



Euro-Mid Observer
المركز الأوروبي لمناخ حقوق الإنسان

EUROMID OBSERVER'S ASSESSMENT:

**The Palestinian Women of Gaza
Speak Out: “ The Blockade Threatens
Every Aspect of Our Lives”**

December 2013

Background

The devastating effects of the 46-year-old Israeli control of the Palestinian Territories (Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem) are felt throughout the population, touching every sector of the society and economy. However, women and girls are disproportionately and sometimes uniquely burdened – particularly in the Gaza Strip.

Reports summarizing the negative effects of the Gaza blockade have been issued by expert observers and researchers from the United Nations (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Relief and Works Agency, Children’s Fund, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Food and Agriculture Organization and the country team for the OPT), World Food Programme and the International Labour Organization. However, little studies have focused on the faith of Palestinian women of Gaza themselves and the special problems they face.

EuroMid Observer for Human Rights conducted an assessment throughout the Gaza Strip by interviewing 1,100 women, age 24-50 (50 per cent from Gaza City and the remainder from communities throughout the Strip) from 14-27 September 2013. The Euromid team asked the women about their perceptions

and experiences related to the impact of the blockade on their family's income, expenses and health; their children's education (which in turn causes stress for their entire family); and their own social status. The interviewers also asked about the degree to which civil-society organizations (both local and international) are able to alleviate their problems.

Family Finances

Access to services in Gaza has been significantly curtailed by the 7 years long Israeli blockade. The ban on the private sector to import construction materials, medical equipment, and machinery impacts every aspect of life in Gaza, which is already highly affected by the frequent Israeli military operations. More than half of the women interviewed (54.4 per cent) said their households are struggling to cope with debts they cannot pay off, and most of these women (59.2 per cent) have been forced to sell personal property as a result, often sacrificing needed items or furniture and jewelry that had been passed down through their families. The most significant cause for their economic troubles is loss of employment and/or income: 32.7 per cent of the women said the breadwinner is out of work, depriving their families of any income at all, and another 19.3 per cent reported that household income has declined.

The Israeli blockade prohibits virtually all exports out of Gaza and significantly restrains even internal efforts to earn an income. (The Egyptian Rafah crossing is not built to handle commercial traffic.) For instance, the Israeli military prevents fishermen from sailing more than six nautical miles out from the Gaza port, which puts the larger, more lucrative fish out of reach.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, unemployment in Gaza was 32.2 per cent in the last quarter of 2012, and even higher among women (48.3 per cent) and young people age 15-29 (48.9 per cent). An analysis by the International Labour Organization concluded that the low employment rate among the women of Gaza is due in part to the overall effects of the blockade, as well as to social norms that are aggravated by the closure, including concerns that women take jobs away from men and are more “expensive” as a result of family obligations.

As a consequence, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia reports that the poverty level for Gaza is 38.8 per cent, with women living in refugee camps the most vulnerable. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory estimates that 80 per cent of Gazans are dependent on assistance to some degree, and 56 per cent of all households are food-insecure as stated by WFP.

Family Cohesion

The population of the Gaza Strip has been severely affected by the Israeli violations and attacks. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands injured, many with permanent disabilities, which have led to a high level of tension and deep social division. National, social and human cohesion have deteriorated, leading to fragmentation, distrust, low morale, decreased productivity, and so forth. Young people are particularly alienated.¹ As the rates of poverty, deprivation and stress rise, coping strategies are being overwhelmed and the social cohesion of families and communities is being eroded.

Frequent Israeli military attacks have left a large number of women in Gaza on their own to raise their families. Pal-Think for Strategic Studies estimates that in just the aftermath of the 23-day Israeli military operation called “Cast Lead” in 2008-2009, more than 800 new widows were created. These widows suffer from insecure incomes and constant feelings of threat and insecurity, high levels of anxiety and concern about lack of access to education and other services for them and their children.

An indirect consequence of the worsening financial burdens faced by Palestinian families in Gaza is a change in family

¹ <http://www.undp.ps/en/newsroom/publications/pdf/other/UNDPGazainfocus.pdf>

dynamics. Slightly less than a quarter of the women interviewed (23.1 per cent) said families are arranging marriages for at least one of their daughters at young ages, to reduce the number of mouths to feed. On the other hand, an even larger number of women (61.2 per cent) said sons are forced to delay desired marriages due to lack of a job that pays enough to support a family. The majority of the women expressed their concern over their children's behavioural problems and their concern regarding family violence and early marriage.

