

Women's Empowerment Project

NARRATIVE REPORT - IDRC

Name of the project: Violence against Women in the Gaza Strip
IDRC project number: 98-8603

Name of the research institution

Gaza Community Mental Health Programme/Women's Empowerment Project

Country where the project was carried out

Gaza, PALESTINE

Names of the research team

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Synthesis

The research project aimed at investigating the problem of domestic violence against women in the Gaza Strip. The combination of economic, political, social and psychological effects of the Israeli occupation on the existing traditional culture has had major consequences on Palestinian women in general and Gaza women in particular. Families in Gaza are still linked to the traditional power structure, which is based on control by men. The isolation of Gaza from the rest of Palestinian society has been instrumental in maintaining the practice of endogamous marriages, tightening family relations and keeping alive the extended family or Ashira. The structure of Ashira has been further strengthened by the PNA. The persistence of the Ashira structure provides another dimension to the issue of violence against women in Gaza. In the Gaza Strip, more than 75% of the population, which is estimated at 1,200,000, are confined to refugee camps. This population is currently undergoing a sharp reduction in all types of social services and economic assistance traditionally provided by UNRWA, resulting in further worsening of the living conditions of refugees. Economic frustration and political humiliation, combined with the social cultural strains as well as the inability of the PNA to deliver any meaningful reforms, have had social and psychological impact on the population at large.

The Women's Empowerment Project (WEP) initiated a study of family violence against women in the Gaza Strip using a qualitative –based study. Concepts of violence in this research included actual physical violence and the killing of women, psychological and sexual abuse, and rape. It also included the threat of violence in the forms of verbal abuse, forcing women into unwanted marriages, husbands forcing wives into unwanted sexual relations, the refusal to supply financial

assistance for women and their children and finally, the constant threat of divorce and remarriage.

120 cases were selected randomly and interviewed. These represented the demographic distribution of the Gaza Strip. These cases were categorized according to age, social status, residential areas, education and family structure. According to social status factor, 100% of the 29 divorced women in the sample were abused, whether during years of marriage, being forced to divorce or being divorced without their knowledge. According to the age factor the highest rate (22.6%) of violence was found amongst women in the 18-28 years of age category. In relation to the educational factor the highest rate of violence (91.3%) was found amongst illiterate and elementary school graduates. According to residential areas the highest rate (67.4) was found among women who live in towns. This resulted from 83% of interviews having been conducted in the poor, conservative areas of Gaza and Rafah cities, where the majority of residents are refugees who relocated to these poor areas. Concerning the type of marriage the highest rate (90%) was found when a woman became a second wife.

A comprehensive report regarding the research project has been widely disseminated within the local community to related organisations, the media, and community members. A wider distribution is planned after the English translation of the report has been completed. At the same time a book has been published by the research team documenting stories by women directly affected by the current *Intifada*. This book has also been widely disseminated.

Research problem

The WEP attempted this research, the first in the Gaza Strip, because it believes that violence against women is one of the most important topics of research to be studied and analysed. From the results it is hoped that new strategies will be adopted which will eliminate violence and at the same time will help in the capacity building of the research team, especially in a feminist approach.

The research focused on family violence against women and its different dimensions:

- The nature of violence used against women, general characteristics of abused women, and the spread of violence within the Gaza Strip. The abusers, as well as their social, age, education and employment levels, were also studied.
- The economic status of the family and its effect on the increase of violence.
- The impact of the relationship of the family structure and social culture, and the rate of violence against women in the family.
- Forms of women's reactions against violence and its social, cultural, economic justifications.
- Women victim's positions and their opinions of the state, the civil society towards this issue and their opinions about what could be done about violence against women.

From the increasing number of women who have approached the WEP because of the trust built with them, it was found out that many are abused mentally, physically, and sexually by different parties: father, husband, mother-in-law, while they do not dare to tell because these kinds of problems, especially sexual abuse, are considered by the society as taboos which should not be discussed. Women also fear the results of publicity which will affect the family and cause

problems such as divorce, taking away her children and other problems women usually try to avoid and keep silent.

On the popular level many stories have been distributed about beatings, rape, sexual harassment, honour killings, and others. Despite these open discussions, there were no admissions from the traditional and conservative society of the size of such a problem; the discussions were considered to be gossip that hurt the culture. Activists, whether men or women who discuss this issue openly are usually Westerners who are considered to be against God.

