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**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)**

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION  
OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN 2009-2011**

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## Executive summary

This report reviews the status of Palestinian women and girls during the period 2009-2010, focusing on political, social, economic and human rights developments. Building upon previously published research of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) on Palestinian women and girls,<sup>\*</sup> and looking at the most recent data available, this report highlights their complex status, revealing both successes and setbacks in the midst of a militarized occupation, a political divide and an attempt at grass-roots State-building.

The first chapter of the report lays out the political setting, highlighting the devastating effects of operation Cast Lead and the economic blockade on the population of the Gaza Strip, in particular the female population, while simultaneously considering the increasingly militarized encroachment upon the West Bank in the form of settlements, checkpoints, the separation wall and house demolitions. This framework is further juxtaposed with the State-building efforts of the Palestinian Authority.

The second chapter addresses the socio-economic indicators that define the lives of women and girls in Palestine. Their situation is characterized by constant insecurity and change, reflected in highlighted improvements on one hand and drawbacks on the other. While progress could be achieved in reducing fertility rates, early marriage still persists. Of additional concern are the different legal frameworks for Gaza and the West Bank, which further complicate the situation of Palestinians, especially women and children. Progress has been achieved in education, and Palestinian women are among the best educated women in the ESCWA region. However, their high education levels are at odds with their low rate of employment, which might create additional frustration and problems. Access to basic services is still inadequate for all Palestinians, with particularly harmful effects on women and girls.

The third chapter highlights the political representation of women in Palestine. Although improvement can be noted and more women hold political office and decision-making positions than in previous years, such developments remain sporadic and fragmented. In order to achieve solid conditions for increased political representation of women in Palestine, a comprehensive approach is needed, on which governmental and non-governmental entities can work together. The national machinery for women, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, plays an essential part in such processes, as is laid out in chapter four.

The larger framework of international instruments and conventions that address women is outlined in chapter four. These instruments and conventions play an important role in improving the overall situation of Palestinian women in a comprehensive manner.

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<sup>\*</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2009, and ESCWA, 2007.

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## I. THE POLITICAL SETTING OF THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES UNDER OCCUPATION

### A. THE WEST BANK AND GAZA STRIP: 2009-2010

Less than 90 kilometres away from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority has set about developing an independent Palestinian State by building up governmental and non-governmental institutions through its “Program of the Thirteenth Government. Palestine: Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State”. These efforts continue despite the political divide between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that contributed to the postponement of local and municipal elections in July 2010. The international community has lauded the efforts of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to build a Palestinian State and that State’s economy. The economy of the West Bank grew by 6 per cent in 2009 and was estimated to have grown by 8 per cent in 2010; however, much of the growth can be attributed to sizeable donor assistance.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, high levels of unemployment, poverty and insecurity persist, especially in areas not controlled by the Palestinian Authority.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the separation wall (the Wall) and checkpoints encircle and cleave a significant portion of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, while illegal Israeli settlements continue to grow.

In September 2010, direct talks between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas were launched. Talks broke down shortly thereafter as a November 2009 agreement by Israel to a 10-month settlement freeze in the West Bank came to an end. The freeze ended in September 2010 and was not renewed by the Israelis, furthering tensions on both sides and forcing efforts toward indirect talks. In spite of the settlement freeze, construction and growth continued in certain locales of the West Bank, particularly in East Jerusalem. Illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank totalled 144, with a significant proportion, 26, located within the Jerusalem Governorate. Settlement outposts reached 205 by the year 2009.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of March 2010, 505 obstacles were documented blocking Palestinian movement and access within the West Bank. These included 65 permanently staffed checkpoints, 22 partial checkpoints and 418 unstaffed checkpoints. Eleven of the permanently staffed checkpoints were within Hebron City where 500 Israeli settlers reside.<sup>4</sup>

Construction of the Wall continued, appropriating land within the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The route of the structure directly affects both the estimated 470,300 Palestinians on its east side and the 27,520 individuals living west of the Wall (on the Israeli side) who require permits to access their homes and have difficulties travelling from their homes to areas on the opposite side.<sup>5</sup> The Wall and checkpoints separate communities from their land, individuals from their livelihoods and services, and families from their kin. These barriers also uniquely impact the lives of females. Families have noted that they are more likely to take their daughters out of school or marry them off at an earlier age for fear of them being harassed by or interacting with Israeli soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank, 2010b.

<sup>2</sup> The West Bank is divided into three zones known as Areas A, B and C. Area A is primarily composed of Palestinian urban centres and falls under Palestinian Authority civil and security control, whereas Area B comprises Palestinian rural areas adjacent to the urban centres and often falls under Palestinian civil control and Israeli military control. Areas A and B make up nearly one third of the West Bank. The remainder, Area C, is under complete Israeli military control and is where the bulk of illegal Israeli settlements are situated. These zones were designated during the Interim Agreement (1995) with the intention of being transferred to the Palestinian Authority in a future peace agreement, yet the plan was halted in 2000. More than a decade later, the three zones continue to strengthen the control of the Israeli occupation over Palestinian autonomy, movement and security.

<sup>3</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 2010c, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2010b, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2010a, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), 2010a, p. 30-31.

The population of East Jerusalem continues to face greater insecurity due to increasing settlement activity and threats of forced eviction or house demolition (box 1). Palestinians living in East Jerusalem are required to obtain permission to build on their property, yet only 13 per cent of East Jerusalem is open for Palestinians to build on. Given the limited space and the difficulty in acquiring a permit, nearly 28 per cent of homes are considered 'illegal' and under threat of demolition.<sup>7</sup> An examination of the impact of house demolitions and forced evictions found that the Israeli municipality demolished 80 structures in East Jerusalem in 2009 and, from January to June 2010, destroyed 230 structures in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, displacing 1,100 Palestinians, including 400 children.<sup>8</sup> This leads to a complex set of psychological, physical and economic consequences in the course of and after evictions from their homes, including constant fear of eviction, poor and overcrowded living conditions, increased violence and economic hardship.<sup>9</sup>

**Box 1. A forced eviction and house demolition in East Jerusalem**

The insensitivities with which the occupation deals with the population can be demonstrated with the following example: "Amani S. lives in the Jabal Al-Mukkaber area of Jerusalem. The family first received a demolition order on their home in 2005, and spent four years contesting the order through the courts. In May 2009, the court made a final decision that either the municipality would demolish the house and the family would have to pay the costs or they could demolish the house themselves".

Amani S. recounts: "The night before our home was demolished, my husband told me that he was going to demolish the house before the municipality came to do it and charge us for it. I went to bed feeling very sad. My husband started demolishing our home on 26 June 2009. It was a Friday. On the first day, he removed the zinc roof from the house and the next day, Saturday, he used a heavy hammer to break down the walls of our house. While he was doing it, the children were asking me why – why is our dad demolishing the house? While he was doing it, I went back and forth between our room in the other house and outside where my husband was demolishing the house. The children were also going backwards and forwards between him and their grandparents house watching what their father was doing".

*Source:* The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), 2010b, p. 22.

The Gaza Strip not only endured a bloody attack; it continues to struggle through an economic blockade that has devastated much of society (box 2). No sector has been left untouched: there is increasing physical, as well as food insecurity, deepening poverty and skyrocketing unemployment. Building materials are limited, as is decent shelter, especially for those displaced during operation Cast Lead. There is limited access to fuel and electricity and health and education systems continue to be compromised. Tunnel trade along the Egyptian border continues to supply much of Gaza's needs, even contributing to a revival of growth,<sup>10</sup> despite a lifting of restrictions on many goods allowed to enter the Strip in June 2010. The movement of people and exports from the Strip to the outside world continues to be restricted, further damaging the economy.

<sup>7</sup> UNDP, 2010a, p. 59 and 64, op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> WCLAC, 2010b, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> WCLAC, 2010b, p. 28f, op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, 2010b, op.cit.

### **Box 2. The situation in the Gaza Strip: key humanitarian indicators**

- Sixty-one per cent of the population is food insecure;
- The unemployment rate is about 39 per cent, one of the highest in the world;
- Power cuts usually last four to six hours a day and often longer;
- Sixty per cent of the population of Gaza receives running water only once every four or five days, for six to eight hours;
- Fifty to eighty million litres of untreated or partially treated sewage are released into the sea every day;
- About 90 per cent of water supplied to Gaza residents is not suitable for drinking and is contaminated with salt and nitrates;
- Seventy-eight per cent of homes that suffered major damage in the attack have not been rebuilt.

*Source:* Amnesty International UK et al., 2010, p. 6.

*Note:* Sex-disaggregated data and information are not available.

The land borders, airspace and coastal waters of the Gaza Strip continue to be controlled by Israel. Following operation Cast Lead, access to fishing waters was reduced to three nautical miles, meaning that fishermen have been cut off from 85 per cent of the maritime areas they were entitled access to under the Oslo Accords.<sup>11</sup> On the ground, the so-called ‘buffer zone’ along the Green Line was extended during the attack, cutting into the Strip by two kilometres, appropriating vital agricultural land and endangering the lives of farmers who are at risk of being shot at for accessing their property.<sup>12</sup> This appropriated land accounts for 17 per cent of the Gaza Strip and 35 per cent of the portion suitable for agriculture.<sup>13</sup>

The continued occupation of the entry points into Gaza led to further bloodshed on 31 May 2010, when Israeli naval forces carried out a raid on the Turkish Mavi Marmara, one of six ships carrying medical provisions and humanitarian aid to the Strip as part of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla. Israeli special forces who boarded the vessel clashed with those on board, resulting in the deaths of nine passengers: eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American. Several others were injured.

Since the start of the second Intifada, in 2000, very few medical professionals have been able to leave the Gaza Strip to improve their knowledge or skills, severely impacting the quality of health care available. Similarly, it is difficult to bring in vital medical equipment and what is available is out-of-date or broken.<sup>14</sup> Compounding this problem, many individuals with life-threatening illnesses have been prevented from accessing proper medical care in Israel or abroad.

