



## Women's Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories

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## Introduction

Women have struggled and continue to struggle for equal rights in virtually every nation of the world. In areas such as education, occupational opportunities, reproductive rights, freedom of movement, political participation, and healthcare, many women around the globe face limited options and social and political restrictions that are difficult if not impossible to overcome. These difficulties are uniquely apparent in the Palestinian Territories, where a complicated geopolitical situation exacerbates the traditional limitations on the rights of Middle Eastern women.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank, collectively known as Palestine, are located in the Middle East between the Mediterranean Sea and the nation of Jordan. The territories are located within the state of Israel (See Figure 1). Approximately 4 million people currently reside in the Territories, and nearly half are women. There exists a long, controversial history of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that began in earnest after World War I and continues to this day. The current research does not aim to choose a side in this ongoing conflict; however, in order to understand the difficulties that Palestinian women face in everyday life, one must have a minimal understanding of the chain of events that led to their unique circumstances.

The areas now referred to as Israel and Palestine were originally part of the Ottoman Empire. After the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I, control of the area was given to Britain via the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916). In the post-WWI years, Jewish immigrants began to enter the area, which at the time was largely Muslim. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration (Balfour, 1917) was sent to Zionist leader Lord Rothschild from Arthur James Balfour, the British foreign secretary. The letter stated, in part: *"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."*

The stage was set for the creation of a Jewish homeland. The Balfour Declaration was agreed upon by France, Britain, Japan, and Italy in the 1920 San Remo Resolution. While not deciding any specific borders, the Resolution confirmed the designation of Palestine as a homeland for the Jewish people while promising not to, "... prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities" (San Remo Resolution, 1920).

Conflicts over land rights continued in the region, and became even more pronounced with the outbreak of World War II and the mass displacement of the world's Jewish population. With the Nazis actively persecuting Jews, they were forced to flee their homes. The influx of Jews in the traditionally

Muslim Palestine created tensions between the groups. In 1936, the killing of Sheik Izz alDin al-Qassam, a respected Palestinian nationalist and preacher, by British forces led to an eruption of violence that lasted for nearly three years. Only when the British agreed to end land sales to Jews in Palestine did the violence subside.

The reprieve was not to last. In 1948, Zionists declared that Israel was a state in its own right. The major conflict that followed is dubbed “The War of Independence” by Israelis (Bard, 2015) and the Nakba, or, “The Catastrophe,” by Palestinians (Alkhateeb, 2013). In that conflict, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to flee, and the Israelis gained massive amounts of land that were previously held by them. To this day, thousands of Palestinian refugees still reside in camps in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, and Syria.

Conflict continued sporadically until 1967 and another dually-named war between the Israelis and Palestinians. The “Six Day War,” (according to Israelis) or “The Setback” (according to Palestinians), in which Israel attacked Egypt in a territorial dispute, led to the United Nations' Resolution 242. That resolution states in part, “The Security Council... affirms that the fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the application of both the following principles: Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict; [and] termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.” (Security Council, 1967) This brief Resolution impacts the peace process between Israel and Palestine to this day, as many scholars and analysts interpret the text to require that Israel withdraw its settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, which were gained during the aforementioned war. Indeed, the redistribution of land in the region from Palestinians to Israelis was remarkable (See Figure 2).

Disputes continued for the next two decades. In 1972, Palestinian fighters invaded the Munich Olympics, killing eleven Israelis and holding hostages, demanding the release of 200 Arab prisoners being held in Israel (Binder, 1972). Then, in 1987, war broke out again, this time with Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip actively rebelling against Israeli occupiers in the territories. The *Intifada*, as it was known, continued until 1993 and the passage of the Oslo Agreement, which gave autonomy to the territories. Despite this, skirmishes and battles continue. According to the UN Security Council, from 2000 to 2007, 4,228 Palestinians and 1,024 Israelis have been killed in ongoing conflicts in the region (Security Council, 2007).

