SECTION «B»

VI - THE LAW ON SEAT BELT USE IN LEBANON

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VI - THE LAW ON SEAT BELT USE IN LEBANON: A LESSON OF PAST AND CURRENT EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The wearing of seat belts has made a significant contribution to the reduction of road casualties, and the risk inherent with not wearing a seat belt in the front seat of a vehicle is now widely understood. The use of seat belts is the most effective means of reducing fatal and nonfatal injuries in all types of motor-vehicles crashes.

On May 3, 2001, the Lebanese Ministry of Interior declared that the national seat belt law is enacted and will enter into force in the beginning of June. It is, however, not an official law in a legal sense; because the Minister enacted a decision to apply the article related to the mandatory seat belt use by front seat passengers that was introduced as a law in June 1967, without being implemented for around 34 years (SRF, 2002).

After few weeks of implementation, the enforcement did not continue from many reasons. Hence the percentage use of seatbelt used witnesses drastic drops which was also reflected on the deaths and disabilities resulting from crashes.

In September 15, 2008, enforcement agencies applied again the seat belt law.

This study targets to learn from experiences for successful implementation of the seat belt law.

This study is a qualitative evaluation and qualitative descriptive of the structure and process before the decision, during the first month of the decision, the first year and during the years that followed the decisions.

The aim is to describe the activities in 2001 initiative, which actors took part and the opinions of the most closely involved actors. The results are based on analysis of written materials, audiovisuals
campaigns regarding seat belt use in Lebanon, interviews with the minister regarding this subject and interviews with other major actors.

In 2001, the mass media focused much attention on the seat belt law, especially during the first month after its introduction. The name seat belt was highly used by citizens, foreigners and by community leaders everywhere in Lebanon. It is essential that many target groups such as taxi drivers provided the necessary support and willingness to apply this law.

Not only the individuals but also the Lebanese community at large was almost committed in accepting this law and considering the decision took by the minister as a needed one to decrease the burden of Road Traffic Injuries in Lebanon. All issues regarding that subject including awareness campaigns organized by the voluntary organization YASA was coordinated with the Minister and the seat belt decision.

The problem appeared approximately after 2 months when a political problem occurred in the first week of August in Lebanon, and interrupted the continuous engagement of the ministry and its various agencies in implementing this law.

Although experiences from various countries prove that such laws have usually a long-lasting effect on seat belt use, Lebanon failed to pursue the successful implementation of this seat belt due to the political problems that occurred locally in August 2001 and later on internationally after September 2001 terrorism attack on the United States of America.

During the years between 2001 and 2009, Lebanon witnessed fluctuation in the use of seatbelts but all not sufficient to decrease the burden of death and disabilities due to traffic crashes. The enactment of 2008 had a longer lasting effect due to variety of factors that show continuation of improvement to 2009.

**KEYWORDS**

Seat Belts; Front seats; legislation; Lebanon; Road Traffic Injuries (RTI); Injury Prevention, Law enforcement, media campaigns, road deaths.
INTRODUCTION

Road Traffic Injuries (RTI) consumes a considerable part of the resources of most countries. The use of seat belts is the single most effective means of reducing fatal and non-fatal injuries in motor-vehicles crashes. In all types of crashes, manual lap-shoulder belts are approximately 45% effective in reducing fatalities in passenger cars and 60% effective in light trucks (Evans, 1986).

About 250 to 300 drivers or passengers in the front seat die and over 7,000 seriously injured every year in Lebanon. Those deaths account for about 55% of all traffic fatalities, which is an incidence of 7 per 100,000 inhabitants. This rate could be reduced considerably by more extensive use of seat belts in the front seats. Many of the deceased incurred by road crashes could have been saved by using seat belts, the protective effects of seat belt use are well documented in scientific literature. It is estimated that seat belts reduce the risk of serious injury to the head, chest, and extremities by 50% to 83% (NHTSA, 1999).

Among the recommendations of the Third National Conference for Road Safety that took place in 2001 was: 50% reduction in the death toll and an 80% use of seatbelt of by the end of year 2002.