A sizeable portion of the population of the Gaza Strip, over 70 per cent, lives on less than \$1 a day.<sup>15</sup> In December 2009, the unemployment rate was reported to be more than 40 per cent.<sup>16</sup> Of those in the labour market, 63 per cent were male and 37 per cent were female.<sup>17</sup> Unemployment levels in the labour force have increased from 36 per cent to 43 per cent. Even the fully employed are not protected against

<sup>11</sup> OCHA and World Food Programme (WFP), 2010a, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, 2010, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> OCHA and World Food Programme (WFP), 2010a, p. 5, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), 2010a, p. 3, op.cit.

<sup>15</sup> Sultana, 2010, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Amnesty International, 2010, p. 6, op.cit.

<sup>17</sup> UNDP, 2009b, p. 17.

poverty as 28 per cent belong to households with a monthly average income below the poverty line.<sup>18</sup> Only 8 per cent of households are above the poverty line but they, too, are at risk.<sup>19</sup> According to one estimate, over 80 per cent of Gazans rely on humanitarian assistance, with food aid going to about 1.1 million people.<sup>20</sup>

The Palestinian legal system has not been updated in decades. It has drawn on the Ottoman system since the British Mandate, as well as on the Egyptian (Gaza Strip) and Jordanian (West Bank) systems. In non-Palestinian Authority-controlled areas of the West Bank (Area C and occasionally Area B), Israeli military law prevails. Informal justice mechanisms, in the form of tribal and customary law, seek to ensure the well-being of the clan and are perceived as negatively impacting the rights of women and girls.

*Operation Cast Lead: 27 December 2008 - 18 January 2009*

The year 2009 began under the barrage of the ongoing military attack on the Gaza Strip known as operation Cast Lead. This exacerbated an already serious humanitarian situation resulting from increasing political marginalization and a three-year economic blockade. What began as an air raid in late December 2008, had, by January 2009, been transformed into a ground invasion coupled with urban warfare. The effect of the attack on the people of Gaza was profound; while Israel claimed it targeted only the infrastructure and leadership of Hamas, various sources documented that many civilians paid a heavy price for indiscriminate warring, as outlined below.

The exact numbers of casualties and injured varied among the Palestinian governmental and human rights organizations that published them, revealing the difficulty in documenting the carnage that took place during the 23-day attack (table 1). As one of the most densely populated places in the world, the impact on civilians living in the Strip highlighted the cruelty of urban warfare and the inability of the population of Gaza to find refuge from the violence. Despite the variation in numbers, it is believed that the vast majority of casualties were civilians and that about one third of casualties and a sizeable portion of the injured were female. In addition, children made up a significant number of the dead and injured. Many male heads of household and/or breadwinners were also killed during the attack, thus requiring females to take on the role of both emotional caregivers and financial supporters. In total, the attack destroyed 10,388 male-headed households, 764 female-headed households<sup>21</sup> and created more than 800 new widows.<sup>22</sup>

TABLE 1. CASUALTIES OF OPERATION CAST LEAD

	Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics	Palestinian Centre for Human Rights	Al-Haq
Palestinians killed	1 440	1 334	1 419	1 409
Women killed	114	108	111	111
Children killed	431	417	326	355
Palestinians injured	5 380		5 300	
Women injured	800		860	
Children injured	1 872		1 600	

Sources: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2009, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 2009d, Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), 2009a, p. 6 and Al-Haq, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> UNDP, 2009b, p. 6, op.cit.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Sultana, 2010, p. 4-5, op.cit.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Haq, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2009a, p. 54.

Surveys taken in the aftermath of operation Cast Lead revealed that 45.7 per cent of homes were partially or completely destroyed or damaged. Additionally, 36.5 per cent of households had one or more members leave their home in order to seek safer shelter.<sup>23</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggested that women and children often left their homes as men stayed on to protect the dwelling. The health infrastructure of Gaza, already disabled by the economic blockade, was further compromised during the attack, which destroyed 15 hospitals, 43 primary health care services and 29 ambulances. In addition, 16 health workers were killed and 25 were injured. Already suffering from a lack of building materials, a number of medical facilities remained in disrepair after the attack.<sup>24</sup>

In September 2009, the report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (the Goldstone Report) was presented to the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The report revealed that Israel had used disproportionate force during operation Cast Lead, had targeted Palestinian civilians, using them as human shields, and had destroyed civilian buildings. Furthermore, Israel was found responsible for using white phosphorus, flechettes and dense inert metal explosive munitions that caused even greater loss of life and injury. The report also pointed out actions by Hamas and other factions that had put Israeli civilians in harm's way, especially rocket attacks.<sup>25</sup> Little else has been done by the international community to bring justice to the residents of the Gaza Strip.

Operation Cast Lead severely impacted the health and security of Palestinian women and girls in the Gaza Strip. During the attack, a significant number of pregnant women experienced some type of medical complication that compromised not only their health, but also the health of their unborn and newborn children. Maternal and child health services were disrupted and, in some cases, destroyed. The emotional and physical stress experienced during the attack increased the amount of time spent in labour, making for a disastrous sequence of events. Maternity wards were used as trauma centres and surgical departments. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in some maternity wards, women were discharged as soon as 30 minutes after giving birth to allow more space for emergency cases. Women who went into labour during the crisis, as well as infants born during the same period, were susceptible to a lack of appropriate care during labour, delivery and after birth.<sup>26</sup> Many women were forced to give birth outside medical facilities, usually with the assistance of a nearby female (box 3). In some instances, mosque loudspeakers were used to request medical assistance for pregnant women.<sup>27</sup>

### **Box 3. Giving birth under attack**

“In areas with limited capacity to move around, people used loudspeakers to request medical assistance for women in labour. In one case reported from the Karameh area (North Gaza), both mother and child died while waiting for such assistance. In another case, a pregnant woman was unable to access a hospital on the Eastern side of Bureij Camp and had to deliver at home with the help of unskilled neighbours. The infant later died due to hypoxia. In addition, antenatal care at primary health care facilities was very difficult to access. In Bureij Camp, a pregnant woman suffering from chronic asthma could not access her third trimester antenatal check-up. She could not obtain any medication for her condition which led to a severe deterioration of her asthma”.

Source: United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2009, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 2009c, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), 2010a, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), 2009b.

<sup>26</sup> WHO, 2009, p. 3, 9, op.cit.

<sup>27</sup> The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), 2009, p. 13.



It is estimated that 5,000 births took place in January 2009 compared with the 4,000 births that normally take place during a period of one month in the Gaza Strip. There was also a 40 to 51 per cent increase in the number of miscarriages.<sup>28</sup> At Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, there was an increase in caesarean sections (32 per cent in December 2008 and 29 per cent in January 2009)<sup>29</sup> and neonatal mortality.<sup>30</sup> As evidence of the trauma inflicted, after an attack on the village of Khuza`a in Khan Yunis Governorate, eight women from one family miscarried.<sup>31</sup>

Just over half (58 per cent) of pregnant women and those who had given birth were able to access pre and post-natal care. A significant number of those seeking care were not able to access it for the following reasons: 34 per cent because it was too dangerous to travel to the facility, 5 per cent because the facility was no longer functioning, 2 per cent because the facility was accommodating victims of the attack and 1 per cent because the facility had been destroyed.<sup>32</sup> After the attack, women were seeking medical care for a variety of other health-related complaints at three times the normal rate.<sup>33</sup>

Women in general faced a great deal of emotional distress during and after the assault, with some even reporting that they had taken out their anxieties on children.<sup>34</sup> Among children experiencing psychological distress, WHO reported that girls between 5 and 9 years of age were particularly affected. A subsequent survey found that males and females were equally distressed shortly after the attack.<sup>35</sup> More than a year later, women and girls in the Gaza Strip still continued to express anxiety over the hostilities and the destruction of their homes.<sup>36</sup>

Violence against women and girls reportedly increased during and after the attack. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 15 per cent of women interviewed immediately after the attack said they had faced many domestic conflicts during the war.<sup>37</sup> The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) documented four types of violence that interviewees stated were prevalent within Gaza after the attack: Israeli violence (62 per cent), domestic violence against wives (50 per cent), domestic violence against children (50 per cent) and imprisonment in Palestine (50 per cent).<sup>38</sup>

In the post-attack environment, when UNIFEM asked about the main safety and security problems that women and girls faced in their communities, the following were reported in order of increasing severity: domestic violence, early marriage, sexual harassment, travelling long distances alone, assault by the occupation forces, assault by Palestinians, so-called "honour killings" and incest. Subsequently, when asked where acts of violence against women and girls were most likely to occur, respondents listed: at home, at schools and universities, while working outside the home, in the shelter, while travelling alone and multiple locations. The family was viewed as the only source of protection for victims of violence, including gender-based violence,<sup>39</sup> despite the fact that higher levels of violence occurred at home.

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<sup>28</sup> MIFTAH, 2009, p. 13, op.cit. and PCBS, 2009f.

<sup>29</sup> PCBS, 2009f, op.cit.

<sup>30</sup> WHO, 2009, p. 9, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2009, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research (Fafo) and UNFPA, 2009a, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA), 2009, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> UNIFEM, 2009b, p. 53-54.

<sup>35</sup> WHO, 2010b, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeah and Stettler, 2010, p. 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> CFTA, 2009, p. 4, op.cit.

<sup>38</sup> UNIFEM, 2009b, p. 53, op.cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 58-60.

## II. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN

Indicators reveal that the socio-economic situation of Palestinian women and girls has been in a constant state of flux during the past decade. While a number of positive steps have been recorded, the impact of the occupation and the factional divide, coupled with internal gender-based discrimination, entrenched patriarchy and adverse traditions contribute to widening gender gaps.