Today, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are partitioned off from Israel by a large segregation wall on the border with the West Bank, security gates, checkpoints (See Figure 4), Israel-exclusive roads, and blockades. Movement into and out of the Palestinian territories is closely monitored by the Israeli military, and travel is difficult. The Israelis justify the barriers as necessary to protect against attacks by the Palestinians. Palestinians continue to protest against Israeli occupation, and Israel responds to real and perceived threats by bombing Palestinian homes and public buildings, creating in Palestine what the United Nations called, “...a permanent state of emergency.” (UN Women, 2013) In

addition, Israeli settlers have been accused of destroying olive groves and other Palestinian property (Bowen, 2014). To the disappointment of Israeli officials, the United Nations recognized Palestine as a non-member observer state in 2012.

The volatile living conditions in Palestine create issues regarding women's human rights. Limited mobility and lack of access to essential resources make it difficult for women to access adequate healthcare. Daily violence and social norms create barriers in education for girls and women in the Territories. The representation of women in the civic community is minimal due to women's lack of participation in political life. And domestic violence flourishes due to legal and social norms that are exacerbated by the ongoing conflict with Israel. Women's access to the legal system and justice, already made difficult by the Sharia Law under which Palestine operates, is even more complicated when day-to-day life itself may make society unconcerned with accusations of rape and domestic violence. The following research merely scratches the surface of the complex sociopolitical system under which the women of Palestine live.

## Healthcare

The political and economic struggles of the women of Palestine create detriments to health. Limited mobility in the region due to the Israeli blockade means little opportunity for economic advancement. The unemployment rate in Palestine is high; in fact, in 2015 the World Bank declared that Gaza had the worst unemployment rate in the world (Gaza's Unemployment Rate Highest in World, 2015). According to World Bank data, in 2011 the poverty rate in the Territories was 25.8% (World Bank, 2015). Poverty leads to poor living conditions, limited access to nutritious foods, inability to afford necessary resources such as cleaning supplies, medical supplies, adequate housing, heating and cooling sources for homes, and other issues.

Israeli occupation forces are one of the greatest detriments to the health of the people of Palestine. The blockade stops many necessary resources from entering the region. With the decline in supply, prices of food and resources skyrocket. Lack of access to nutritious foods has had a devastating effect on the people of Palestine, particularly the children. In a report on the health conditions of Palestine, the World Health Organization (WHO) found that, among children aged 9 to 12 months, the rate of anemia was 57% in 2012 (World Health Organization, 2013). The rate among school-aged children was 36%, and the rate among pregnant women was 27.8%. Palestinian children also suffer a disproportionate amount of stunting (below minus two standard deviations from median height for age of reference population) and wasting (below minus two standard deviations from median weight for age of reference population) (UNICEF, 2015).

The limited mobility of Palestinians also makes it difficult to travel outside the area for necessary medical treatments that are not available in the territories. Israeli forces deny many of the requests for authorization to leave the territories on security grounds, according to the WHO report. The study found that, in 2012, 9,329 requests to leave for medical treatment were submitted from residents of the Gaza Strip. Of these, 8,628 were approved and 701 were denied. From the West

Bank, 222,188 requests were submitted, with 177,051 approved and 39,105 denied. The remainder of requests went unanswered (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Requests for Authorization to Leave the Territories for Medical Treatment, 2012**

| <b>Territory</b> | <b>Requests to Leave</b> | <b>#of Requests Approved</b> | <b># of Requests Denied</b> |
|------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Gaza Strip       | 9,329                    | 8,628                        | 701                         |
| West Bank        | 222,188                  | 177,051                      | 39,105                      |

Palestine has its own health administration, of course. The Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Health was created after the Oslo Agreement of 1993. According to Article 5 of the Public Health Law of 2004, the Ministry is responsible for, in part:

- Pre-marriage medical tests.
- Care for women, especially pregnant women.
- Support for natural breastfeeding.
- Monitoring child growth and development.
- Making family and society aware of child care services and protections (Palestinian Public Health Law, 2005).

Article 8 of the Public Health Law lists the terms and conditions for women seeking abortions. Abortions are illegal in Palestine, except when it is necessary to save the mother's life. If abortion is the only option, a woman must also have two specialized physicians to act as witnesses, provide written approval for the procedure, and the abortion must be performed in a medical institution (Palestinian Public Health Law, 2005).