As per international experience, such a high rate of usage has been achieved only by enacting and implementing seat belt laws. Experiences from many high-income countries such as Canada, Sweden and the United Kingdom convinced the organizers to lobby and to organize many activities during the following months in order to convince the Minister of Interior to enact a decree needed to activate the seat belt law, which dated back to 1967. During that time, what also helped was the existence of a political discussion in Lebanon towards the need and the benefits of this law. Many political figures stated that the enactment of a seat belt law is required only after reaching a relatively high usage rate. The Minister of Interior and others stated that such a decision to apply the legislation enacted in 1967 can not wait more till the voluntary use of seat belt increases since that may need too much time and hence took action.

Informative and educational campaigns aiming at promoting the use of seat belts by the front seats occupants were common and had been proven to be efficient not only in most high-income countries but also in many middle and low income countries. However, the increase
in voluntary use of seat belts is crucial in raising the acceptability of people about seat belt use and the law enforcement move.

**THE NEED TO ENFORCE SEAT BELT USE**

In the United States of America, major actions were launched to find ways to increase the use of seat belts during the last four decades. Attempts to encourage individuals using seat belts through awareness campaigns, publicity or persuasion have had little success (Mackay, 1985 and Robertson, 1977). As in most countries, the results of these public awareness campaigns for voluntarily use of seatbelts were deceiving.

**OBJECTIVE**

The primary target of the seat belt law is to increase the use of seat belt in Lebanon in order to reduce the burden of Road Traffic Injuries RTI on the Lebanese society. Based on information from many programs, seat belt policy and awareness campaigns are associated with clear reductions in the severity of RTI (Glassbrenner, 2004; Salzberg, 2004; SRF 2002; ).

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Methodology**

The present study is a qualitative evaluation of the minister’s seat belt law. The focus is on the process of seat belt use in Lebanon before and after the enactment of the law. The aim was to describe the activities that organized, which actors took part and the opinions of the major actors that were involved in the enactment and the implementation of that law.

A quantitative evaluation of the effect of the law on seat belt use is also presented to compare the percentage of seat belt before the law, during the first year and after one year and three years from that law.

**Population**

In 1998, the study was carried on national level by both YASA and SRF which are two non-governmental organizations actively engaged in raising awareness of Lebanese citizens about road safety and especially
about seat belt use through sustainable campaigns with the partnership of educational institutions, media, politicians, municipalities, the military and the police.

In August 1998, the management of these two NGOs approached “Sofres” a French company specialized in statistics. Based on available data, this company advised the 2 NGOs to collect the data based on a sample of 4000 vehicles distributed on 10 different observing points in order to give the best possible representation of the seat belt use of both drivers and front seat passengers. Different teams worked independently to observe 8000 vehicles: 4000 drivers and 4000 passengers in the front seat (SRF, 1998).

**Study Period**

This study was repeated as designed at different dates between 1998 and 2009.

A study was organized in September 1998 with the results published in October 1998 during the First National Conference for Road Safety, which was held in the Unesco Palace- Beirut.

The second study was organized during September 1999 and the results were published in October 1999 during the Second National Conference for Road Safety, which was also held in the Unesco palace- Beirut.

The third study was in December 2000 and the results were published, in January 2001 during the Third National Conference for Road Safety which was also held in the Unesco palace- Beirut.

The fourth study was in June 2001 and the results were published in all press during that month that coincided with the new law enactment.

The fifth study was in April 2002. Results were published, in 26 and 27 April 2002, in the Fourth National Conference for Road Safety which was also held in the Unesco palace- Beirut.

The sixth study was in December 2004 and was published in a press.

The seventh study was in December 2005 with the results published in a study presented at the WHO 8th World Conference on Injury
Prevention and Safety Prevention that took place in Durban South Africa during April 2006.

The eighth study was in October 2008 and is being published for the first time in this paper.

Data Collection

This sample represented approximately the number of inhabitants and circulating vehicles in the five major Lebanese regions known as “Mouhafaza”: 1200 vehicles in Mount Lebanon (Around 30 %), 1000 vehicles in Metropolitan area of Beirut (25%), 600 vehicles in the North (15%), 600 vehicles in the South (15%) and 600 vehicles in the Bekaa (15%).