### A. POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The total population of Palestine at mid-2010 was estimated at approximately 4.05 million, with 2.06 million males and 1.99 million females. The estimated population of the West Bank was 2.51 million: 1.27 million males and 1.24 million females and the estimated population of the Gaza Strip totalled nearly 1.54 million: 779,000 males and 756,000 females.<sup>40</sup> Registered refugees numbered 1,513,847 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>41</sup> The male-female sex ratio was 103.1 males per 100.0 females.<sup>42</sup>

Palestinian society is noted for being especially young. The percentage of individuals aged 14 years and under is 41.9 per cent, equally distributed between males and females, compared with 3 per cent for those aged 65 years and over.<sup>43</sup>

Female life expectancy in Palestine is 73.2 years: 73.7 years in the West Bank and 72.5 years in the Gaza Strip. In contrast, male life expectancy is 70.5 years: 70.9 years in the West Bank and 69.9 years in the Gaza Strip.<sup>44</sup>

The Palestinian household size has declined since 2000, and, as of 2009, averaged 5.8 persons. This occurred in both the West Bank, where the average household declined from 6.1 persons to 5.6 persons, and in the Gaza Strip, where it declined from 6.9 persons to 6.3 persons.<sup>45</sup>

In Palestinian society, marriage is not only a family event, but also a family investment. In 2008, the number of contracts of registered marriages in Palestine reached 33,774, of which 19,006 were in the West Bank and 14,768 were in the Gaza Strip.<sup>46</sup> A total of 28 per cent of married women were married to their first cousin and another 17 per cent were married to someone within their *hamula*, or clan.<sup>47</sup> A greater proportion of consanguineous marriages among females took place in the Gaza Strip, 32 per cent, versus the West Bank, 26 per cent.<sup>48</sup> Such marriages within the wider family are seen as protecting women against violence from outside and within the family due to close ties, though others warn that it limits a woman's autonomy and regards her as some kind of property. In any case, from the medical point of view such marriages have the danger of increasing recessive genetic illnesses and disorders within Palestinian society, which, due to its limited genetic pool, is already endangered in this respect.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> PCBS, 2010e.

<sup>41</sup> PCBS, 2008a and 2008c.

<sup>42</sup> PCBS, 2009a.

<sup>43</sup> PCBS, 2010h, p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> PCBS, 2010e, p. 2, op.cit.

<sup>46</sup> PCBS, 2010h, p. 14, op.cit.

<sup>47</sup> Abdul Rahim et al., 2009, p. 968.

<sup>48</sup> Juzoor Foundation for Health and Social Development, 2010, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Zlotogora, 1997, p. 765.

The legal age of marriage in the West Bank is 15 years for females and 16 years for males; in the Gaza Strip it is 17 years and 18 years, respectively. However, in the case of females, a *qadi*, or Islamic judge, may permit a younger girl to marry if she is deemed 'mature' enough. While some may argue that early marriage is intended to protect young females and secure their future, early marriage limits the education and career options of an under-age female and potentially compromises her health should she become pregnant before her body has fully matured.

There is a general tendency to get married rather young when compared with other societies. The mean age at first marriage for females is 19.5 years compared with 24.8 years for males.<sup>50</sup> Just over half of women aged 15 years and above were married, totalling 55.9 per cent.<sup>51</sup> The latest available statistics, from 2007, indicate that the percentage of females who were married under the age of 18 years was 29.2 per cent; this translated to 27.5 per cent of females in the West Bank, and 31.5 per cent of females in the Gaza Strip.<sup>52</sup>

Registered divorces totalled 4,399, of which 2,803 were in the West Bank and 1,596 were in the Gaza Strip.<sup>53</sup> Proportionally, women comprise 81.8 per cent of all divorced persons in Palestine,<sup>54</sup> which shows that the vast majority of divorced women do not remarry while men usually get married again after divorce. However, when compared with other societies in the ESCWA region, very few Palestinian women, 1.2 per cent, are divorced at all, while even fewer, 0.2 per cent, are separated.<sup>55</sup> There is a great amount of stigma attached to divorce for women in Palestine. A divorced woman is subjected to a significant amount of judgement regarding her moral character and her ability to raise her children. Divorce may also result in a woman losing her children to her ex-husband or his family. Recent interviews indicate that women and girls would rather endure an abusive or polygamous marriage than face divorce.<sup>56</sup>

Never-married women comprise a substantial percentage of the female population, equalling 43.3 per cent. The percentage of never-married women aged 30 years and over is 9 per cent.<sup>57</sup> While the roles of wife and mother are exalted in Palestinian society, research indicates that never-married women are creating their own niche in society with positive results, such as increased independence; if they have a supportive family, they often have more freedom to attend higher education and to chose their profession.<sup>58</sup>

Though legal, polygamy does not persist in a significant way and, in the year 2000, was documented to take place amongst only 3.6 per cent of the population.<sup>59</sup> The few women who are in polygamous marriages have indicated that they feel neglected and vulnerable in these marriages, some noting that their needs are often ignored.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> PCBS, 2010l.

<sup>51</sup> PCBS, 2010g, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> PCBS, 2010a, p. 26-27.

<sup>53</sup> PCBS, 2010h, p. 14, op.cit.

<sup>54</sup> PCBS, 2009b.

<sup>55</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 36-37, op.cit.

<sup>57</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 25-26, op.cit.

<sup>58</sup> Johnson, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 36-37, op.cit.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The vast majority of individuals who have lost a spouse are female, equalling 90.2 per cent,<sup>61</sup> which reflects the high death rate among men. Widows comprise 5 per cent of the population.<sup>62</sup> Similar to their divorced counterparts, widows encounter a significant amount of stigma that makes remarriage and/or motherhood difficult.

Movement and access restrictions imposed by the occupation impact all Palestinians, but women in particular must contend with social isolation and family strain as they are often less able to travel outside their communities. This is especially true for family members that have identification cards from different territories (West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and, occasionally, Israel) and wish to legally reside together. In a 2010 study by Birzeit University on family migration and unification, women, especially mothers, faced a number of hardships when families were fractured. In fact, 52 per cent of those in the study reported that women faced difficulties in looking after their children, 39 per cent were subjected to interference from their families, 29 per cent were subjected to interference from the families of their husbands and 38 per cent were subjected to harassment while attempting to rectify their unification situation.<sup>63</sup>

Gender roles in Palestinian society are clearly outlined and often dictate status and legitimacy. Of the many roles that women assume, none are more privileged than that of wife and mother. Females that do not fall within these rigid social categories are often perceived as vulnerable because they have not fulfilled, or have yet to fulfil, their intended role within society. Thus, young women and girls find themselves in a subordinate position within the Palestinian social sphere, as do elderly women who may no longer be connected to their families. Females with disabilities, as well as rural and refugee females continue to be marginalized, are often denied appropriate services and are rarely provided a platform to advocate for their needs.

Palestinian young women and girls face gender specific restrictions in their movements within the private and public spheres. In a 2010 study, young women and girls reported that they experienced harassment, both verbal and physical, by young men in the public sphere. With regard to the domestic sphere, they expressed concern over equal access to education, and over restrictions on their movements and dress by male family members, most often a brother.<sup>64</sup> Within the home, 98 per cent of girls undertake unpaid domestic work.<sup>65</sup>

A 2009 youth survey revealed that 49 per cent of women attributed their insecurity to the Israeli occupation, 18 per cent to the factional divide, and 11 per cent to social restrictions. Overall, 51 per cent of young females compared with 56 per cent of men expressed such feelings of insecurity.<sup>66</sup>

According to a study by Assaf in 2010, on the physical and mental health of elderly women, elderly women (65 years and over) comprise only 3.5 per cent of Palestinian society and are the most vulnerable.<sup>67</sup> Of those interviewed, 4.5 per cent were paid workers while 1.5 per cent were not paid for the work they performed, and 38.6 per cent were poor.<sup>68</sup> Seventy per cent of elderly women received financial support from their families. However, 38 per cent of these women claimed that what they received does not cover

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<sup>61</sup> PCBS, 2009b, op.cit.

<sup>62</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 25, op.cit.

<sup>63</sup> Center for Development Studies, Birzeit University, 2010, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeah and Stettler, 2010, p. 23-24 and 30-31, op.cit.

<sup>65</sup> PCBS, 2010a, p. 60, op.cit.

<sup>66</sup> Sharek Youth Forum, 2009, p. 9-10.

<sup>67</sup> Assaf, 2010a, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

their needs.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, 72.1 per cent of elderly women in Palestine suffer from at least one chronic disease compared with 55.1 per cent of males.<sup>70</sup>

Rural women, especially younger women, face a number of obstacles due to their isolation and lack of mobility. The most vulnerable are never-married females with a high school education or less. This demographic group is more likely to face lesser prospects with regard to their physical mobility, work and marriage options, as well as social standing. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in 2010, the work of an estimated 40 per cent of rural Palestinian women of working age (15-64 years) was unpaid and unaccounted for in national accounts.<sup>71</sup> Many rural females live in Area C, an area completely controlled by Israel and often without services such as health care, decent housing and sanitation, further placing them at risk.<sup>72</sup>

The number of registered female refugees equals 286,889 (25.6 per cent) in the West Bank and 460,854 (67.4 per cent) in the Gaza Strip.<sup>73</sup> Refugee households are prone to falling below the national poverty line because of the dire situation under occupation. This increases the number of female-headed households and the risk that refugee women will be forced to take on this burden, resulting in what is commonly known as the “feminization of poverty”. Additionally, fertility rates are higher than average among the refugee population, reaching 4.9 births per woman.<sup>74</sup>

## B. HEALTH

The attack on the Gaza Strip has prevented a number of Gazans from leaving the enclave in order to access life-saving medical care (box 4). Information collected by WHO revealed that 51 women and girls died between October 2007 and August 2009 while waiting to receive medical treatment that was only available outside the Gaza Strip.<sup>75</sup>

### **Box 4. The death of Fidaa Talal Hijji**

Fidaa Talal Hijji, 19 years old, was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease in 2007 and was treated at Shifa Hospital in Gaza. Her health deteriorated and she was told she needed a bone marrow transplant. This procedure was not available in Gaza. Her doctors referred her to Tel HaShomer Hospital in Israel on 20 August 2009 and she obtained a hospital appointment for 23 September 2009 for a transplant.

The District Liaison Office submitted an application for Fidaa to cross the Erez border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel on the date of her appointment but the Israeli Authorities did not respond to her application and she missed her appointment with Tel HaShomer Hospital. She secured a new appointment for 20 October 2009 and a new application was submitted to cross Erez. She had no response from the Israeli Authorities. Her health condition deteriorated further. She was given a new appointment at Shneider Hospital in Israel for 9 November 2009 and submitted an urgent application to cross Erez. No response was received.

Fidaa died on 11 November 2009. The Israeli Authorities approved her request on 12 November 2009, three days after her hospital appointment and one day after her death.