The condition that abortions must be performed in a medical institution raises the question: How many medical institutions are available in Palestine? The WHO report found that, for the total population of 4,168,858 people living in Palestine, 81 hospitals are available. This works out to 14 hospital beds per 10,000 residents. This is one of the lowest numbers of hospital beds in the Middle East. Yemen has 7 beds per 10,000 residents, Iraq has 13, Syria has 15, Iran and Egypt have 17, Jordan and Oman have 18, Saudi Arabia has 22, and Turkey has 25 (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2012). In stark contrast to Palestine, Israel boasts the highest number, with 34 hospital beds per 10,000 residents (See Table 2).

There are also 187 family planning centers in the Territories. According to the WHO report, the proportion of women in Palestine who are of reproductive age is 48.8%. With nearly half of the female population of child-bearing age, the small number of hospitals and family planning centers in

Palestine is not adequate to provide for the needs of the nation's women. Perhaps this is part of the reason for Palestine's relatively high maternal mortality rate: 28 per 100,000 live births in 2011, according to the WHO report. In Israel, the maternal mortality rate was 7 per 100,000 live births in 2010 (Key Facts on Israel, 2013). It should be noted that maternal mortalities are under-reported in Palestine, and the number may in reality be much higher.

**Table 2. Hospital Beds per 10,000 in Middle Eastern Nations**

| Country                 | Number of Hospital Beds per 10,000 residents |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Yemen                   | 7                                            |
| Iraq                    | 13                                           |
| Palestinian Territories | 14                                           |
| Syria                   | 15                                           |
| Egypt                   | 17                                           |
| Iran                    | 17                                           |
| Jordan                  | 18                                           |
| Oman                    | 18                                           |
| Saudi Arabia            | 22                                           |
| Turkey                  | 25                                           |
| Israel                  | 34                                           |

The political and social realities of Palestine make women's access to adequate healthcare extremely difficult. Poverty and the lack of resources create health problems that the healthcare system of the nation is not equipped to treat. The lack of medical institutions makes traveling outside the territories the only option for some Palestinian patients. However, receiving treatment out of the country is expensive and made difficult by the complex process of being granted authorization from the Israeli government to leave the region.

## Education

Education is important for improving the quality of life for women around the globe. It gives women the opportunity to get better jobs, helping them escape from poverty. A stable income reduces women's reliance on their husbands, families, and government assistance, giving them

autonomy and a greater sense of self-respect. A proper education can also give women the tools they need to face crises and setbacks they may face in their lives. Similarly, schools can act as coping mechanisms for children who face struggles in their home lives.

As with the Ministry of Health, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) was formed following the Oslo Agreement. The Palestinian Basic Law, Article 24 states, "Every citizen shall have the right to education. It shall be compulsory until at least the end of the basic level. Education shall be free in public schools and institutions" (Palestinian Basic Law, 2003). Currently, there are three types of schools in Palestine: public, private, and those run for refugees by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Of the current population of 1,138,965 students, public schools account for 67.08%, private schools 8.85%, and UNRWA serves 24.07% (MoEHE, 2014).

When the Palestinian Authority took over the education system, enrollment increased more than 50% in the following decade (Nicolai, 2007) and it continues to increase steadily today. According to the MoEHE, from 2008 to 2013, the number of students enrolled in public primary school rose .58%. The number of personnel employed at public schools also continues to rise, from 42,163 in 2008/2009 to 47,877 in 2012/2013. For these students, there are 1,881 public school buildings with 23,252 classrooms. There are an average of 30.3 students per classroom and 22 students per teacher (MoEHE, 2014).

Girls in Palestine do not suffer from a lack of access to education. According to the Royal Academy of Science International Trust (RASIT), in the 2007/2008 school year, the number of girls enrolled in primary and secondary schools surpassed the number of boys, with 548,781 girls and 548,314 boys (RASIT, 2009). However, outside factors affect the success of girls and women in their educational endeavors.