Another important factor is legal. There is a strong relationship between violence and parts of the personal status law and its legal procedures. The majority of women who have been abused in different forms found no protection in the law because in every case evidence must be given in court that will prove their abuse before they can receive justice. Many women find themselves paralysed and unable to prove that they were abused and how much they suffered, especially in cases of verbal abuse, women need witnesses. How can a woman bring witnesses in such a case when she lives in an extended family and it is not expected that family members will stand by her? The woman usually finds herself a victim of these unjust laws and the long procedures that she has to go through without any hope and at the end she has to give everything, even her children.

Also, families or local associations tend to use mediation to resolve disputes in order to keep the family unit together and strong. In many cases this leads to the unconscious justification of some women that because she would be a loser in these dispute settlements, that men have the right to be violent.

Research findings

Violence and its relationship to social status and age

<i>Social Status</i>	<i>No Interviewed</i>	<i>No Abused Women</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Single	26	9	34.6
Married	55	31	56.4
Divorced	29	29	100
Widow	10	6	60
Total	120	75	62.5

These results show that the highest rate of violence is found among divorced women. They were victimised while they were married and forced to divorce. On the other hand the rate is lowest among single women because most of the violence is related to marriage and related factors.

Age groups and social status

<i>Social Status</i>	18 & less	18-28	29-39	40 & above	<i>Total Victims</i>
Married	-	7	16	8	31
Divorced	-	17	6	6	29
Single	1	7	1	-	9
Widow	-	-	2	4	6
Total	1	31	25	18	75

The table shows that the highest rate is found in 18-28 years age group (22.6%) while this rate decreases in 29-39 years age group (8%). The rate increased among married women of the 29-39 years age group (21.3%), compared to the age group 18-28 years (9.3%). The general trend of the whole sample reflects the fact that the rate of violence decreased as the women became older, especially with women who had male children beyond the age of childhood.

Residential area

<i>Location</i>	<i>No Interviewed</i>	<i>No Abused Women</i>	<i>% Abused Women</i>
City	46	31	67.4
Camp	51	31	60.8
Village	23	13	56.5
Total	120	75	62.5

This table shows that there is higher rate of violence in cities than in refugee camps and villages. This came as a result of 83% of interviews in cities were concentrated in the poor, conservative areas of Gaza and Rafah cities. The majority of people who live in these areas were originally refugees who moved to live in those poor areas. On the other hand women victims who lived in villages 56.5% declared that the living conditions led to social problems and pressure on them. Male family members control the females' mobility, families don't encourage education of women because of distance from schools, and early marriage and intermarriages among villagers are encouraged.

Educational standard

<i>Years of Education</i>	<i>No Interviewed</i>	<i>No Victims</i>	<i>% Victims</i>
Literate elementary	23	21	91.3
Preparatory	32	19	59.4
Secondary	54	31	68.9
Post secondary	11	4	36.4
Total	120	75	62.5

The highest rate of violence was found among literate and elementary school which reached 91.3%. Also the table shows that next highest rate of 68.9 were among women who have finished or still in the secondary stage and were forced to leave school and marry at an early age.

Marriage

<i>Marriage Type</i>	<i>No Interviewed</i>	<i>No Abused Women</i>	% Abused Women
Intermarriage	33	19	57.6
Marriage outside the Family	87	56	64.4
Polygamous Marriage	20	18	90

There is a close relationship between the first two categories but the result does not show that one of the biggest factors behind violence against women is intermarriage.

Family Type

<i>Type of Family</i>	<i>No Interviewed</i>	<i>No Victims</i>	% Victims
Extended	43	25	58.13
Nuclear	66	41	62.12
Compound	11	9	81.8
Total	120	75	62.5

Since 1948 Palestinians prefer to live within the extended family because of cultural reasons. Originally Palestinian society was largely agricultural and its lifestyle was largely group living. After 1948 Palestinians retained their cultural and national identity by keeping the family united as a tool against the Israeli occupation. The historical and current economic situation and instability means that the extended family continues to be a source of survival and a feeling of security. The 1970's saw an increase in the number of nuclear families as a result of the change of economy. From that time the economy of group production transformed to individual consumption because of the tie to the Israel capitalist economy.

