

POLICY BRIEF

Empowering Jerusalem's Most Marginalized Palestinian Women

Juzoor for Health and Social
Development

Palestinian women share a unique and protracted history of dispossession, occupation, and oppression. The effects of Israeli military and settler violence – checkpoints and related restrictions on movement; reduced access to critical education, healthcare and other services; land confiscation; and home demolitions – are gendered, and disproportionately impact the lives of women. This is particularly true in Jerusalem where Israeli aggression is heightened and unmitigated.

Decades of military occupation, coupled with a confining patriarchal society, have had a profound negative impact on the lives of Palestinian women in East Jerusalem. Each year Palestinian women encounter ever-increasing levels of discrimination, marginalization, and violence, and yet exhibit strength and courage, for which they are admired globally.

“Empowering Women in Marginalized East Jerusalem Communities,” a 2017 research report by Juzoor, a Palestinian public health non-governmental organization, may be one of the first examinations conducted through interviews with Palestinian women themselves on the status of gender equality and women’s empowerment in East Jerusalem.

The report’s research team carried out a cross-sectional study which examined determinants of women’s empowerment and the priority needs of almost 1,000 women from the most marginalized East Jerusalem communities. Study results were striking: Only 18 percent of women saw themselves as empowered. Participants reported severe restrictions on access to resources and services, decision-making, and public participation, as well as a steep rise in child marriages. Most concerning was the widespread prevalence of violence: both state violence emanating from

Editor's Note:

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Israel's militarized ongoing occupation, including a sharp rise in settler violence, and gender violence from husbands or other family members.

Women participants were clear that gender violence, inequality, and disempowerment impact all spheres of life in East Jerusalem and must be addressed by the government, non-government, and private sectors in a serious and systematic way. Proposed policy changes need to be based upon – and fully incorporate – the voiced needs and choices of the women for whom the policy changes are to be designed.

Findings

The experiences of women who participated in the research report documented this reality, adding the related impact of gender violence – ranging from a sharp rise in the incidence of child marriage, to an increase in violence within the home from husbands or other family members. Taken together, these factors are a clear public health crisis for Palestinian women and girls that has serious implications for all of Palestinian Jerusalemite society.

Only half of women in the study finished high school. Factors preventing successful completion of high school included: lack of security in reaching school (checkpoints, confrontation with soldiers), discrimination (preference for educating sons over daughters), and increasing rates of early marriage.

Women's participation in the labor force was very low: only five percent held a full-time job, with 21 percent holding a part-time job. Reasons for unemployment included: lack of job opportunities, political violence, movement restrictions, and gender stereotypes, including a husband's perceived insecurity. Such factors, added together, make Palestinian Jerusalemite women almost completely dependent upon husbands and fathers for income. This situation, in turn, motivated women to seek out small loans for income-generating projects; however, 75 percent were without access to small loans, and 85 percent had no access to income or resources at all. This was due to either the limited number of microfinance programs, absence of national support from the West Bank, or lack of women's awareness of services provided by the banks and organizations regarding small loans and income resources.

Such limited access to employment contributes in high poverty rates for Palestinian East Jerusalemites. More than three-quarters (76 percent) of participants were from families of five or more members with a monthly income of less than NIS 6,000 (about \$1,650) – termed poor by household poverty standards. More than half (58 percent) of participants did not have enough money for living expenses, while 31 percent of women believed their children were deprived in comparison with others.

Such limited income places enormous pressure upon female members of households, who are largely responsible for maintaining home and family. Additionally, women face discrimination and prejudice when acting as decision-makers, with 26 percent not able to make household decisions by themselves.

Prejudice and marginalization extends beyond the home into the public sphere: almost half of women participants not able to join women's organizations or attend training courses. This is despite the strongly voiced opinion of most women (88 percent) that training would enable them to better participate in the economic, social, and political life of East Jerusalem. Overall, 94 percent of women said discrimination against women participating in public life exists, with 40 percent of women completely lacking any access to social or recreational activities.

While Palestinian Jerusalemite women and girls generally had good access to healthcare, access to certain critical services – testing for sexually transmitted disease, family planning, and counseling for mental health issues – was largely absent. The lack of public health attention to mental health is a special concern for Palestinian women and girls, as females were four times as likely to report elevated psychopathology.