The physical division of the West Bank and Gaza has led to divisions in policies regarding education. Authorities in the West Bank tend to avoid reforms that would disrupt the already fragile state of the education system, while authorities in Gaza are more conservative and promote a gender-segregated approach to public schools (UN Women, 2013). Social norms like chaste laws and the accepted role of women as wives and mothers also hinder women's educational development. Girls are often the last to be enrolled in school and the first to be pulled out in times of crisis or family trouble. Girls may drop out of school in order to marry or help out at home. When women do complete their secondary education, it is often in traditional "motherly" roles such as teaching, nursing, and social work. These fields are also the ones with the highest rate of unemployment: 42.8% of Palestinian women in these fields are out of work (RASIT, 2009).

As with healthcare, Israeli occupation forces are the cause of most of the troubles in the Palestinian educational system. In East Jerusalem and elsewhere, public schools attended by Palestinian children are required to use Israeli-censored textbooks, from which the symbol of the Ministry of Education has been removed along with the Palestinian side of the Israel-Palestine narrative (Abukhater, 2011) (See Figure 5). A 1999 study found that classroom maps were changed to



depict Israel while excluding Palestine, and that over 4,000 books were banned from the territories (Alzaroo, 1999).

Curfews enforced by the Israelis also hinder education in Palestine. A curfew in this context consists of Israeli troops patrolling Palestinian areas with tanks and other weaponry, often in response to threats from Palestinian protesters, real or perceived. During curfews, schools remain closed, as residents are required to remain at home. Missed school days halt the education process and contribute to rates of demoralization.

Violence is also a hindrance to education in Palestine, and it remains prevalent in the area. From July 8-July 10, 2014, 81 people were killed in Israeli airstrikes on Gaza (List of Victims, 2014). From July 26-August 5 of 2014, 916 Palestinians were killed in the fighting, while 27 Israelis died during the same conflict (Keller & Yourish, 2014). Schools are not exempted from attacks. On August 3, 2014, Israeli forces bombed a UNRWA school in Rafah that was housing displaced persons, killing ten civilians (See Figure 6). Earlier that week, a bomb struck a UNRWA school in Jabalya refugee camp, killing 15 Palestinians (US Appalled by Disgraceful Israeli Shelling, 2014). Such acts of violence make traveling to school difficult and dangerous, and the threat of death may lead families to become reluctant to send their children to school.

While girls in Palestine have approximately equal access to education as boys, outside influences create obstacles. Division among the leaders of the territories creates confusion and a lack of consistency between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Social norms such as gender-specific practices and decision-making, early marriage, and the tendency of women to go into traditional fields that are high in unemployment all devalue a woman's education in the Palestinian Territories. The continued occupation by Israeli forces and the resulting violence effectively halt the education process in the region for the duration of conflict and thus leave Palestinian students at a disadvantage.

## **Political Participation**

Involvement in the government that one lives under is paramount for receiving adequate representation. Social injustices cannot be rectified if those who are being oppressed cannot make their voices heard. As stated by the UN Secretary General in a 2002 report, "If women do not participate in the decision-making structures of a society, they are unlikely to become involved in decisions about the conflict or the peace process that follows" (UN Secretary General, 2002).

Power in the Palestinian Territories is divided in accord with areas agreed upon in the Oslo Agreements. Area A is under full Palestinian control, Area B is controlled jointly by the Palestinians and the Israelis, and Area C is under the control of the Israelis (Vertical Division of Power, 2014) (See Figure 7). In areas where there is Palestinian control, the government operates at three levels. At the central level, there is the Palestinian Authority and the Ministry of Local Government. At the regional level, there are governorates that are supervised by the Ministry of the Interior. These governorates are in control of the police forces for their region. The local level consists of municipalities and village

councils. Currently, there are 121 municipalities and 355 village councils in the Palestinian Territories (Signoles, 2010).

The Palestinian Basic Law provides for the following political rights for all citizens:

- To form, establish and join political parties in accordance with the law.
- To form and establish unions, associations, and societies.
- To vote, nominate candidates, and run for office.
- To hold public office.
- To conduct private and public meetings.

