Addressing Violence Against Palestinian Women

"Sometimes my husband treated me well, but other times he beat me and did stuff to me," 37-year-old Ma'ha Kameel* says.

The Gaza Strip woman has been divorced for two years, but she is still haunted by 19 years of abuse from her Palestinian husband.

"I was burned by a fire when I was cooking," Kameel says, recalling an accident three years into her marriage. "After that, my husband refused me ... he beat me even more."

**Emotional scars**

Her burns pale to the emotional scars from years of abuse that left a legacy of nightmares and depression. She is free of such abuse today, but freedom had a price: Kameel remains in Gaza City while her husband lives — with her four grown children — in Egypt.

Kameel's situation isn't unique. A ground-breaking research project funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) shows that violence against women is "rampant" in the Gaza Strip, the tiny coastal area between Israel and Egypt. The Gaza Community Mental Health Program, through its Women's Empowerment Project (WEP), undertook the 18-month project to discover why such violence is prevalent in this impoverished region.

**Women's issues**

This project is a first: neither the media, government officials, nor even non-governmental organizations have devoted much attention to women's issues in Gaza. The research indirectly arose from efforts to analyse the impact on women from nearly 30 years of Israeli occupation and isolation during the Intifada, the Palestinian uprisings between 1987 and 1992.
"All Gaza people suffered a lot during the occupation: the area was sealed, houses were demolished, many women lost their husbands, and labourers lost their jobs," says WEP Director Nuha Saba. "Women were really the target of violence during that period, not only from within the family but also from Israelis the idea came from this, these women needed help."

Origins

The project was initiated after Nahla Abdo, an associate professor at Carleton University in Canada (who became the project consultant), began to realize the magnitude of violence against women during visits to Gaza communities. Since no organization was tackling this issue, the idea of a proper study emerged.

Launched in January 1999, the project first established a research team, trained by Dr Abdo, which in turn began training community leaders on gender-based research methods. They have used these skills to interview a representative sample of 120 women from refugee camps, villages, and cities in the Gaza Strip to determine the incidence of gender-based violence. The preliminary results are alarming: half of the women interviewed to date have been victims of violence.

Domestic violence

"Violence against women in Gaza basically means domestic violence," says research consultant Aitemad Muhanna. "Women are beaten by their husbands, beaten by their fathers, and even beaten by their brothers." Women are beaten for not fulfilling traditional roles — such as cooking, cleaning, or tending to their appearance — to a husband's satisfaction. Other abuses include harsh insults, sexual abuse among family, and marital rape.

Mothers-in-law are also raising their fists against their son's wives when an extended family lives under one roof. "Women accept violence from the husbands but they [can't] handle violence from their mother-in-law," says Muhanna.

Taboo topic

As part of this study, officials within the police, justice ministry, and court system were also interviewed. But gathering information on what is a taboo topic in this Islamic society proved difficult. "Because of a gender-biased culture and the issue of shame, most of this violence is hidden," explains Muhanna. "It's not recorded and not discussed." Most women do not believe they are victims of violence, even though their husband may abuse them, because they consider it "a husband's right" — an attitude men share.

Amal Hamad of the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs admits that information on domestic violence is scarce: "There are no specific statistics on violence against women because of the traditions and values of an Arabic society which prevent her from going to any institution or organization to express the violence."

Early impacts

Not surprisingly, the IDRC-supported project has already made an impact. The research has captured the attention of local media, boosting awareness of violence against women through television and newspapers. And, thanks to this project, a team of women has been trained on how to conduct gender research — giving them a professional skill for future work on women's issues.
When the project's first phase ends, the findings will be raised with focus groups, in community presentations, and at a final workshop. Ultimately, says Saba, this project may help to initiate change in everything from the Family Law (also known as the Personal Status laws) to attitudes on women's issues, while encouraging social service agencies to focus their efforts to combat address domestic violence.

**Positive changes**

Saba already sees some positive changes. For example, men are starting to appear alongside women at WEP lectures on women's issues. The younger Palestinians, she stresses, do not appear to condone traditional attitudes that have allowed domestic violence to flourish in Gaza.

But there is much work ahead. The biggest challenge remains "working on changing the civil law and creating awareness all over the country," says Saba.

"We're still at the beginning. It's not a revolution, but if you work on changing something you're working on the long-term. It's not going to happen tomorrow. We have to have faith that things will change," she concludes.

* Name has been changed to protect her identity.

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