*Source:* World Health Organization (WHO), 2010a, p. 1-2.

<sup>69</sup> Assaf, 2010a, p. 5, op.cit.

<sup>70</sup> PCBS, 2007, p. 22.

<sup>71</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2010, p. 13.

<sup>72</sup> WCLAC, 2010a, p. 39-50, op.cit.

<sup>73</sup> PCBS, 2008c, p. 68, op.cit and PCBS, 2008a, p. 61, op.cit.

<sup>74</sup> PCBS, 2010d.

<sup>75</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), 2010, p. 9-10.

The persistence of disease and illness is exacerbated, both directly and indirectly, by the political situation. Access to proper and timely health care can mean the difference between life and death. Palestinian women contend with higher incidences of diseases; which often go unchecked and untreated due to the Israeli-imposed blockade and control over movement, the limited number of highly skilled health-care providers and institutions, limited knowledge of disease prevention and monitoring, and/or the stigma attached to certain ailments.

Cancer is one of the greatest threats to the health of women in Palestine. More women than men are diagnosed with the disease; 45 per cent of all new cancer cases are in men while 55 per cent are in women.<sup>76</sup> Among all cancers, the leading cause of death in women is breast cancer, at 31 per cent.<sup>77</sup> The disease especially impacts women in the Gaza Strip. Sixty per cent of diagnoses of breast cancer in the Strip take place after the disease has metastasized. Due to the delay in diagnosis, the survival rate for women is very low, equalling some 30-40 per cent or lower.<sup>78</sup> Equipment to detect the disease is often not available. For example, a representative from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the Gaza Strip claimed that, "It took the ICRC eight months to bring spare parts for a mammography machine into Gaza".<sup>79</sup>

Strokes are the second leading cause of death among Palestinian women; the number of deaths resulting from stroke was documented at 35 per 100,000 women. The rate of heart failure in women was 32 per 100,000 women.<sup>80</sup> Other diseases of note include hypertension and diabetes. Based on a 2003 survey, the Ministry of Health documented 55 reported cases of HIV/AIDS in Palestine, nine of whom were female.<sup>81</sup>

Palestine has the highest fertility rates in the ESCWA region with the exception of Yemen, though fertility rates are on the decline. The total fertility rate dropped to 4.6 births in 2007 compared with 6.0 births in 1997. The fertility rate in the Gaza Strip is higher than in the West Bank at 5.2 births and 4.1 births, respectively.<sup>82</sup> Contrary to other ESCWA countries, in the Palestinian context it is difficult to link high fertility rates with female disempowerment as high rates of fertility are often considered a political act, particularly among refugee families. However, there is evidence that fertility is in decline due to delays in marriage and the increase of singlehood among females, which is less prevalent in the Gaza Strip; contraception and family planning services have also had an impact.<sup>83</sup>

Maternal and child health continue to be severely impacted by the occupation. Women in the Gaza Strip face higher rates of miscarriage, severe levels of anaemia and limited post-natal care, whereas mothers-to-be in the West Bank encounter checkpoints and other barriers that place them and their pregnancies at risk. Indicators also reveal that while infant mortality rates are on the decline, maternal mortality rates have increased, highlighting the instability of health care services and women's access to them.

Women of reproductive age (15-49 years) and children younger than 5 years comprise 40 per cent of the Palestinian population.<sup>84</sup> There is high prevalence of under-age pregnancy, with almost 34 per cent of

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<sup>76</sup> Husseini et al., 2009, p. 1043.

<sup>77</sup> Juzoor, 2010, p. 30, op.cit.

<sup>78</sup> Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 2005, p. 6-7.

<sup>79</sup> WCLAC, 2010a, p. 37-38, op.cit.

<sup>80</sup> Husseini et al., 2009, p. 1042, op.cit.

<sup>81</sup> PCBS, 2008b, p. 39, op.cit.

<sup>82</sup> PCBS, 2010f.

<sup>83</sup> Khawaja, 2003.

<sup>84</sup> Abdul Rahim et al., 2009, p. 967, op.cit.

women being younger than 18 years when they become pregnant with their first child.<sup>85</sup> In 2005, the adolescent birth rate per 1,000 women was less than 60 births in the West Bank and 67.4 births in the Gaza Strip.<sup>86</sup> According to the most recent data, miscarriages reached 7.1 per cent on average for Palestine: 6.4 per cent in the West Bank and 8.1 per cent in the Gaza Strip.<sup>87</sup> Two-fifths of higher-order pregnancies (women who already had three or four children) reported that their current pregnancy was unintended.<sup>88</sup>

Anaemia has increased among pregnant women in recent years, which suggests increasing levels of malnutrition. The proportion of pregnant women suffering from anaemia was 37.5 per cent in February 2009, higher than in 2007 (33.3 per cent).<sup>89</sup> Rates of anaemia were higher in the Gaza Strip (severe) versus the West Bank (moderate).<sup>90</sup> The percentage of children suffering from anaemia decreased to 65.5 per cent during the same time period in which the percentage of mothers suffering from it increased.<sup>91</sup>

Pregnant Palestinian women continue to experience difficulties in accessing maternal health care facilities, including delays at Israeli checkpoints. Full closure of checkpoints was the second most frequent obstacle, experienced by 4.3 per cent of West Bank women and 7.9 per cent of women in the Jerusalem area.<sup>92</sup> Although the rate of checkpoint births has slightly waned over the years, they continue with detrimental effects. While no single organization is tasked with documenting the phenomenon, cases do emerge (box 5). It is estimated that 2,500 births per year face difficulties en route to a delivery facility to ensure assistance of a medical professional. Thus, there has been an increase of 8.2 per cent in the number of home deliveries<sup>93</sup> and caesarean section rates have reached 15 per cent,<sup>94</sup> with the highest rate in the Jericho Governorate.<sup>95</sup> Caesarean section deliveries were significantly associated with increased maternal age (35 years or more), women giving birth for the first time, low birth weight and residence area.<sup>96</sup>

#### **Box 5. The persistence of checkpoint births**

“In January 2009, a 25-year-old pregnant woman from Al A’sawiya (Jerusalem) was delayed by soldiers at Zayem checkpoint, which controls access to East Jerusalem through the Barrier. The woman, who held a Jerusalem ID and was travelling in a car with Israeli plates, informed the soldiers upon arrival that she was in labour. According to the woman, she was delayed for two hours, during which her water broke. After being allowed through, she delivered in the car while en route to the hospital, where she was rushed into the emergency room”.

*Source:* United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009a, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> MIFTAH, 2009, p. 10, op.cit.

<sup>86</sup> PCBS, 2009e, p. 39.

<sup>87</sup> PCBS, 2009f.

<sup>88</sup> Roudi-Fahimi and Abdul Monem, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> WHO, 2010b, p. 9, op.cit.

<sup>90</sup> Khader, Madi, Riccardo and Sabatinelli, 2009, p. 2418.

<sup>91</sup> WHO, 2010b, p. 9, op.cit.

<sup>92</sup> PCBS, 2010a, p. 38.

<sup>93</sup> HRC, 2009a, p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> PCBS, 2008b, p. 30, op.cit.

<sup>95</sup> PCBS, 2007, p. 18.

<sup>96</sup> Abdul-Rahim, Abu-Rmeileh and Wick, 2009, p. 151-153.

In 2009, the Qalqilya Governorate in the north-western West Bank had the highest percentage of unsafe deliveries at 11.3 per cent, closely followed by Jenin, in the northern part of the West Bank, at 10.9 per cent and Tubas, in the north-eastern part, at 10.4 per cent,<sup>97</sup> even though the vast majority of births in Palestine, 98.6 per cent, are attended by a health professional.<sup>98</sup> The number of registered midwives for every 1,000 people in the West Bank is 0.16, while the number is 0.10 for the Gaza Strip.<sup>99</sup> Only 0.3 per cent of pregnant women choose to deliver with the assistance of a *daya*, or traditional birth attendant. A midwife is responsible for about 11 per cent of prenatal care visits in the West Bank, compared with 60 per cent in the Gaza Strip.<sup>100</sup> Only 16 per cent of obstetricians registered in the West Bank are female and very few actually practice in maternity hospitals.<sup>101</sup>

The Palestinian maternal mortality rate (MMR) is difficult to estimate. In 1995, MMR was estimated at 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. This had risen to 100 deaths per 100,000 by 2005.<sup>102</sup>

Infant mortality rates (IMR) decreased from 27.3 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 25.3 in 2006, and the under-five mortality rate fell from 33.2 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1999 to 31.3 in 2006.<sup>103</sup>

According to a recent survey, 11 per cent of urban children under the age of five years were stunted, 1.3 per cent was wasted, and 2.7 per cent were underweight. Among children in rural areas, 8.6 per cent were stunted, 1.3 per cent was wasted and 3.5 per cent were underweight; in camps, 10 per cent were stunted, 2.1 per cent were wasted and 2.5 per cent were underweight.<sup>104</sup> All these numbers point to serious malnutrition among children.

Breastfeeding is common among Palestinian mothers with 97.5 per cent of all children born in the five-year period prior to a 2006 survey having been breastfed. The mean duration of breastfeeding was 13 months.<sup>105</sup>

While in 2006 the vast majority, 90 per cent, of pregnant women had four or more prenatal visits<sup>106</sup> a lesser number, 70 per cent, did not receive any post-natal care,<sup>107</sup> 38.6 per cent of whom could not access health-care services. This was true primarily in the Gaza Strip, 44 per cent, and to a lesser extent in the West Bank, 10.8 per cent.<sup>108</sup>

Contraception is used by just over half, 50.2 per cent, of Palestinian women between the ages of 15 and 49, with higher usage in the West Bank, 54.9 per cent, compared with the Gaza Strip, 41.7 per cent.<sup>109</sup> The most common form of contraception among married women is the intrauterine device (IUD) at 24.8 per cent of all women using contraception, followed by the contraceptive pill at 7 per cent and, finally,

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<sup>97</sup> PCBS, 2010a, p. 38, op.cit.

<sup>98</sup> PCBS, 2009e, p. 37, op.cit.

<sup>99</sup> PCBS, 2009f, p. 1, op.cit.

<sup>100</sup> Juzoor, 2010, p. 35, op.cit.