Further, the Palestinian Local Elections Law, Article 17, states that women should hold 20% of the seats in local bodies of government (Palestinian Local Elections Law, 2005). According to the UN, in 2004-2005, while women constituted 30% of the candidates in local council elections, they were only able to secure 18% of the seats. According to the same report, in 2012, women constituted 20.6% of elected leaders in local council seats (UN Women, 2012). At the central level, women constitute 7.5% of the National Council and 24.8% of the Central Council. The first woman on the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization was elected in 2009, the first woman governor was elected in 2010, and the first female head of the Bureau of Statistics was seated in 2011 (Nasr, 2013). Clearly, progress for women in elected leadership has been slow.

Women in Palestine face a battle on two fronts in terms of political participation. On one hand, they face the internal and external struggles that are inherent in the region and its complicated history. Political divisions within the governments of Palestine and with the authorities in Israel make political life difficult. The inability to move freely creates barriers for political involvement as well. On the other hand, they are denied full citizenship and equality by the patriarchal society in which they live. Although the Basic Law clearly paves the way for women's citizenship, *de facto* discrimination and the rulings of municipalities and village councils discourage women from participation in political life. Since women are less likely to gain a higher education in Palestine, they are often unable to secure a well-paying job that would then allow them to afford to run for public office. In Palestinian society, women are expected to be homemakers and mothers; political involvement is another burden that proves too much for many women. Women are also informally discouraged from entering the political sphere. "Men dominate the political arena; men formulate the rules of the political game; and men define the standards for evaluation" (Shvedova, 2005).

Though women face these difficulties in civic life, they have been active since the beginning of the conflict with Israel. Women's active involvement began during the riots of 1929. At that time, women began not just passive resistance, but physical involvement in combatting opposition forces: "...police protested that the women had assaulted them, kicked at the gates of government offices, and did all they could to urge male members of the demonstration to defy police orders" (Fleischmann, 2000). Later, during the *Intifada*, Palestinian women took on Israel in several ways. In addition to active participation in conflict, it was women who began the boycott against Israeli products in the territories. In order to fill the vacuum created by the boycott, women began

businesses to produce the necessary goods. In response to the boycott, Israel closed down schools. Once again, women took initiative and opened underground schools to educate Palestinian children.

The women of Palestine have also come together to form organizations to fight for their rights. In the 1970s, the Women's Work Committee was formed, which later split into four separate institutions: the Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committee (FPWAC), the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees (UPWWC), the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC), and the Women's Committee for Social Work (WCSW) (Hilterman, 1990). These organizations work toward women's empowerment in multiple areas, including ending domestic violence, ending the violence of the struggle with Israel, a free Palestinian state, and encouraging Palestinian women to join the political process.

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, which was then adopted by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 2006. The resolution called for the active encouragement of women to receive decision-making positions, especially in areas involved in armed conflict. Some key goals included:

- “Increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.”
- All actors involved should, “...when negotiating and implementing peace agreements... adopt a gender perspective.”
- Implement a plan of action, “...calling for an increase in the participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes.”
- “Security Council missions [should] take into account gender considerations and the rights of women, including through consultation with local and international women's groups” (UN Security Council, 2000).

The language of the resolution is clear. Instead of referring to women solely as victims, it acknowledges their victimization while also calling for their increased involvement in conflict resolution. Women's direct involvement in decision-making and peace negotiations are paramount in order to ensure that women's interests are represented in those decisions. “In the Palestinian case... the institutions of civil society can still play a critical and dynamic role in challenging and checking incursions of both the transitional Palestinian authority and the domination of the Israeli colonial state” (Dajani, 1994). Instead of being subjects of the state, it is paramount that the women of Palestine claim their right to be full members of the civic community.

## **Domestic Violence and Access to Justice**

Domestic violence is a major problem in the Palestinian Territories. The pressures of occupation, movement restrictions, threats of violence from occupation forces, social norms, discriminatory laws, and an absence of policies that protect women from abuse all converge to create an environment in which domestic violence can fester indefinitely. While hard data is difficult to

collect on domestic abuse rates in Palestine, numerous studies have concluded that domestic violence is an issue that must be addressed in the troubled state.

According to a study done by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 36.7% of married women in the Palestinian Territories have been the victims of domestic violence (PCBS, 2011). Twelve percent of married women have been the victims of sexual abuse by their husbands, 22.4% have been physically assaulted, and 58.6% have experienced psychological abuse in the home. These numbers are a slight improvement from the data collected in 2005/2006, with the exception of the rise in sexual abuse reports (See Table 3).

