

# Women and Security:

## Findings from an Assessment on the Security Perceptions of Palestinian Women and Girls

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Despite being uniquely affected by insecurity and violence in conflict-affected and post-conflict regions, the perspectives of women and girls are rarely brought into the security debate. The Palestinian Territories are no different. Yet, Palestinian women and girls have much to relay about the way conflict and insecurity impact their lives.

With this in mind, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) released a report titled “Palestinian Women and Security: Why Palestinian Women and Girls Do Not Feel Secure”<sup>1</sup> (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010) in February 2010. The report documents women and girls’ perceptions of their personal security, the security sector, service providers, and violence against women.<sup>2</sup> It was based on 35 semi-structured focus group discussions and eight in-depth interviews with Palestinian women and girls in seven governorates in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip between June and November 2009. Occupied East Jerusalem was not included in the report.

The report’s findings revealed that Palestinian women and girls face very specific forms of insecurity. Perceptions of insecurity were largely related to the ongoing conflict, society’s tacit tolerance of violence against women, women’s own lack of awareness of service providers,<sup>3</sup> and women’s distrust of the services currently available. This paper intends to present a brief overview of the report’s main findings, with a sampling of the voices of Palestinian women and girls.

### Military and Factional Violence

The report begins with the following quote from a university student near Hebron: “Whenever I think that there are Israeli soldiers around us, I don’t feel secure, and as long as there is an internal conflict between the Palestinian political parties, I also don’t feel safe...” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 18). This observation highlights the insecurity Palestinian women and girls feel as captives of an Israeli-led occupation that is now coupled with an internal factional divide. Such violence and insecurity increases current struggles for gender equality in the domestic sphere. For example, a working woman from a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip was compelled to alter her perception of insecurity with the onset of Operation Cast Lead:<sup>4</sup> “... now the war has created an even more difficult situation. Women have become less concerned with [domestic] violence practiced against them” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 19). In other words, the violence experienced in the public sphere has taken precedence over the violence women face within the local community, in general, and inside the household, in specific. Another working woman from a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip said: “...we, as women, do not have a role in this struggle. On the contrary, women are afraid for their children if they are from different political factions...” (Ibid.:21). Concerns voiced by Palestinian women and girls focused on the security of the community and the family’s exposure to violence rather than on their own vulnerability.

Other forms of insecurity and violence involved

mechanisms of control directly linked to the Occupation. Women and girls who lived in close proximity to Israeli settlements and checkpoints expressed specific fears of violence against them by soldiers and settlers, especially sexual harassment perpetrated by Israeli soldiers. Others lamented how pregnant Palestinian women were denied access to medical services and some had to give birth at checkpoints.<sup>5</sup> Fear of checkpoints also extended to the home environment: some women and girls made a connection between the violence and abuse faced by Palestinian males at checkpoints and the likelihood that these men will take their anger and frustrations out on female loved ones, resulting in domestic violence. These voices serve as a reminder that there is not a clear demarcation between the conflict zone and the home. For Palestinian women and girls, insecurity persists and violence occurs in multiple forms and in multiple locations, as is shown below.

### Perceptions of Insecurity in the Public Sphere

Perceptions of insecurity in the public sphere were strongly linked to the larger society's perception of female modesty and morality. Women and girls mostly feared accusations of improper behavior when attempting to access masculine (public) spaces. This fear, whether justified or not, increased their feelings of insecurity. A housewife from a refugee camp near Ramallah explained: "If any one of us goes out of her home too many times during the week, the community starts talking about her; people at our camp do not like to see women outside their homes..." (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 24). Reports of women and girls having to quit work or drop out of school were also mentioned due to the consistent belief that it was scandalous for a female to go out during odd hours.

On the streets, unwanted attention, verbal harassment, and touching were considered the norm. Young men acted with impunity. A university student from a refugee camp near Ramallah shared her experience by saying the following: "Young men harass me in the street; not only verbal harassment, but also they touch our bodies. This leads to the insecurity of women on the street" (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 23). Such

behavior sends a clear message to women that the public sphere is off limits and that accessing it has negative consequences for them.

### Perceptions of Insecurity in the Home

Research and anecdotal evidence show that family violence, sexual violence towards female family members, and murder in the name of honor have all been on the rise since the start of the second Intifada in 2000 (Amnesty International, 2005; Erturk, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2006). Increased violence in the home was partly explained by the current economic situation in the Palestinian Territories and partly by society's tacit tolerance of violence against females within the family.

According to a former female prisoner from a city in the Gaza Strip:

Poverty leads to a lot of violence inside our homes. The husband is not able to provide basic necessities, so he will take out his anxiety on his wife and children. If my daughter asks for something from her father, he will beat her because he is not able to provide it... (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 29)

In contrast, some said that verbal and physical violence was common, like this housewife from a camp near Ramallah:

The first type [of violence against women] is verbal violence. To hear verbal abuse within a family is a normal phenomenon. There are some men who don't have the slightest respect for their wives. They treat them as servants who are only there for housework and childbearing. There is a lot of physical abuse at home. (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 33)

In many of the focus group discussions, all family members were implicated in promoting abusive behavioural patterns, including fathers, brothers, sons, and even mothers-in-law. However, what young women and girls were especially keen to share were the limits placed on them as they tried to access educational and career opportunities – limits which they viewed as abusive, as a university

student from a camp near Jenin explained: “[Families] compel girls to choose certain fields of specializations, such as education. But few families accept [that their daughters choose] fields like engineering” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 31).