<sup>101</sup> Wick, L., 2010, p. 19.

<sup>102</sup> World Bank, 2010a, p. 91, op.cit.

<sup>103</sup> PCBS, 2008b, p. 21-22, op.cit.

<sup>104</sup> MIFTAH, 2009, p. 9, op.cit.

<sup>105</sup> PCBS, 2007, p. 18, op.cit.

<sup>106</sup> MIFTAH, 2009, p. 10, op.cit.

<sup>107</sup> PCBS, 2009f, p. 2, op.cit.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> PCBS, 2007, p. 17, op.cit.



condoms.<sup>110</sup> Use of contraception has been associated with the decrease in fertility rates over the previous decade. It is asserted that 12.4 per cent of females cannot access family planning facilities, with negligible difference among urban and rural areas and refugee camps.<sup>111</sup> For Palestinian mothers with more than one child, 27 per cent had an average spacing of less than 18 months between pregnancies.<sup>112</sup>

Abortion is a criminal offence in Palestine unless the physical health of the mother is threatened. There are no exceptions for instances of rape or incest, seriously compromising an already difficult situation for women or girls. Despite this prohibition, women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) assist victims of rape and incest to end unwanted pregnancies. A 2006 Bethlehem University survey among female students at a West Bank university on abortion revealed that many female students view abortion as permissible within a certain set of circumstances, including when the pregnancy threatens the physical health of the woman or if the foetus is compromised. Interviewees also stated that abortion should be allowed if the woman engages in extra-marital sex, viewing it as a protective measure to combat so-called "honour crimes".<sup>113</sup>

In 2010, out of 160,620 Palestinians with special needs, 80,593, or approximately 50 per cent were women. These women need visual, physical, audio, intellectual and communication assistance.<sup>114</sup> This group of women is often more vulnerable than their male counterparts and is subject to greater discrimination in terms of freedom of movement. They also face higher incidences of sexual and domestic gender-based violence.

The psychological toll that militarization and conflict has inflicted upon Palestinian women and girls, particularly those in the Gaza Strip, has been assessed. Gazan women and girls report having suffered from sleeping and eating disorders as a result of the recent barrage of attacks;<sup>115</sup> others fear that their homes could be destroyed without notice.<sup>116</sup> Forty-four per cent of Gazan women express feelings of insecurity related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, compared with 39 per cent of men. Yet, women were less likely than men to cite fears of insecurity related to the factional divide, with 7 per cent compared with 14 per cent respectively.<sup>117</sup> Women and girls in the West Bank have expressed frustration over the presence of Israeli settlers who harass and assault them.<sup>118</sup> The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) documented 58 cases where women were affected by violence from Israeli settlers and Israeli State actors, causing them severe anxiety and fear.<sup>119</sup>

### C. LITERACY AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Over the last few decades, the Israeli occupation authorities have sought to cripple the Palestinian educational system by closing schools, imposing barricades and impassable barriers and demolishing school buildings. In recent years, students from the Gaza Strip have been denied their right to pursue studies in the West Bank or abroad. However, for Palestinians, the education of women and girls has been a priority, often viewed as a form of 'portable capital' for a population that contends with ongoing statelessness and displacement.

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<sup>110</sup> PCBS, 2008b, p. 36. op.cit.

<sup>111</sup> PCBS, 2009e, p. 41, op.cit.

<sup>112</sup> MIFTAH, 2009, p. 10, op.cit.

<sup>113</sup> Foster et al., 2006.

<sup>114</sup> PCBS, 2010b, p. 49.

<sup>115</sup> CFTA, 2009, p. 4, op.cit.

<sup>116</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 18-19, op.cit.

<sup>117</sup> UNDP, 2009b, p. 25, op.cit.

<sup>118</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 19-20, op.cit.

<sup>119</sup> WCLAC, 2010a, p. 72, op.cit.

Thus, the Palestinian commitment to education has resulted in one of the consistently highest female literacy rates in the Arab region. The overall literacy rate in 2009 among Palestinians (15 years and over) was 94 per cent: 91.7 per cent for females and 97.4 per cent for males.<sup>120</sup> These numbers, especially for females, are expected to further increase as the younger generation ages. While the overall literacy rate among Palestinian women is high, 76 per cent of elderly and older women are illiterate and 90.3 per cent of elderly women have not completed any stage of education.<sup>121</sup>

While education is highly prized in the Gaza Strip, options to study beyond the secondary level are severely limited. Thus, studying abroad, or even in the West Bank, becomes a necessity. This necessity is difficult to achieve given the travel restrictions imposed upon Gazans by Israel. In 2008, seven Fulbright students from the Gaza Strip seeking to study in the United States faced travel restrictions; two were ultimately turned back. Travel prohibitions continue to deny students their right to an education (box 6).

#### **Box 6. Access to education in the Gaza Strip**

“Fatma Sharif, a 29-year-old lawyer from Gaza, was accepted for a Masters’ course on human rights and democracy at a West Bank university and was set to begin her studies in August 2010. However, her request for a permit to travel to the West Bank for her studies was rejected by the Israeli authorities.

Israel has imposed a general ban on the passage of people from Gaza to the West Bank, including students, since 2000. Israel is only permitting the exit of students with scholarships at universities in selected ‘friendly’ countries, but not students enrolled at universities without scholarships or in other countries. Since the ‘easing’ and as the new academic year began, no change to that policy has been observed”.

Source: Amnesty International UK et al., 2010, p. 8.

The education of women and girls is just as important in the Gaza Strip as it is in other parts of Palestine. Female education is viewed as providing a better opportunity for marriage and, on occasion, employment. However, early marriage does occur and is often viewed as protective in a climate of increasing conflict and poverty. In order to offer an incentive to marry, group weddings sponsored by political parties or charitable organizations have become common occurrences. Sponsors cover the costs of the festivities, often including the contract, some furniture and, occasionally, some start up money. The gender imbalance of people of marriageable age has meant that polygamy is encouraged at these events.<sup>122</sup>

In basic education, the number of children in kindergarten during the academic year 2007-2008 stood at 84,289; with girls constituting 48.2 per cent and boys 51.8 per cent. In the West Bank, 67.1 per cent of eligible girls were in kindergarten compared with 32.9 per cent in the Gaza Strip.<sup>123</sup>

The number of students enrolled in primary education during the academic year 2008-2009 reached 963,991, with girls comprising 49.5 per cent and boys 50.5 per cent.<sup>124</sup> At the same time, 145,135 students were enrolled in secondary level education, with girls constituting 53.2 per cent of the total.

The school dropout rate at the primary level was 1.3 per cent for boys and 0.5 per cent for girls, while the corresponding rates at the secondary level were 3 per cent and 3.8 per cent, respectively.<sup>125</sup> Overall, the

<sup>120</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 37, op.cit.

<sup>121</sup> Imam, 2010, p. 37.

<sup>122</sup> Jad, 2009, p. 36-53.

<sup>123</sup> PCBS, 2010a, p. 42, op.cit.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

school dropout rate for youth (aged 15-29 years) was 29.4 per cent for males and 12.6 per cent for females. The dropout rate in the northern West Bank for urban females (18 years and older) was 40 per cent, compared with 36 per cent in the central West Bank and 46 per cent in the southern West Bank.<sup>126</sup> According to PCBS, 29.5 per cent of the males who dropped out performed poorly in school, while 25.1 per cent of the females dropped out because their families could not afford to pay the tuition fees. However, further in-depth research may shed more light on factors leading to these high drop-out rates.

At the tertiary level, 55.2 per cent of university students were female, while the proportion of females at community colleges was 37 per cent during the 2007-2008 academic year.<sup>127</sup> The number of females holding Bachelor's or higher university level degrees increased to 8.6 per cent, compared with 10.4 per cent for males.<sup>128</sup> The number of females with PhD degrees constituted 11.1 per cent.<sup>129</sup> Females are often advised (by universities and families) to take up traditional and gendered specializations.<sup>130</sup> For instance, the majority of females in the West Bank studied education science and teacher rehabilitation, humanities and business administration, with a much smaller proportion of females specializing in security services and veterinary sciences.<sup>131</sup>

In general, gender bias and gender stereotyping in Palestinian school curricula has been a major concern. The findings of a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) study on education in Palestine showed that educators were committed to improving gender equality in the curricula as early as 1999.<sup>132</sup> Yet, another study on how school-age children are taught gender roles, explicitly or implicitly, revealed that schools still have much work to do in order to promote gender equality. Spontaneous utterances by children indicated that messages promoting traditional gender roles are deeply embedded in textbooks and other school curricula.<sup>133</sup>

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education accords high priority to females' vocational education. 8,303 students were enrolled in vocational high schools of which one-third were women.<sup>134</sup> This indicates that vocational training is being considered an option for women. Females constitute 30 per cent of the graduates of the technical and vocational education training (TVET) system.<sup>135</sup> However, evidence shows that vocational training is highly segregated by gender and along traditional lines since conservative families often do not allow their daughters to travel outside their hometowns or villages to attend the training courses.<sup>136</sup>

#### D. LABOUR AND EMPLOYMENT

Mitchell argues that the current employment situation in Palestine has been characterized as "women advance/men retreat",<sup>137</sup> referring to the increasing alienation of men from the formal labour market and the increasing integration of women into the informal sector. According to the 2010 United Nations Human

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<sup>126</sup> World Bank, 2010a, p. 75, op.cit.

<sup>127</sup> PCBS, 2010h, p. 24, op.cit.

<sup>128</sup> PCBS, 2010e, p. 4, op.cit.

<sup>129</sup> PCBS, 2010b, p. 43, op.cit.

<sup>130</sup> Riyada, 2009, p. 27.

<sup>131</sup> PCBS, 2010b, p. 44, op.cit.

<sup>132</sup> Nicolai, 2007, p. 75-76.

<sup>133</sup> Sfeir, 2006.

<sup>134</sup> PCBS, 2010a, p. 42-43, op.cit.

<sup>135</sup> ILO, 2008, p. 4.

<sup>136</sup> Sultana, 2010, p. 14-16, op.cit.

<sup>137</sup> Mitchell, 2010, p. 27.