In each of the 5 regions, one point for observation was selected in urban area and the other one in rural area. Half of the vehicles were observed on 5 selected observations points that are few kilometres on the highway leading to the major 5 cities (300 vehicles in the city of Zahle for Bekaa, 600 vehicles in the city of Baabda for Mount Lebanon, 300 vehicles in the city of Tripoli in the North, 300 vehicles in the city of Saida for the South and 500 vehicles in Achrafieh region for Beirut).

The sample size is similar for vehicles which are observed in the other 5 selected observing points which were situated in rural areas of the 5 aforementioned Lebanese regions.

A Sample Case

A method about voluntary use was tested in the municipality of Qobaih, Baabda region. This intervention was organised between the Scientific Research Foundation-SRF- and the council of that municipality in the spring of 2000, when that municipality endorsed recommendation of the information campaign organized by YASA with the partnership of all media stations that were working in Lebanon in that time. Much debate was created about that decision of that relatively small municipality to adopt the 1967 law without waiting the ministerial degree. The primary target of the seat belt decision was to increase the use of seat belt in that municipality in order to reduce the burden of Road Traffic Injuries RTI in that small community which lost in a tragic crash three adolescents in a collision with a wall where seat belt could most probably saved their lives.
According to Lebanese legislation, even that it is clearly stated that seatbelt use is mandatory, that article of the law needed to have a ministerial decree in order to have the power of law in order to allow the police municipality to enforce it. As mentioned earlier, the decision of the minister was enacted after more than one year from that intervention.

After much debate in that small municipality especially when the police stopped someone from outside the region who was not informed about the seat belt decision, the council of the municipality made clear through media that the aim of its decision was to increase the voluntary use of seat belt in that region believing that this may be effective together with the educational and information campaigns organized by YASA with media institutions. People in that community started voluntarily to use seat belts.

After one month, the president of that municipality was in an interview on a well-known TV channel asking the minister to enact the required decision of seat belt in order to save lives from dying in Road Traffic Injuries. He informed the Lebanese public about the results of the observation of seat belt use that were organized by the SRF. The sample size of this study was 1000 drivers passing on 2 major intersections in that municipality. Before the decision, only 98 drivers were using seat belt, after one month the percentage raised to 344. Although no other Lebanese municipality has taken a similar initiative, this study proved to the Minister of the Interior and to the civil society organizations about the possible increase in the number of drivers using seat belt. This study helped YASA to lobby the public opinion through concentrated media campaign to accept the decision that the minister promised to take during the meeting with YASA team during March 2001.

Results of the study

In 1993, a study managed by Dr Basem Saab showed that only 1 to 2 % use seat belts in Lebanon. During the period 1993-2000, the use of seat belts use has increased over the past seven years but was still relatively low. In that same period, YASA, SRF, the Lebanese Red Cross, the Lebanese Association for Family Medicine and other voluntary groups were doing much educational and media activities to raise the awareness of the Lebanese about the crucial role of seat belt use in improve road safety inside the vehicles.
In December 2000, an observation organized by the SRF showed that approximately 9% to 11% of all ages wear seat belt in the driver seat and around 8% or 9% wear seat belts in the passenger seat next to the driver known as death seat. While for the youth category (18-30 years old), approximately 12% to 14% were wearing seat belt in the driver seat and around 11% to 13% wear seat belts in the passenger seat next to the driver known as death seat (SRF, 2001).

Initial effects of Seat belt law

On May 3, 2001 the Lebanese Ministry of Interior declared that the national seat belt law is enacted and will enter into force in the beginning of June of 2001. It is, however, not an official law in a legal sense, because the Minster enacted a decision to apply the article related to the mandatory seat belt use to front seat passengers that was introduced as a law in June 1967, without being implemented for around 34 years.

As in most countries, the onset of belt enforcement appears to be the critical factor: the announcement of impending enforcement was not enough (Salzberg, 2004). The decision did almost no change during the 27 days from the third of May till the first of June. The application of this law produced a substantial increase in seat belt use. The effect on the behaviour was immediate and astonishing. The results of the observations where surprising.

Around 40% higher than it was one week earlier. This effect is almost similar with other countries. The fact that the increase in belt use was immediate and simultaneous with the enforcement effort is compelling evidence (Salzberg, 2004).