Child marriage, a wide societal concern, has increased in East Jerusalem, with more than one-third of women marrying before age 18. Numerous studies have linked a rise in child marriages to times of increased political tension and insecurity – such as Palestinians face in East Jerusalem. Several factors contribute to child marriage: a negative coping response to insecurity caused by protracted Israeli occupation; negative coping mechanisms towards poverty, for example, families having daughters marry at an early age to reduce the economic burden of raising and educating them, passing this responsibility to the husband; and girls are not protected from child marriage by the national law. (Israeli law prohibits child marriage but Palestinian Moslems marry under Sharia law, registering the marriage with Israeli authorities only when the girl becomes 18.) In addition, girls struggle with limited economic opportunities, a general situation of movement restrictions and violence, and parental stress and worry over raising girl children in such an environment. There may also be the girl's wish to escape from father and brother domestic abuse.

Yet these obstacles pale in the face of violence – first and foremost, Israeli-sponsored military and settler violence. While incidents of women's family members being detained, arrested, and injured by Israeli military were widespread, fully half of women participants also had their homes seized, demolished, or under threat of demolition by the Israel government. Virtually all women participating in the study stressed an urgent need to address growing settler violence, with more than three-quarters of women indicating that settler violence was a problem in their neighborhood, causing them to worry on a daily basis about their personal safety as well as the safety of their families.

More than 98 percent of women expressed the belief that gender violence against women and children is one of the most important issues and must be addressed. Gender-based violence was prevalent among women in the study sample, with some incidents happening in the workplace but most incidents stemming from the behavior of husbands or ex-husbands; exposure to physical violence from a close relative increased five-fold among separated, divorced, or widowed women. For half of women exposed to physical or sexual violence, the first exposure was at age 15 or younger. Also many women in

poor neighborhoods in East Jerusalem mentioned that male unemployment often leads to an increase in drug addiction, which increases the violence against women and girls at home. The patriarchal nature of Palestinian society, which maintains a societal structure inherently discriminatory towards women, is slow to address the issue of gender violence.

Although services and legal paths are available to women in East Jerusalem and are much better than for the rest of the Palestinian women, still Israeli services are seen as a last resort to provide services to gender-based violence victims. Lack of trust in the occupying power, and its practices and procedures that are not compatible with Palestinian culture, were mentioned by women who had been in contact with the Israeli system. For example, children were forcibly removed from homes when cases were reported. Services are limited in scope due to the inadequate budgets allocated for East Jerusalem, a complaint mentioned by service providers. Additionally, the language barrier is a deterrent. Women from the West Bank married to Jerusalemites mentioned they were afraid of reporting gender-based violent incidents for fear they would lose their residency permit and thereby have reduced contact with their children.

Current Policy

Palestinian civil society organizations have been advocating for women's rights for decades, but only in the past decade have significant efforts been focused on the issues of gender equality, women's empowerment and gender violence. Their efforts pushed the Palestinian National Authority to adopt a Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy which has served as the government's roadmap for addressing gender-related issues. Also, together with the Palestinian Authority, civil society organizations launched a Palestinian National Development Plan 2014–2016 which focused on the promotion of a "rights-based, gender-sensitive, and more inclusive integrated and sustainable social protection system to alleviate poverty, marginalization and social exclusion."

It was hoped that the government's strategy would become the national reference point for the development of gender-responsive policies that could guarantee women's rights throughout Palestine, with related programs, like the National Development Plan, supporting that effort. However, to date, only a limited legal framework on gender equality exists, as the principles of equality between men and women, and non-discrimination, are not embodied in national laws. The lack of gender sensitive legislation, old and outdated legal frameworks, and a predominantly inaccessible justice system are chronic issues that women and girls must face.

For victims of gender violence, while psychological counseling and legal aid services do exist, both are severely limited in number and accessibility, and women and girls are often unaware of their rights, as limited as they are. Women participants in this report were aware of or had experienced the full range of these obstacles.

Policy Recommendations

Gender equality and women's empowerment is a multidimensional phenomenon. Women residing in marginalized communities in East Jerusalem need to be empowered in a wide variety of dimensions, but especially in economic and public participation. Findings from this research study make clear that women are aware of their priority needs for empowerment, both individually and at the community level. Study results also show that planned interventions to promote and enhance gender equality and women's empowerment have a far greater likelihood of success if the approach makes use of an interdisciplinary, cross-sector approach.