Mental Health

Such stresses increasingly contribute to tension within the family, with 90 per cent of the women describing the blockade and frequent Israeli military attacks as directly triggering higher levels of nervousness, tension and anxiety. A result of these growing tensions is a rise in the divorce rate (perceived as increasing by 24.6 per cent of the interviewees) and violence against women and girls. More than half (58.9 per cent) of the women in the study said they believe domestic violence is a growing problem in Gaza, and an even larger proportion (61.3 per cent) think their children are more at risk. An earlier survey (2011) by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics corroborated the women's concerns. It found that approximately 37 per cent of Palestinian women in both the West Bank and

Gaza had experienced physical or sexual abuse by their husbands in the previous 12 months. A larger 51 per cent in Gaza reported violence within the household directed against at least one member (including children).

Physical Health

The quality of health care available in Gaza has declined significantly as a result of the blockade, due to lack of fuel, shortages of vital equipment and medicines, and insufficient training. In many cases, travel to Egypt or Israel is necessary. Yet, 49.9 per cent of the women in the Euro-Mid survey report that families not being able to afford medical treatment cost.

Pregnant women are particularly at risk. A report on the “Situation of and Assistance to Palestinian Women,” produced in December 2012 by the United Nations Economic and Social Council’s Commission on the Status of Women, estimates that 45 per cent of pregnant women in the Gaza Strip suffer from anemia.

Additionally, a June 2012 joint report by Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and Save the Children notes that anemia affects 36.8 percent of pregnant women in Gaza and that anemia can result in “poor pregnancy outcome, reduced work

productivity in adults,” and “contributes to 20 percent of all maternal deaths.”

Other prevalent disorders during pregnancy that could be prevented or at least well managed in normal circumstances are hypertension and diabetes. Aggravating the overall health challenges in Gaza are poor water quality and supply. Ninety per cent of water from the area’s aquifer is not safe for drinking without treatment, which is dependent on fuel and supplies from the outside.

Education

As stress within the home increases, the women of Gaza report growing problems managing their children at school: 56.9 per cent say their children’s grades have dropped, 28.4 per cent say their children are repeating classes or entire grades, and 7.9 per cent are worried about their children skipping classes. A majority of the mothers complained about the poor school infrastructure in Gaza. Staff at schools cannot absorb the traumas of the children, especially after an Israeli operation. There are not sufficient psycho-social activities being held at schools, leading to more stress and concentration problems with the children.

According to UNICEF, more than 5,000 girls in the Gaza Strip

began the 2011/12 school year in tents or tin shacks with minimal protection from the heat. Meanwhile, fuel shortages due to the blockade, which intensified in 2013, cause blackouts for 12-18 hours a day, interfering with the ability of classes to function effectively.

Fuel Crisis hitting the Gaza Strip since June 2013

The latest crisis in Gaza was triggered on June 30, when the Egyptian military halted all but a trickle of traffic into and out of Gaza, adding more agony to the already crippling blockade imposed by Israel since 2007. The Egyptian actions have created an acute shortage of fuel, construction materials and a variety of essential medicines within Gaza.

On November 1, Gaza's power plant ran out of fuel, causing power outages averaging 16 hours a day, paralyzing all facets of daily life in the Gaza Strip from families maintaining their incomes to hospitals running properly.

Housewife Iman Abdul Hai (35 years) is a mother of four children. Iman considers the fuel crisis a horror, especially when she has to use candles to lighten her home as she remembers the three children burned to death when a candle ignited their room as they were sleeping last year.

Iman confirmed that she feared for her children's safety from something as small as a candle. The thought of her children burning to death terrifies her, but at the same time she has no choice but to result to candle light amid the severe crisis of electricity and fuel.

She explains that the fuel crisis has forced her to schedule her daily routines according to the hours she gets electricity. Some days, her neighborhood will have power from midnight to 6:00 am, obliging her to carry out her domestic duties at late hours. Iman has to turn on the washing machine in the middle of the night; and the heavy sound will deprive her children from a good night sleep and keep them agitated all day. Iman will also lack proper sleep days on a row, as her duties need to continue throughout the day, as she needs to take care of her 4 children.

Iman also explains that she receives flour from the UNRWA and bakes bread for her family. She now cannot make use of her oven, and has to buy the bread from a bakery, a luxury they cannot always afford.

She believes that the power cuts have led to a rise in domestic

violence because of the emotional stress suffered from every member of her household. Also, her children's education has been affected as they cannot study properly as it's already dark when they come back from school and there is no electricity. Additionally she cannot follow up with their homework.