**Table 3. Percentages of married Palestinian women exposed to types of abuse, 2005/2006 and 2010/2011.**

| Type of Abuse | 2005/2006 | 2010/2011 |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| Sexual        | 10.9%     | 11.8%     |
| Physical      | 23.3%     | 22.4%     |
| Psychological | 61.7%     | 58.6%     |

A separate survey was done by the PCBS to determine the rates of abuse for women who never married. Among unmarried women, sexual abuse was also the least reported, with just 0.8% of the unmarried population reporting instances of this type of abuse. The numbers for physical and psychological abuse were higher than those of married women, with 30.1% and 25.6%, respectively. Elderly women were also surveyed. Among women aged 65 or older, 2.7% had been physically abused by a family member, 13.2% had been psychologically abused, and 18.3% reported that their health had been neglected by their family (PCBS Survey, 2011). It should be noted that these numbers represent only reported incidents of domestic abuse, and that the numbers may actually be higher.

The Palestinian Basic Law, Article 9, states, "Palestinians are equal before the law and the judiciary, without discrimination by reason of race, sex, color, religion, political views or disability" (Palestinian Basic Law, 2003). However, the West Bank and Gaza continue to operate under dated penal codes: the West Bank under the Jordanian Law of Personal Status (1976) and the Gaza Strip under the Egyptian Law of Family Rights (1954) (Human Rights Watch, 2006). These shari'a laws have disparate effects on men and women. Under both, for example, a rapist may be excused from prosecution if he marries his victim. If a woman were to reject the offer of marriage from her abuser, she could be killed under the auspices of "honor"-- to be raped is very shameful in Palestine and other Muslim nations. Under the Jordanian Law in the West Bank, if a minor girl seeks to file a complaint of abuse, she must have a male relative file it for her. In the courts, the testimony of a woman is worth half of that of a man (UNICEF, 2011). Abortions, as mentioned above, are illegal in Palestine, and cases of rape and incest are no exception: any pregnancy must be carried to term unless the mother's life is in peril. The laws in effect in Palestine do not adequately protect women's right to freedom from domestic violence.

It has long been known that nations experiencing political violence tend to also see a rise in domestic violence. “Familial relationships become overburdened by conflict as traditional normative understandings that define the family unit, structure, and hierarchy are confronted” (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Sehwail, 2007). The everyday stress and strain of life in the occupied Territories due to constant violence tends to leak into home life, and instances of domestic violence spike when political violence escalates. For example, in an interview with the *Palestine Pulse* (Jalal, 2013), a woman named Sahar related her tale of domestic abuse: “He beat me severely and I was fainting from the stress. He forced me to engage in sexual intercourse against my will.” According to Sahar, her husband had never abused her before, and only did so with the onset of the Gaza War, another conflict between Palestine and Israel that occurred in 2008-2009.

The Al-Krenawi *et al* study found significant correlations between degree of exposure to political violence and violence between parents in households and violence within families. The authors surveyed 2,328 Palestinian youths about the political violence and domestic violence they had witnessed. Those who were exposed to higher levels of political violence were more likely to report violence within the home, and children exposed to political violence were more likely to witness violence at school. The study also found that those who were exposed to high levels of political violence were more likely to experience symptoms of obsessive-compulsion, anxiety, depression, panic, psychotism, and interpersonal sensitivity. These disorders could in turn lead these youths to eventually commit acts of domestic violence themselves or find themselves the victims of such abuse.

Women's shelters are available in the Territories. Groups such as the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC), the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDGF), the UN, and other various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operate shelters for battered and abused women in Palestine. However, according to data collected by the PCBS, most women do not opt to use these resources. Of abused married women, only 0.7% sought help from women's shelters, and only 0.4% sought help via telephone. Thirty-point-two percent sought help instead from their relatives, and a majority of 65.3% did not tell anyone at all about the abuse (PCBS, 2011).