In discussing instances of violence, whether forced early marriage, battery, or murder in the name of honor, Palestinian women and girls confirmed that an aura of secrecy and intimidation pervaded the household and the community. According to a working woman from a village near Nablus: “Women are afraid to share and talk about their situation because it will be used against them” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 31). This fear of discussing or talking about the violence inflicted on them perpetuates the violence and makes it hard to put an end to it.

### Perceptions of Response Mechanisms

Women and girls believed that the use of service providers tasked with assisting them during moments of insecurity negatively affected their safety and their family’s honor. This was primarily due to the belief that service providers were unable to provide any protective services. As a housewife from a refugee camp near Ramallah put it bluntly, “There are no organizations that will totally support women; no one dares to stop a violent husband” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 40).

There was also little trust in the police and security forces, the main individuals tasked with protecting citizens. Going to the police to solve a problem of family violence was equated with bringing shame upon the woman’s family and possibly inciting even greater violence. As for public and non-governmental services, such as hospitals, shelters and women’s organizations, they were commonly avoided due to a perceived lack of confidentiality, unfamiliarity with the services offered, a belief that staffers were unprofessional, or a combination of all three. Many Palestinian women and girls were unaware of the existence of any shelters, although two such shelters existed in the West Bank at the time of the interviews. While women’s and human rights organizations are many in the

Palestinian Territories, women and girls did not notice their presence in their communities. As a working woman from Jenin said: “... I cannot think of any party [non-governmental organization or government institution] that seriously and effectively cares for women who are subjected to violence and who need treatment and follow up” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 46). Women and girls were skeptical about and distrustful of the women’s rights organizations they did know, as explained by a university student from Nablus: “Not all people believe in these organizations; they are not convinced of their role” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 46).

Finally, the current legal framework in the Palestinian Territories is unable to provide gender-specific security. It is a patchwork of laws from the Ottoman period and British Mandate, as well as from neighboring Jordan (West Bank) and Egypt (Gaza Strip). Recent decades have added Israeli military laws and Palestinian Authority civil laws. As a housewife from Jenin explained, “Palestinian women do not feel secure because the law is unfair... Concerning the personal status law, we depend on the unjust Jordanian law that is not fair to women” (Chaban, Daraghmeh, & Stettler, 2010, p. 47). It is believed that the ongoing Israeli occupation, the paralysis of the parliament, and the historically low priority placed on women’s issues have made gender-sensitive legal reform extremely difficult in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

### Recommendations

Recommendations by Palestinian women and girls sought to fill institutional gaps, increase female participation in the security, justice and political spheres, and increase the capacity of service providers in rendering services to those in need. In specific, women and girls recommended an increase in confidential services among core security and justice providers, including an increase in the number of females on the police force and in the Palestinian parliament. Women and girls demanded legal reform, especially gender-sensitive legal reform of the Penal Code and the Personal Status Law. Enactment of a family protection law that penalizes violence against women and crimes

in the name of honor was also requested. Women and girls demanded psychosocial services in hospitals and an increase in the number of shelters. Stronger networking and communication between service providers and greater outreach by women's and human rights organizations was requested in order for marginalized women and girls to benefit from their services.

It is obvious that Palestinian women and girls are knowledgeable about and have a serious investment in security; not just their own security, but that of their community. While women and girls did not explicitly state it, many of these recommendations are in-line with international conventions such as

the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). They lay the foundation for gendering peace and security as echoed in the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Thus, it is clear that women and girls do have a significant contribution to make to the security debate. These recommendations serve as a confirmation that the active participation of women and girls is vital for developing a holistic form of security that addresses the unique needs of women and men, girls and boys.

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## ENDNOTES

1. The report can be found online in Arabic and English at: <http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Publication-Detail?lng=en&id=112812>
2. DCAF was motivated to examine the perceptions of Palestinian women and girls with regard to security after having conducted an earlier public perception study in 2006. That survey revealed that a majority of those polled, 57 percent were not satisfied with the way Palestinian law enforcement agencies responded to violence against women (Bocco, De Martino, Friedrich, Al Hussein & Luethold, 2006, p. 36).
3. In the context of this paper 'service provider' refers to any local organization or institution tasked with providing services to Palestinian women and girls so that they feel more secure in their lives. This may include a diverse range of actors including, but not limited to the government, the police, human rights and women's organizations, religious institutions, and the judiciary.
4. Operation Cast Lead is the name given to the 23-day war on the Gaza Strip that took place between 27 December 2008 - 18 January 2009. The Palestinian Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip reported that 1,440 Palestinians were killed (including 114 women and 431 children) and 5,380 Palestinians were injured.
5. None of the organizations document the number of checkpoint births, though there is agreement that the numbers have waned. In 2010, the Palestinian Central Bureau for Statistics (PCBS) estimated that 7 percent of pregnant Palestinian women experienced delays at Israeli checkpoints when accessing maternal health care.
6. The Palestinian government has taken steps in recent years to address violence against women and gender inequality. In its Program of the 13th Government, the Palestinian Authority formally committed itself to "enable women's participation in policy and decision-making processes" and to "fight violence against women." On 8 March 2009, President Mahmoud Abbas ratified Presidential Decree No. 19 concerning the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) viewed by many as a symbolic signing of CEDAW. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, with the help of UN WOMEN, has developed an eight-year National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women (2011-2019).

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