But this change in family structure to nuclear families did not weaken the extended family culture but instead kept the same traditions. Though many males left to live independently their hold on mothers and female members still exists. They take responsibility for, and make decisions affecting the whole family, while at the same time they are forced to support the family financially because of aged parents. More recently, due to the social and political instability many young people prefer to live with their extended families for years after marriage especially those who work long hours outside. In many cases the couple's share of the house does not exceed a single room with basic facilities. In better situations they could extend the family house, but they are forced to share the family's daily life, and this usually means that the wife spends her day serving her husband's family. This decreases her personal freedom, even with her husband. It was clear that the majority of those who were abused when they lived within the extended family stopped when they moved to live independently.

Fulfillment of objectives

Overall Objective

To contribute to change in the status of women in the Gaza Strip through action-research on violence against women.

The research project was divided into two phases: phase one which included training of community trainers on feminist research methods, a pilot study and a workshop.

Phase two included a major research on violence against women with a mini conference or wider workshop at the end of the project.

Specific Objectives of Phase One

1 Develop the capacity building of the WEP in gender research by enabling it to establish a sustainable unit for gender research

In May 1999 extensive training courses started which focused on several topics related to gender issues, feminine research methodology, linked between theory, practical experience and international standards towards women's issues. The training started by reviewing international feminist literature and the theories related to gender and development, the international conventions. The research team acquired necessary skills and knowledge to write, analyse and criticise social, political and cultural trends, especially in Palestinian society. The researchers stressed the ethical principles of feminist research by not using women as a source of information but considered as part of an information exchange by developing interaction with the interviewees.

The second part of this training concentrated on developing the researchers skills in organising interviews, focus groups through role-playing and development of questionnaires. Capacity building was achieved through the training process.

2 Improve the quality of services provided by the WEP for empowering women and their communities by

a devise advocacy strategies to raise women's awareness of the issue of violence against women, and networking around them

b devise strategies for developing the infrastructure of services for dealing with the issue and networking around them,

c devise lobbying strategies for influencing policies around the issue and networking around them

In building the capacity of the WEP staff, the research team depended on quality information about women victims who approached the WEP centres, through discussions and analysis of these cases with staff members, especially psychologists, lawyers and social workers. This helped to develop mechanisms in dealing with women victims because awareness was raised by the staff members of the gender dimension of violence against women, and in developing their analytical skills, especially with cases who were raped or abused sexually. The women could not talk about their experiences in detail but with the support of counselling and other services provided by the WEP staff, the process was made easier.

Specific Objectives of Phase II

1 To conduct comprehensive research on violence against women with a representative sample of women from different sectors of the Gaza Strip. The results of this research will be widely discussed though a conference to be held in Gaza.

Due to the lack of sufficient studies in the area of violence against women, a pilot study was conducted at the end of the training period.

Final stage of project

The final stage of the project was disrupted due to the start of the El Aqsa Intifada in September 2000. The workshop, which was planned to disseminate the research findings, was to have invited interested parties from the West Bank, overseas, and locally but movement was restricted so the workshop was delayed. Despite this, the research team succeeded in building bridges between women in the community by providing information about the WEP and its services and raising awareness of the rights of the women involved in the study. They also publishing findings in local newspapers, raising awareness through publishing reports and distribution to local women's organisations

Project design and implementation

Initial research training took 11 months. The principle researcher (resident in Canada) implemented the project and trained the research workers in three-month blocks. At the same time a local researcher was recruited who was responsible for implementing the project on a daily basis.

In January 2000, the local researcher resigned and was replaced. Problems occurred regarding communication between the principle researcher and the local researcher regarding the implementation of the project. There did not appear to be any clear planning and the work and training schedule changed regularly. Training of the research workers was haphazard, and there was minimal supervision of the field workers, who became confused about their role in the project.

At the same time the research workers were not involved in decision making, and felt that they were not treated in a professional manner by the local researcher. The local researcher wrote reports and communicated with the principle researcher and the donor agency, often without prior consultation with the research workers. This upset the research workers, who felt that they were not being treated as part of a team. This decreased their confidence in their ability, as well as their self-esteem. All of these problems caused confusion within the project and the belief among the research team that they needed more training, especially in the field.