For example, on the day British Columbia introduced its seat belt law, 30 percentage points higher were recorded in 24 hours (Williams & Robertson, 1979).

One year after the enactment of the law

The results that were published in 26 and 27 April 2002, in the Fourth National Conference for Road Safety, deceived all the participants and was reflected in the increase of mortality rate due to RTI in the first quarter of the year 2002. In May 2002, YASA organized interviews
with both the public and the police where it proposed enhancing the enforcement programs but no positive efforts were done to enforce again this law. Only few exceptions of enforcement occur such as during the last day of the year where highly publicized campaigns were organized to enforce traffic laws.

**Years to follow**

The years that followed the law enactment of 2001 were enough to show that when there is not enforcement most people will not use the seatbelt. This also proves that people are not convinced of the importance of the seatbelt on saving their lives and reducing injuries in case of a crash.

Various observations during various years all showed a drop in the use of seatbelt. All the figures showed a percentage less than 20% use whether among drivers or front seat occupants.

In 2008, the Minister of Interior decided to shed light on road safety and hence started the law enforcement on various points among which we had the seatbelt for front seat occupants. The law enactment was accompanied by great increase in the percentage use where it increased to over 85% for drivers and accompanying front seat passengers.

More observations were conducted to assess the percentage use and it all confirmed figures of use higher that 85%. During the peak of law enforcement and even after it, the figures stayed relatively high since the people were afraid from the fines and random location of checkpoints.

**SEAT BELT IN REAR SEATS**

The installation and use of seat belts in the rear seats is important not only for those occupying the rear seats but also for the persons in the front seats since the dynamic force of a person in the rear seat thrown forward is considerable and will with all probability break the front seat. It should consequently be compulsory to have seat belts installed and used in the rear seats and also in heavier vehicles than private cars. As a matter of fact most cars are nowadays produced with seat belts installed in the rear seats. This means that the cost for the buyer of a vehicle would be none since the vehicle already has a seatbelt installed.
It is therefore recommended that the legislation is amended so that it is compulsory to have seat belts installed for all seats and so that it is compulsory to use seat belts wherever installed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enforcement

Based on information from programs that collected follow-up data, safety belts use rates declined somewhat in the months after enhanced enforcement programs ended (Shults, 2004). Enhanced and sustainable enforcement of safety belts law should involve the increasing number of traffic police on patrol, increasing citations for safety belts violations during regular patrols, use of mobile safety belts checkpoints, or a combination of these efforts (Shults, 2004).

Although long-term effects remain open to question, there is evidence that repeated implementation of enhanced enforcement campaigns results in cumulatively higher levels of seat belt use (Solomon et al., 1999).

2. Maximizing publicity

Canadian provincial officials launched highly publicized enforcement campaigns in the early 1980s that resulted in substantially increased belt use (Williams, 2004). Therefore all enforcement should be accompanied by a wide publicity campaign to strengthen the impact and ensure wider acceptability.

3. Reaching those with high-risk of accident

In Lebanon, as in many other countries, there is a major challenge to convince people who are at a high risk of being involved in traffic crash. There is a belief among most people that they are skilled, above-average drivers and can avoid being a crash (Williams et al., 1995).

In case of the sustainability of enforcement campaigns coupled with intensified publicity, it is expected that the majority of the Lebanese public will increase its risk perception about the crucial role of using seat belts.
CONCLUSIONS

Experiences from many countries have proven that successful programs to raise seat belts use had been based on both a leadership role of the police in enforcement and on maximization of the publicity campaigns. A controlled intersection study, which is part of the U.S. National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS), has shown that safety belt use has increased for both sexes, for nearly all age groups, and for all races for which data are available (Glassbrenner, 2004).

The experience of Lebanon from previous years also confirms that the use of seatbelt use is directly correlated with the enforcement and the issuance of fines. The experience of the 2008 that gave a longer effect due to the fear factor of mobile check points has given great improvement since more people are used to the use of seatbelt.

Now in 2009, with less check points than during the end of 2008, observations still record a relatively improved level of use of seatbelt by drivers and passengers.
drunk drivers

drunk drivers

drunk drivers