Development Report by UNDP, the nominal GDP per capita in Palestine is \$2,243.<sup>138</sup> A significant number of Palestinian households receive financial and in-kind assistance from multilateral donors, bilateral donors or national sources (the Ministry of Social Affairs or other public entities) as well as from local religious and charitable organizations.

During the second quarter of 2011, the female unemployment rate was 28.6 per cent.<sup>139</sup> In the third quarter of 2010 it was greatest among young females aged 20-29 years; within this age group, females aged 20-24 years had the highest unemployment rate at 62.3 per cent, followed by females aged 25-29 years at 51.8 per cent. The unemployment rate among women who had completed one to six years of schooling was 5.2 per cent, whereas is increased to 39.2 per cent for those who had completed 13 years of schooling.<sup>140</sup> This leads to the conclusion that an increased level of education does not guarantee employment among Palestinian women.

Palestinian female labour participation is one of the lowest in the Arab region which is a puzzle given the high female literacy rates and educational attainments.<sup>141</sup> During the second quarter of 2011, female workforce participation reached 16.2 per cent,<sup>142</sup> slightly increasing from 15.2 per cent one year earlier.<sup>143</sup> The sectoral distribution of the female labour force follows the general pattern perceived in most other Arab countries. The participation of women in the labour force is highest in the educational sector at 34.7 per cent, followed by the agricultural sector, at 20.5 per cent, and in the health-care sector at 9.4 per cent. Moreover, 90 per cent of women working in the health-care sector are employed under informal working conditions.<sup>144</sup> Within the health-care sector, 14 per cent of physicians, 56 per cent of nurses, 25 per cent of dentists and 52 per cent of pharmacists are women.<sup>145</sup> Employment in the informal sector increases the vulnerability of women, often resulting in a lack of social protection, low or no wages and the potential for exploitation.<sup>146</sup> Only 7 per cent of labour union members are women,<sup>147</sup> which compounds their vulnerability as they remain unprotected.

Moreover, coupled with the difficulties in finding gainful employment, the gender wage gap lingers. For instance, Palestinian women continue to earn less than men with an average daily wage rate of 72.8 New Israeli Shekels (NIS) compared to 80.7 NIS for men.<sup>148</sup> About 66.4 per cent of women in the labour force are paid for work compared with 67.1 per cent of men; while work of women in the informal sector and at home remains underestimated and unremunerated or accounted for in the system of national accounts.<sup>149</sup>

The courts are often a last resort for women seeking justice for family issues and abuse. This is partially due to a dysfunctional legal system, but also due to limited awareness among women of how the legal system can help them, and inadequate legal services for women. Additionally, the low numbers of female judges in civil courts (12 per cent) has inhibited women from seeking redress through the court

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<sup>138</sup> UNDP, 2010a, p.34, op.cit.

<sup>139</sup> PCBS, 2011.

<sup>140</sup> PCBS, 2010i, p. 5.

<sup>141</sup> UNDP, 2006, p. 88.

<sup>142</sup> PCBS, 2011, op.cit.

<sup>143</sup> PCBS, 2010i, p. 5, op.cit.

<sup>144</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), 2010, p. 5, op.cit.

<sup>145</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 65-68, op.cit.

<sup>146</sup> Hilal, Al Kafri and Kuttub, 2008.

<sup>147</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 69, op.cit.

<sup>148</sup> Riyada, 2009, p. 18, op.cit.

<sup>149</sup> PCBS, 2010k, p. 43.

system.<sup>150</sup> Women comprise 12 per cent of judges in civil courts in the West Bank, and 11 per cent in the Gaza Strip. They also comprise 5 per cent of all prosecutors and 15 per cent of lawyers.<sup>151</sup>

In 2009, the Palestinian Authority followed the Sudan in the Arab region by allowing female judges to preside over sharia, or Islamic courts.<sup>152</sup> The Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence allows for the appointment of women to such positions. Of the 45 candidates who took the test, only nine passed and two were women. It is too soon to measure the impact of women judges in sharia courts. However, increasing the number of women in the judiciary will have positive results, especially for women, given that family laws and personal status codes are dealt with by the sharia court system.

Turning to law enforcement, there were 500 women who served as police and law enforcement officers in the combined West Bank and Gaza Strip prior to 2007. In late 2007, a handful of officially-trained female police officers were added to the ranks of the West Bank police force. Currently, out of a total of 8,000 police officers in the West Bank, only 2 per cent are women.<sup>153</sup> The number of policewomen in the Gaza Strip is unknown. Without doubt, a stronger female presence in the police and security forces increases women's confidence in those forces, especially given the prevalence of violence against women, which remains a cause of concern among women and girls.<sup>154</sup>

While the presence of women in the police force remains limited, their role in leadership is growing. The current Head of the Family Defence Unit, the unit tasked with addressing violence against women and children in the West Bank, is the first female to head such a unit within the police force. The Head of the Juvenile Department and the Head of the Beit Sahour Police Departments are both women.

Furthermore, the number of women joining the security forces is also increasing. In the 2008 inaugural class of the Palestinian Academy of Security Sciences, 3 women out of 90 students enrolled, while 16 women enrolled in 2009. In 2010, 32 women out of 125 students enrolled in the Bachelor's degree programme and 10 out of 152 students enrolled in the diploma programme.<sup>155</sup>

More than half of Palestinians listen to the radio, 55.9 per cent (box 7). As for newspapers, 34.9 per cent of males read newspapers compared with 28 per cent of females and 58 per cent of males read books compared with 64.2 per cent of females.<sup>156</sup>

#### **Box 7. Palestinian women on the radio: raising gender awareness**

In late June 2010, a new radio station specifically for women joined the airwaves of Palestine. Radio Nisaa' (Women) FM committed itself to empowering Palestinian women through dialogue and communication and to engaging men in discussions on the rights of women. Radio Nisaa' is the first radio station that is solely dedicated to discussing the status of Palestinian women. At the end of 2010, Radio Nisaa' was airing two daily live shows, "Qahwa Mazbout" (coffee that is just right) and "Tarweeha" (pausing). Since its launch, the radio station has interviewed four female Palestinian ministers, covered the rights of women workers, and raised awareness on breast cancer and disability rights. The broadcast currently reaches the northern and central portions of the West Bank and is seeking to reach the south and the Gaza Strip in the near future.

*Source:* Radio Nisaa'.

<sup>150</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 43, op.cit.

<sup>151</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 62-64, op.cit.

<sup>152</sup> In 1970, Nagwa Kamal Farid was appointed to the sharia court in the Sudan.

<sup>153</sup> Personal correspondence with the police, 2010.

<sup>154</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 51, op.cit.

<sup>155</sup> Personal correspondence with the Palestinian Academy of Security Sciences, 2010.

<sup>156</sup> PCBS, 2010j, p. 35, op.cit.

Only 14 per cent of information and communications technology (ICT) professionals are female.<sup>157</sup> However, female graduates in that sector are growing and a number of rural women are benefiting from courses provided by international development organizations. An initiative to promote socio-economic development of rural women through ICT revealed that more women in rural than urban areas sought such training so as to increase their income-generation potential, enhance their employment opportunities and to improve the quality of their lives through knowledge acquisition. Nonetheless, more awareness of the importance of using ICT as a tool for social and community development is needed.<sup>158</sup> The percentage of women who worked as journalists in 2010 was 15.8 per cent.<sup>159</sup> Moreover, the Israeli occupation has greatly hampered the use of ICTs by preventing imports of equipment and materials into the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Notwithstanding this situation, some breakthroughs are reported in research and practice levels (box 8).

#### **Box 8. Palestinian girls and science**

In mid-2010, Aseel Abul Lail, Noor Al-Arada and Aseel Al-Shaar, aged 14 years, from Al-Askar Camp near Nablus were invited to attend the Intel Science and Engineering Fair in the United States. The three UNRWA high school students invented a cane with a sensor for visually impaired persons. One of the girls came up with the idea after observing the difficult conditions her family members encountered while navigating the uneven terrain of the refugee camp. For their invention, the girls earned a special award out of 1,500 finalists in the field of Applied Electronics and securing their place in history as the first Palestinians to ever win at the competition.

*Source:* Al-Arabiya, 7 October 2010.

The gender gap in the use of ICTs is wide, although women are increasingly using this tool to improve their knowledge. The most comprehensive survey by PCBS in 2006 on ICTs in Palestine found that 32.8 per cent of households possessed a computer, while only 15.9 per cent had access to the Internet. When asked what purpose the computer served, 43.8 per cent of males stated for entertainment, 29.6 per cent for learning and studying, 12.7 per cent for the Internet and 11 per cent for work. In contrast, 50.7 per cent of females responded that they used computers mainly for learning and studying, and 34.3 per cent for entertainment. A greater number of females than males expressed unfamiliarity with the Internet (55.8 per cent, compared with males, 44.5 per cent). Similarly, 20 per cent of men responded that they used the Internet for entertainment, while 31.2 per cent of females used it for educational purposes. The location of computer use varied between males and females. Females were more likely to use the Internet at home and at school or university, whereas males preferred the home or an Internet café. More males claimed to use e-mail, 63 per cent, compared with females, 49.6 per cent. Just over one third, 37.7 per cent, of Palestinians own a mobile phone and ownership is more than double among males, 52.7 per cent, than females, 22.4 per cent.<sup>160</sup>

In the face of growing economic uncertainty and limited job opportunities, entrepreneurship has become an attractive option for many women in Palestine. Women who have not studied past secondary-school level are likely to run home-based businesses. In contrast, women with post-secondary education tend to run more formal businesses.<sup>161</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Totah, 2009.

<sup>158</sup> Rabayah, 2010.

<sup>159</sup> PCBS, 2010g, p. 3, op.cit.

<sup>160</sup> PCBS, 2006b.

<sup>161</sup> ILO, 2008, p. 2, op.cit.