Potential areas to pursue are evident and numerous, with the following as starting points for stakeholder and donor discussions:

- Strengthen local and national stakeholder commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, targeting political leaders and parties, non-governmental organizations, and, very importantly, community and religious organizations. Make ending gender discrimination a top priority by creating programs for parents, such as positive discipline to end gender discrimination. Support programs that provide economic, vocational, and social empowerment for women that could give them skills and knowledge to become leaders in their communities. Provide services to women through linking them to organizations that offer a range of different services for women, such as social, economic, mental, and vocational services, and support the protection networks that work directly with women to defend their concerns.
- Mandate quotas on both political and corporate boards to increase women's representation in decision-making positions that would increase their skills and knowledge to become leaders in their communities. Also, involve more women in organizations, especially in decision-making positions.
- Address the rapid rise of child marriage through work to amend the Personal Status Law, in particular, raising the age of marriage for women to 18, raising awareness for parents, encouraging married women to continue their education by providing alternatives for education and learning, increasing awareness in vocational training, and ensuring equitable distribution of opportunities for women in the marginalized areas.
- Design leadership training for women, and support initiatives and working with men in all communities, to decrease child marriage and raise gender awareness issues that will help women in working in different sectors between East Jerusalem and the West Bank.
- Establish an East Jerusalem Coordination mechanism.
- Establish Safe Spaces (one-stop centers) for gender-based violence survivors.
- Support Palestinian health providers to provide specialized services to gender-based violence survivors.
- Create awareness of women's legal rights under the Israeli system by increasing the number of service providers and professionals to deal with women's rights, specifically with victims of violence which prevent them from achieving their rights.

- Design and provide gender awareness training to all law enforcement personnel so as to enhance security and protection for women. Simultaneously, encourage female participation in policing and law enforcement.
- Support and upgrade Palestinian Jerusalemite women’s local production so as to better compete in the commercial marketplace. The Palestinian Authority should also consider a mechanism with the Palestinian Monetary Authority and Palestinian banks to enable those banks to extend loans for investment for women in East Jerusalem or the establishment of a funded agency whose task is to guarantee loans for business and investment projects for women in Jerusalem.
- Enlist active support from both governmental and business sources to increase women’s participation in sectors such as information technology, manufacturing, and tourism. Offer career counseling, as well as vocational education, to make the choice of technical careers more appealing.
- Support school administrators in efforts to encourage girls to finish high school.
- Foster gender-responsive data design, collection, and analysis so that innovative, effective interventions based on sound research can be implemented in the future.
- Target Palestinian men – everyone from family members to high-ranking political and religious figures – with a gender equality awareness campaign, utilizing compelling data proving that women’s enhanced equality and participation benefits all of society, not only women.

Consulted Sources

The document which gave rise to the research study was the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 5: “Gender Equality – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” Juzoor adopted the UN definition of women’s empowerment, which considers: women’s sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order (Secretariat of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, *Guidelines on Women’s Empowerment*). The study’s design and development was based on the World Health Organization *Toolkit for Women’s Empowerment* which outlines eight critical dimensions for assessing empowerment: public participation, familial/interpersonal, economic, access to basic services, freedom of movement, and gender roles. An additional WHO specific tool for assessing women’s felt needs was also utilized. Other UN sources included: UN Women, “Ministerial Roundtable: Enhancing National Institutional Arrangements for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment”; UNFPA, “Palestine 2030: Demographic Change, Opportunities for Development”; “Report of the UN Secretary-General: Situation of and Assistance to Palestinian Women”; and “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, 2017.”

Palestinian sources included: Palestinian Authority, Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, “Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics, 2011”; Palestinian Authority, Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, “Violence Survey in Palestinian Society, 2011”; and Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, “Jerusalem Statistics 2016”.

Juzoor for Health and Social Development (founded in 1996) is a Palestinian non-governmental organization based in Jerusalem working at the national level, dedicated to improving the health and well-being of Palestinian families and promoting health as a basic human right. Read more about Juzoor at www.juzoor.org.