There are several reasons why Palestinian women may not seek the assistance of women's shelters when they are abused at home. In order to be allowed to enter a women's shelter, women must first get a permit from the Ministry of Social Affairs, which is an obstacle on the path to relief. There is a social stigma associated with reporting abuse, and to do so may bring shame to the family. As such, many women may feel that seeking assistance is not the best course of action. Another reason that women may not go to women's shelters is the fact that if they leave the family, they are at risk of losing their children, since the courts in Palestine generally grant custody to fathers in divorce cases. Another problem that women face regarding women's shelters is the lack of mobility in Palestine. If there is no shelter present within the area in which she lives, a woman would first have to gain the necessary clearances to pass through the checkpoints, and then make her way through them. The social and political realities in Palestine make fleeing from domestic abuse extremely difficult.

Some women may feel that seeking justice for domestic abuse is futile. As stated above, the outdated laws that the West Bank and Gaza operate under hinder women's access to justice; they are

not treated equally under the law. What good would it be to go to the police when all that will happen is scandal? Further, in the West Bank, the Jordanian Law of Personal Status defines rape as the unwilling penetration of a woman who is not the man's wife-- there is no protection from marital rape in the West Bank. The informal "tribal" system of redress-- that is, turning to family for support-- is also not without risk. "Even the act of seeking help from family and community may result in women's being blamed for being abused..." (UN Women, 2014).

In their study *Access Denied*, UN Women interviewed 56 female victims of domestic violence in the West Bank about their access to justice. Most of the women scoffed at the notion of justice and argued that it was better to live with the pain than go through the ordeal of reporting domestic violence. A woman named Ghada stated, "I am not considered human, and even if I try to speak, share my pain, and ask for help, no one will hear my real voice or understand my pain. I was raped when I was very small, and when I asked for my mother's help, she did not know what to do... I spoke, I screamed, I reported ... but I paid such a high price – a price that is higher than silence itself" (UN Women, 2014).

Steps have been taken to aid the abused women of Palestine. In 2011, the PA passed the National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women 2011-2019. The strategy, formulated by the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs, calls for the following actions by the PA and international agencies:

- Activate international protection mechanisms for Palestinian women.
- Improve the quality of the services offered to abused women.
- Integrate the fight to combat violence against women in national plans.
- Build administrative protocols and codes of conduct defining the roles of the multiple agencies involved and on how to deal with victims of domestic violence.
- Develop and amend local laws to protect women from violence.
- Rehabilitate victims and survivors of domestic violence and reintegrate them into society (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2011).

The full extent of the success of the National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women remains to be seen; however, in 2014, Palestine ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Some key provisions of CEDAW include:

- Establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men (Article 2).
- Abolish existing laws and customs that constitute discrimination (Article 2).
- Modify social and cultural patterns of conduct that are based on the inferiority of women (Article 5).
- Allow women to participate in political life on equal terms with men (Article 7).
- Equal access to education (Article 10).
- Eliminate discrimination in healthcare (Article 12) (UN General Assembly, 1979).

The signing of the National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women and the ratification of CEDAW suggest that authorities in Palestine recognize that women's rights in their nation are lacking, and that the issue must be addressed. What will be the biggest problem in the quest for women's

rights in Palestine is the *de facto* discrimination in public and private life, as well as the challenges presented by the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

## Conclusion

The people of Palestine in general, and Palestinian women in particular, face great hardships in their daily lives. The occupation creates a lack of vital resources such as food and medicine. Adequate healthcare is difficult to find due to travel restrictions, lack of healthcare centers, and discriminatory laws that control what women do with their bodies. Girls and women struggle in the educational system, not due to a lack of access, but due to a mixture of social norms and pressures as well as the ongoing threat of violence from Israeli forces. Women are virtually excluded from the civic community due to the very same cultural norms and restrictions imposed by Israeli forces, ie the inability to travel freely. Domestic violence is perpetuated by the patriarchal society of Palestine as well as the continuous exposure to violence from Israeli forces that serves to exacerbate domestic violence at home.