Iman also said that they are suffering from severe water scarcity at home. The water pumps hardly function anymore; therefore washing the dishes and showering are becoming a task on their own. Her children complain from the saltiness of the water. Her youngest cries every time he has to take a shower. Also, Iman now has to buy water from private companies and pump into her house's reservoirs. She cannot always afford it, and was once forced to fill in two gallons of water from our neighbor to be used in cases of extreme necessity.

Iman explains that the long hours of power interruption have damaged most her electrical devices. Also, she noted that her refrigerator is usually empty because the food spoils as it cannot be kept cold or frozen.

She added that her mother suffers from a chronic disease in her lungs and has shortness of breath. Iman's mother is urgent need of an evaporator, which has to run continuously on electricity.

Iman says that she is on the edge of collapsing emotionally and physically as the burden becomes tougher by day.

Women and International Law

Armed conflict often exacerbates discrimination and inequalities, further impeding progress towards women's full realisation of their human rights. International human rights, humanitarian and refugee law share a common goal aimed at preventing and relieving suffering as well as protecting the rights and freedoms of women and girls.

Protection for women in times of conflict is enshrined in international humanitarian law (IHL), which is binding on both States and armed opposition groups. This body of law, which includes the Fourth Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their two Additional Protocols of 1977, provides protection for women as civilians and as captured or wounded combatants. Many of its rules constitute customary law and are therefore binding on all parties to an armed conflict, whether they have ratified the relevant treaties or not.

Women benefit from the general protection afforded by IHL. Along with the rest of the protected population, they must be able to live free from intimidation and abuse. In addition, IHL includes a specific protection regime for women, primarily in respect to their health and hygiene needs and their role as mothers.

Human rights law and refugee law provides further protection

for women in times of violence. Human rights treaties, several UN resolutions and world conferences have sought to strengthen the protection and promotion of women's human rights. These include:

- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted in 1979 to reinforce the provisions of existing international instruments aimed at eliminating discrimination against women and achieving gender equality;
- The 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, which provides strategic objectives to address the impact of armed conflict on women;
- Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), which recognizes the importance of bringing women's perspective to conflict and post-conflict situations, including: negotiating peace agreements, planning refugee camps and peacekeeping operations, and reconstructing war-torn societies. It emphasizes that civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those negatively affected by conflict and calls for measures to ensure that women are more equally represented in all stages of interventions aimed at bringing peace and reconstructing war-torn societies;

- The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which provide states, the UN and other human rights and humanitarian actors with important guidance related to the protection of internally displaced persons against arbitrary displacement, offer a basis for protection and assistance during displacement and also set out guarantees for safe return, resettlement and reintegration. The Principles pay particular attention to gender related problems common in situations of internal displacement and guarantee: : (i) freedom from gender-specific violence; (ii) the right to non-discrimination and equality, including employment and economic activities; (iii) the right to the full and equal participation of women in the planning and distribution of assistance and in educational and training programmes; (iv) the right to special medical attention specific to women's needs, including access to reproductive and psychological health care; (v) the right to respect for family life and family reunification; and (vi) the right of women and girls to personal identification and other documentation.

In other populations, civil-society organizations are able to address the most urgent needs of the people. However, even charitable organizations in Gaza, both local and international, are unable to help significantly as long as the blockade remains in force. Of the Gaza women interviewed, 42.1 per cent reported that charitable organizations are unable to alleviate

their economic distress and only half said they were able to get sufficient help with their health problems. Aid and assistance can only go so far as long as Israel prohibits exports, limits imports and severely restricts human traffic through its border. Egypt is aggravating the situation further by virtually shutting down its own border with Gaza, allowing only a trickle of Palestinians to leave for medical care, study abroad or family visits.

A 2009 Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) report highlights the suffering of Palestinian women under the illegal Israeli-led siege imposed on Gaza for the past seven years. ‘Through Women’s Eyes’, notes Gazan women’s continued struggle “as they attempt to come to terms with their grief and their injuries; with the loss of their children, their husbands, their relatives, their homes, and their livelihoods.”²

The only answer to the suffering of the people of Gaza, including its neglected women, is for the international community to hold Israel accountable and force it to lift the blockade, allowing the Palestinian society to evolve and develop in a healthy way and grant Palestinians their right to gradually heal from this injustice.

² http://www.pchrgaza.org/files/Reports/English/pdf_spec/through-women's%20eyes.pdf



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