Women who choose to run their own businesses often face gender-based and financial challenges compared with men, unless they work in a family-run business.<sup>162</sup> The Businesswomen Forum was founded in 2006 (box 9) to support Palestinian entrepreneurs, who comprise 5 per cent of business owners.<sup>163</sup> Businesswomen constituted 1.5 per cent of members of the Palestinian Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture in 2007.<sup>164</sup> However, these female entrepreneurs are not represented on the Chambers' boards of directors.<sup>165</sup> Only two Palestinian businesswomen, compared with 800 businessmen, have been issued a "Businessman Card" by Israel, which allows for special privileges related to travel and commerce within the West Bank and Israel.<sup>166</sup>

#### **Box 9. The Businesswomen Forum**

"In 2006, eight businesswomen founded a women-only association in Ramallah, Businesswomen Forum-Palestine, with the core belief that women's economic participation plays an essential role in the development of the Palestinian economy. The Forum targets self-employed women who do not belong to professional syndicates or unions. A part of the MENA Businesswomen's Network, the Forum currently runs four programs in collaboration with various international organizations. The services it provides include one-on-one consulting for members, organizing workshops and conferences, and networking".

*Source:* International Labour Organization (ILO), 2008, p. 4.

#### **E. FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY: FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS**

The poverty line in Palestine is approximately \$581 per month for a family of two adults and four children. In 2008, the number of individuals living in poverty, or below that line, was 477,360 people in the West Bank and 729,880 people in the Gaza Strip.<sup>167</sup> According to UNDP, the poverty rate in the Gaza Strip is 56 per cent, while in the West Bank it is 31 per cent of the population. More than half of Palestinian households, 54 per cent, fall below the poverty line, and 22 per cent of these households endure conditions of extreme and abject poverty. The Gaza Strip has a higher level of extreme poverty, 26 per cent, when compared with the West Bank, 9 per cent.<sup>168</sup>

Females constitute 5 per cent of the main breadwinners in Gazan households, an increase over previous years,<sup>169</sup> yet they struggle more than their male counterparts to obtain employment and support their families. Among Gazan women with higher education, the employment rate is roughly at the same level as for men without higher education.<sup>170</sup>

Poverty rates impact females, particularly female-headed households, in significant ways. Female-headed households are some of the most compromised households in Palestine and their food insecurity is on the rise, especially in the Gaza Strip where the 2009-2010 attack left a number of households without a male

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<sup>162</sup> Mitchell, 2009, p. 46.

<sup>163</sup> Riyada, 2008, p. iii, op.cit.

<sup>164</sup> ILO, 2008, p. 2, op.cit.

<sup>165</sup> Riyada, 2008, p. iv, op.cit.

<sup>166</sup> World Bank, 2010a, p. 52.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>169</sup> UNDP, 2009b, p. 17, op. cit.

<sup>170</sup> Fafo and UNFPA, 2009b, p. 7.

breadwinner.<sup>171</sup> A recent PCBS survey revealed that 9 per cent of households are female-headed: 9.9 per cent in the West Bank and 7.2 per cent in the Gaza Strip. More than half are comprised of women 60 years of age or older.<sup>172</sup> The average size of a female-headed household is 3.4 persons compared with 6.1 persons for a male-headed household.<sup>173</sup> The poverty rate among female-headed households with seven or more children is 79.7 per cent, compared with 68.6 per cent for households with five or six children.<sup>174</sup> It is estimated that 60 per cent of female-headed households receive assistance compared with 27 per cent of male headed-households,<sup>175</sup> increasing their dependency on an already overburdened system.

While poverty and unemployment have been on the increase, so too has food insecurity. Monthly food spending in Palestinian households above the poverty line equalled nearly \$2.60 per person/per day while in poor households it equalled nearly \$2.10.<sup>176</sup> Before the attack in late 2008, the overall proportion of food-insecure households in the Gaza Strip stood at 56 per cent.<sup>177</sup> Female-headed households are especially susceptible to food insecurity, especially the women and girls; empirical evidence from the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) shows that 20 per cent of households have reported that, during food shortages at home, boys are given priority over girls.<sup>178</sup> This leads to greater health problems, including malnutrition, vitamin deficiencies and anaemia as well as complications among pregnant and lactating women.

In the West Bank, 31 per cent of female-headed households are food insecure compared with 24 per cent of male-headed households. In Gaza, 17 per cent compared with 14 per cent have 'poor' food consumption and 26 per cent compared with 23 per cent have 'borderline' food consumption.<sup>179</sup> Additionally, a higher proportion of females and/or children in a household increases its food insecurity; the food insecurity prevalence among households with more than 50 per cent women is 29 per cent more food insecure.<sup>180</sup> In the Gaza Strip, there is a low level of employment among women within food insecure households that constrains their contribution to the household and increases their dependency on a male breadwinner.<sup>181</sup>

#### F. WATER AND SANITATION

Women bear the brunt of water management in the Palestinian household as their tasks involve water collection, cooking and cleaning, as well as supporting household hygiene. Depending on the water source, some women are more susceptible to water borne diseases if they are responsible for its collection. In the Gaza Strip, an assessment in 2010 by Linda Pennells, related to a gender marker mission, revealed that female-headed households were not able to afford drinking water or a domestic desalination unit.

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<sup>171</sup> CSW, 2010, p. 6, op.cit.

<sup>172</sup> PCBS, 2010e, p. 2, op.cit.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>174</sup> CSW, 2010, p. 5, op.cit.

<sup>175</sup> WFP and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2009b, p. 8.

<sup>176</sup> UNDP, 2010a, p. 167, op.cit.

<sup>177</sup> WHO, 2009, p. 17, op.cit.

<sup>178</sup> CSW, 2010, p. 6, op.cit.

<sup>179</sup> WFP and FAO, 2010.

<sup>180</sup> WFP and FAO, 2009b, p. 24, op.cit.

<sup>181</sup> WFP and FAO, 2009a, p. 3.



The percentage of households connected to a public sewage network in Palestine during 2009 was 52.1 per cent: 35.5 per cent in the West Bank and 83.8 per cent in the Gaza Strip.<sup>182</sup> Nearly half of households, 49.8 per cent, own a toilet that is connected to a public sewerage system.<sup>183</sup> In Area C, women Bedouins are more vulnerable to disease because of a lack of sanitary areas and facilities in encampments that are often in close proximity to animals and their waste.<sup>184</sup> In 2010, only 33.7 per cent of household units were connected to all three basic services, namely water, electricity and sewage, and 46.7 per cent are only connected to water and electricity.<sup>185</sup>

### III. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND RIGHTS OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN

Political representation of women in the Palestinian National Authority continues to be influenced by the Israeli occupation and the factional divide. Israel administers 60 per cent of the West Bank, notably portions of Area B and all of Area C. This is especially evident when the assistance of the police or security services is needed. Furthermore, the paralysis of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and the division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip means that the ability of the Palestinian Authority to enforce the rule of law is weakened. This affects all Palestinians, but particularly adds to the insecurity of women and girls, who also suffer from gender and cultural biases as well as structural barriers.

Within such a compromised justice system, increasing militarization, an unfavourable overall political setting and with factionalism plaguing society, Palestinian women continue to struggle. While much of their involvement has been at the informal grassroots level, women have played much more of an active role in the political struggle than a supporting role. In 2010, for instance, Israeli forces arrested 20 Palestinian women for political activism. At the same time, there were 36 Palestinian women in Israeli prisons, of whom 26 had been sentenced to life imprisonment or 10 months to multiple life sentences. In addition, six were awaiting trial and four were in administrative detention. Seven of the women were mothers, with 27 children between them.<sup>186</sup> Palestinian female prisoners, the majority of whom are young, are subjected to a host of abuses including beatings, insults, threats, sexual harassment and humiliation. Moreover, pregnant women do not receive preferential treatment, such as special diets and living space or medical care. Additionally, they suffer from poor diets and inadequate hygiene. During 2007 and 2008, 56 per cent of female prisoners were aged 20-30 years and 13 per cent were under 18 years.<sup>187</sup> Former female detainees face serious challenges and social constraints once released, including restrictions on their mobility and social isolation.<sup>188</sup> From the start of the second Intifada until the end of 2008, the proportion of women killed as a result of occupation-related activities was 5.6 per cent: 5.7 per cent in the West Bank and 5.6 per cent in the Gaza Strip.<sup>189</sup>

With such deep involvement in the political struggles of their country, one would expect commensurate representation of women in the Palestinian Legislative Council and judiciary. Political participation of women in the local and national legislative and executive bodies has increased pursuant to the introduction of a hard-earned quota for women for the 2006 elections. The Minister of Women's Affairs supported women's NGOs in lobbying the Cabinet and the PLC to impose a quota, as an interim positive discrimination affirmative measure, to promote the best interests of the Palestinian people. The introduction

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<sup>182</sup> PCBS, 2010h, p. 57, op.cit.

<sup>183</sup> PCBS, 2007, p. 15, op.cit.

<sup>184</sup> Pennells, 2010, p. 34-37.

<sup>185</sup> PCBS, 2010b, p. 18, p. 40, op.cit.

<sup>186</sup> WCLAC, 2010a, p. 52, op.cit.

<sup>187</sup> Addameer, 2008, p. 6-7.

<sup>188</sup> Save the Children, p. 1.

<sup>189</sup> PCBS, 2010k, p. 56, op.cit.

of a quota for women improved their political representation, raised gender-awareness and reduced gender-bias in elections.

During the first PLC elections of the Palestinian Authority in 1996, women won five out of 88 seats, only 5.7 per cent of the seats in the Council. The 2006 elections saw that share rise to 12.9 per cent (17 out of 132 seats).<sup>190</sup> In municipal councils, women have fared better, securing 18 per cent of the seats in 2007.<sup>191</sup> Women comprise 37 per cent of staff members and employees working for the Palestinian Authority and 15 per cent of senior employees in Authority departments.<sup>192</sup>

Arguably, at the Cabinet level, a trickledown effect of the women's quota resulted in an increase in the share and number of females with ministerial portfolios, albeit mostly holding traditional social, education or women's affairs. According to a 2010 poll, 55 per cent of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) members agreed that there should be a higher number of women in the Cabinet and 90.6 per cent believed that women should be appointed in decision-making positions within the public administration.<sup>193</sup>

However, these results do not guarantee better representation of women in political decision-making. Five out of the 22-member 2009 Cabinet (i.e. 23 per cent) are women holding the portfolios of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education, Culture, Tourism, Women's Affairs and Social Affairs.<sup>194</sup> Women constituted 4.3 per cent of deputy ministers.<sup>195</sup> As of 2008, there were five female ambassadors.<sup>196</sup>

A woman has been appointed to the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), a first since 1964, while 11 women were elected to the 120-member Revolutionary Council of Fatah. Women are also present in other decision-making governmental positions. For instance, in 2009, the first female chief of the Palestine Stock Market Committee was appointed and, in 2010, the first female governor for Ramallah/Al-Bireh took office. The current President of the Palestinian Central Bureau for Statistics (PCBS) is also female. Women's membership in political parties is limited and very few are in leadership positions. Nonetheless, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, since, in 2010, the first female president of a political party was elected (Fida').

