disappointment at the relative unconcern among Israel's rabbis. "Because they exert a great deal of religious and moral authority, they are absolutely central to dealing with the domestic violence issue," she emphasizes.

women was opened in October 1994. Until then, Arab victims of domestic violence were cared for in the same shelters as Jewish



Dr. Lenore E. Walker

watched on Israeli TV, has helped raise the profile of domestic violence and dramatize it as a critical social problem in Israel. The psychologist, who was the first clinician to do research on what is known as "battered woman syndrome," has testified as an expert witness in hundreds of court cases, often on behalf of women who have killed their abusive husbands or boyfriends.

In Israel, when cases of wife battering have arisen, they are often handled quietly through rabbinical courts rather than the civil judiciary, explains Dr. Walker, who is a Reform Jew.

"It's the sha — the 'be quiet' — mentality that has prevailed until now," she says. "Jewish cultural values have perpetuated the myth of the 'perfect Jewish family' in which abuse of a spouse or child is not supposed to exist."

However slowly, the climate is starting to change, she notes, citing a high profile case last October involving a woman who killed her abusive husband. A rabbinic court refused to hear the case because it was reluctant to focus public attention on the issue of wife battering. The woman pled guilty in a civil court and was sentenced to seven years in prison.

"This was a woman who was suffering from 'battered woman syndrome,' which is now accepted

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