The fieldwork and inputting into computer and analysis took 11 months, and the interviews took six months. The field research related to areas such as social level, age, economic level, family structure, education, and their relationship, in order to study the effects of increase of violence within the family. The different forms of violence (verbal, mental, physical, sexual) which effect women, being mindful that forms of discrimination and of abuse against women, like preventing them from education, work and the restrictions of freedom of mobility, choosing a husband, and discrimination within the legal system, were identified.

The timing of violence which was divided into two parts
violence in the past: women who were previous victims but the violence stopped;
women who were previously abused and continue to be abused.

Also studied was the reaction of women to violence and their justification, and the role of civil and traditional institutions in confronting violence against women, and women's attitudes and opinions towards them.

120 individual interviews and two focus groups were conducted with women. The focus groups comprised educated, married women and uneducated, married women; and educated, divorced women and uneducated, divorced women. These focus groups were organised to identify the relationship between violence and education and social status.

Problems conducting research

There were general problems in the field because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Some women were hesitant to talk about their problems so it took time and effort for the team to build trust.

Some women refused to talk after the interview was arranged because of reasons relating to families and talking outside the family. Many women feared what would happen resulting from talking about this topic. The team replaced these women with others to fulfill the research requirements.

Some women, especially from towns, were reluctant to talk about their problems so considerable time was necessary to finalise interviews. However, villagers and refugees discussed this topic more easily.

There were problems discussing in detail sexual abuse with single women because traditionally this topic should be addressed only with married women. The team overcame this problem through dialogue and raising the awareness of their rights because sexual abuse or rape is not limited to married women.

It was difficult to speak privately with women from extended or compound families because of constant interruptions by family members. The team was obliged to repeat or stop interviews, or stayed longer to convince other family members about the need for privacy.

There were problems in convincing illiterate and old women to talk about violence because they believed it was a private subject and not for discussion with outsiders.

Project outputs and dissemination

Information sharing and dissemination

A comprehensive report regarding the research project has been widely disseminated within the local community to related organisations, the media, and community members. A wider distribution is planned after the English translation of the report has been completed. At the same time a book has been published by the research team documenting stories by women directly affected by the current *Intifada*. This book has also been widely disseminated.

Knowledge creation

As described above the research team acquired valuable skills from reviewing, analysing and criticising local and international publications regarding gender-based research. This knowledge was disseminated amongst the WEP staff to increase their awareness of this topic. Information regarding services provided by the WEP and legal rights regarding violence against women was also disseminated among the subjects of the interviews and focus groups.

Training

Due to the eruption of the *El Aqsa Intifada* the expected workshops and seminars which had been planned to disseminate the research results to a wider audience have had to be cancelled because of restrictions in travel. These will be conducted when the current situation becomes more stable.

Capacity building

Please refer to the above-mentioned information concerning training of field researchers and the involvement of the WEP staff members in case discussion and analysis. On the other hand the field researchers created a link whether with women victims and other marginalised social groups. Information was distributed and discussions took place.

The research workers worked well as a team in compiling the various sections of this report.

Project management

Please refer to the evaluation report submitted to IDRC by the WEP director on the 19th of March 2001.

Impact

Despite the problems which were occurred throughout this project, the research team acquired important knowledge and skills which assisted them in compiling a comprehensive report, and later a book which documents the stories of women who have been directly affected by the current Intifada. The book especially has been widely distributed and has received positive responses from the recipients. The English translation of this book will soon be completed so it can then be more widely distributed. Book, honour killing, raised awareness of services (WEP)

Throughout the duration of the field work the team took the opportunity to raise awareness of the WEP to women victims of violence, and many of these have availed themselves of its services. At the same time awareness has also been raised by the team about women's legal rights regarding violence against them.

The research team is currently preparing to study the issue of honour killings, one tragic factor of violence against women which occurs throughout the Gaza Strip. This issue was one of the many which were highlighted during the recent field work. It is expected that at the conclusion of this study, more light will be shed on the factors contributing to this issue resulting in awareness raising and procedures formulated to decrease its occurrence.

Overall assessment

Please refer to the evaluation report sent by the WEP director which evaluated the progress of the project.

Recommendations

The research report by the team will be available in the English translation by the end of July, and it is expected that the English translation of the book will also be completed soon.