Although numerous IGOs and NGOs as well as the PA have sought to help the women of Palestine gain their human rights, it will take more than the ratification of CEDAW, Resolution 1325, the development of women's centers, the building of schools, or the passage of the National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women to fix the problem of human rights in Palestine. The common threads in all the rights violations discussed above are the *de facto* discrimination that women face as well as the seemingly insurmountable threat imposed by Israeli occupying forces. It is difficult to think of two problems that are more difficult to solve. Social norms are extremely difficult to change once they have been established, and it does not appear that Palestine and Israel are going to come to an agreement over who gets what anytime soon-- it appears as if Israel is biding its time and slowly overtaking more and more Palestinian-controlled land until, one day, nothing will be left to the Palestinians but a painful memory.

It will take the hard work and dedication of outside agencies, the PA, and the citizens of Palestine themselves to ensure that women receive their full human rights. These entities must work together, not only to ensure the rights of women in the sociopolitical framework in which Palestine currently operates, but also to work toward a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict in which both parties are satisfied. The only hope for women's rights in Palestine lies in the peaceful resolution of the violent conflict that has burdened them for decades.



Source: [www.fairobserver.com](http://www.fairobserver.com)

Figure 1. Israel and the Palestinian Territories



Source: [www.ifamericansknew.org](http://www.ifamericansknew.org)

Figure 2. Redistribution of Land from Palestinians to Israelis, 1947-Present





Source: [www.readingsofthecity.wordpress.com](http://www.readingsofthecity.wordpress.com)

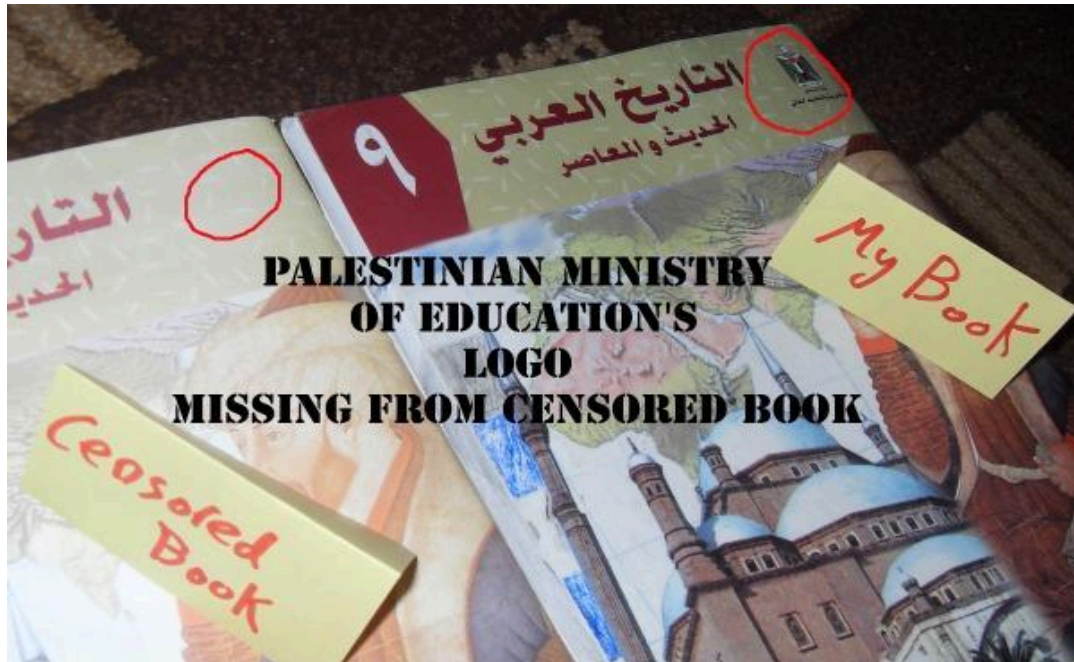
Figure 3. The closely-guarded wall that separates Israel from the West Bank.



Source: [mondoweiss.net](http://mondoweiss.net)

Figure 4. An overcrowded Israeli checkpoint in the West Bank.





Source: [www.972mag.com](http://www.972mag.com)

Figure 5. Two textbooks, one with the seal of the Palestinian Ministry of Education, the other without.



Source: [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com)

Figure 6. A Palestinian man carrying an injured child after the bombing of the UNRWA school at Rafah.



Source: [www.polgeonow.com](http://www.polgeonow.com)

Figure 7. The Palestinian Territories Divided by Area.

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