Palestinian instruments clearly provide for gender equality within the legal and judicial systems. The Palestinian Declaration of Independence (1988) affirms equality between men and women and the Amended Basic Law (2003) states that all Palestinians are equal under the law without discrimination. Other laws seek to mitigate gender-based discrimination within specific sectors, such as the Palestinian Labour Law (2000) and the Election Law (2005, amended in 2007).

#### A. INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS AND CONVENTIONS ADDRESSING WOMEN

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979 addresses the multiple forms of discrimination that women and girls face. On 8 March 2009, Presidential Decree No. (19) was issued, ratifying the Convention. Women's rights advocates view this signing as a commitment by the Palestinian Authority to the Convention once statehood is achieved. Subsequently, the Palestinian Women's Bill of Rights, also viewed as the 'Palestinian CEDAW Convention', was adopted.

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<sup>190</sup> PCBS, 2009e, p. 27, op.cit.

<sup>191</sup> World Bank, 2010a, p. 5-6, op.cit.

<sup>192</sup> CSW, 2010, p. 8, op.cit.

<sup>193</sup> Assaf, 2010b, p. 7.

<sup>194</sup> PCBS, 2010g, p. 3, op.cit.

<sup>195</sup> CSW, 2010, p. 8, op.cit.

<sup>196</sup> PCBS, 2010g, p. 3, op.cit.

In a similar vein, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA, 1995) explicitly calls for the empowerment of women and girls. The BPFA believes that acknowledging and respecting the human rights of women and girls as “an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights”, is a prerequisite for political, social and economic development. Furthermore, paragraphs 131-149 of the BPFA address women and armed conflict, condemning violence against them and demanding that women have a greater decision-making presence in resolving conflicts and promoting a culture of peace.

As a conflict-stricken population living under occupation, Palestinian women and girls must be protected according to international standards. They also have a significant role to play in security matters and as decision-makers in preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) urges Member States “to ensure 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”. During the 2009-2010 reporting period, there appear to be few opportunities for Palestinian women to take part in these processes. Women were significantly involved in the peace process in the 1990s. However, since the signing of the Oslo Accords, their participation has not been evident and their activism has been marginalized.

Progress in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially Goal 3 on gender and women, remains slow (table 2). While achieving universal education is nearing reality, statistics show that child and maternal health are seriously compromised by the mechanisms of the occupation, particularly when the lives of women and children in the Gaza Strip are examined. Much work is still required to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women. Serious efforts are being exerted to combat gender-based violence and to increase women’s political representation in decision-making positions. Poverty continues to be an issue of concern and indicators point to female-headed households as being the most impoverished and women and girls more prone to food insecurity and malnutrition.

TABLE 2. PALESTINE AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Millennium Development Goal (MDG)	MDG achievement status
1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	Highly unlikely
2. Achieve universal primary education	Highly likely
3. Promote gender equality and empower women	Likely
4. Reduce child mortality	Unlikely
5. Improve maternal health	Likely
6. Ensure environmental sustainability	Highly unlikely
7. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases	No information provided
8. Develop a global partnership for development	Unlikely

Source: MIFTAH, 2009, p. 7-8.

#### B. NATIONAL MACHINERIES FOR WOMEN: THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN’S AFFAIRS

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA) was created in 2003 and since then has had five different ministers. During these power shifts, the Ministry encountered difficulties in fulfilling its mandate, particularly after the 2006 elections.<sup>197</sup> Subsequently, MOWA received technical support from international organizations, including ESCWA and UNIFEM, to build its institutional capacity in order to:

1. Improve the situation of women and girls.
2. Empower women to assume policy- and decision-making positions.
3. Cooperate with governmental and non-governmental institutions to alleviate poverty among women.
4. Monitor and assess the Government’s commitment to gender issues.
5. Combat violence against women.

<sup>197</sup> ESCWA, 2009, p. 16.

Towards this end, MOWA has developed an eight-year National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women (2011-2019), the first of its kind in the Arab region. Moreover, a National Committee for Combating Violence against Women (VAW) was set up in 2008 to follow up on implementation of a plan that aims to:

“Combat violence against ...women by promoting the principle of the rule of law based on women’s rights and improving institutional mechanisms in Palestinian society in order to protect and support abused women to live in a society free from all forms of discrimination based on equality, dignity, and respect for human rights”.<sup>198</sup>

The PCBS collects data on domestic violence as well as from women’s and human rights organizations that conduct surveys for that purpose. However, this remains a taboo area in Palestinian society, especially in the case of sexual violence against never-married women, and insufficient data is available to assess the extent of the problem.

Other forms of violence exist. Data collected following operation Cast Lead highlighted the difficult situation of women and girls living in the Gaza Strip. However, it is important to remember that such hardships existed before and have continued since that attack. The presence of women in the public sphere has been significantly curbed since the takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas. Girls are required to cover their heads at school; female lawyers are obliged to cover their heads while practicing their profession; women are prohibited from smoking *argilah* in public, swimming in the sea or going to male hairdressers. However, many women report that the greatest threats to their safety and freedom are the occupation, the economic blockade and the resulting poverty.

Clark found a correlation between violence and the occupation.<sup>199</sup> For instance, the findings of a 2005 survey in Palestine show that 61.7 per cent of ever-married women were subjected to psychological violence, 23.3 per cent to physical violence and 10.9 per cent to sexual abuse at least once by their husbands in 2005. In the same year, 25 per cent of unmarried females (18 years and over) suffered from physical violence and 52.7 per cent from psychological abuse, that was inflicted, at least once, by a household member. Data on sexual violence are not available.<sup>200</sup>

Because domestic violence is a taboo subject, only 1.2 per cent of women subjected to this form of violence reported that they had sought assistance from the police.<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, 1.7 per cent of women sought assistance from relevant organizations while 3 per cent made phone calls to organizations to seek counselling.<sup>202</sup>

Women’s and human rights organizations have noted a surge in so-called “honour killings” since the start of the second Intifada in 2000. However, there are no reliable data, largely due to the failure of law enforcement authorities to investigate such crimes and the fact that few families called for such crimes to be investigated. From January to August 2009, it was reported that at least 10 women had been killed in ‘honour-related crimes’,<sup>203</sup> and, in 2010 the murder of nine women was documented in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank for various reasons.<sup>204</sup> In a survey conducted in 2009, when asked how respondents would deal

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<sup>198</sup> Ministry of Women’s Affairs of the Palestinian National Authority, 2011, p. 2.

<sup>199</sup> Clark et al., 2010, p. 310-316.

<sup>200</sup> PCBS (2006a), p. 6-7.

<sup>201</sup> UNDP, 2010a, p. 48, op.cit.

<sup>202</sup> WCLAC, 2009, p. 12.

<sup>203</sup> CSW, 2010, p. 8, op.cit.

<sup>204</sup> Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), 2010.

with a 'wayward' female, the vast majority chose 'check her story', 'advise her' and 'punish her financially'; while nearly 10 per cent of respondents chose the option 'kill her'.<sup>205</sup>

Palestinian women have a legal right to own and exercise control over their land, yet very few do. Justifications for this practice revolve around the tradition of male retention of property within families. Similarly, females also have a legal right to an inheritance, albeit to a disproportionately lesser share than their male family members. Yet, custom dictates that women surrender their share to a male family member for 'safe keeping', to avoid shaming the family in the eyes of the community.<sup>206</sup> Women and girls assert that a number of females have been killed in recent years due to inheritance issues rather than for the sake of honour (box 10).<sup>207</sup>

#### **Box 10. A gender perspective on the Criminal Code**

"Some women are beaten or divorced and they get nothing of their rights. They are forced to give up their rights. We are in the twenty-first century and we are still talking about basic rights like alimony and financial security. We still demand that the Palestinian Legislation Council [sic] amend these laws. They are delayed due to paralysis. It has never been normal to practice violence, but I feel that violence against women is normally practiced against the backdrop of family honour. This issue is very sensitive in our society. We, as an association were involved in an issue that should be discussed from a legal, religious and social point of view. I was really moved by the regrettable incident in Qalqiliya when two sisters were killed. People claimed they were killed for family honour. I discovered later, or someone told me, that they were killed for inheritance issues. So, the law is used to escape a severe penalty".

*Source:* Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 38.

Prostitution and trafficking exist in Palestinian society and while data and public discussion are limited on these topics, a recent report reveals that prostitution appears to thrive in Ramallah and Jerusalem, while Palestinian women and girls are trafficked between the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and Israel. The stigma surrounding prostitution and trafficking makes it difficult to provide assistance to those women involved. The majority of traffickers were said to be older Palestinian women who had previously been prostitutes.<sup>208</sup>

In 2009, the Ministry of Women's Affairs succeeded in convincing the Palestinian Authority to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In 2010, the Ministry also succeeded in the annulment, in the West Bank, of article 340 of the Criminal Code that allowed mitigating circumstances for so-called "honour crimes" and of article 98 that allowed for special consideration if the perpetrator of the crime acts in a fit of passion or rage.

#### **C. NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOS)**

Women's organizations in Palestine work in a number of capacities and serve women and girls from all walks of life. Some organizations empower women through livelihoods projects, while others may serve as charitable organizations. Some train the police and security forces to be more victim-sensitive, while others provide direct services. Others focus on research and documentation, or work on advocacy and legal reform.

<sup>205</sup> UNDP, 2009a, p. 85.

<sup>206</sup> Azzouni, 2010, p. 15-16.

<sup>207</sup> Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 37-38, op.cit.

<sup>208</sup> SAWA-All the Women Together Today and Tomorrow, 2008, p.16.

The 2009 West Bank-based Government continues to express its commitment to empowering women and securing their rights, and has called upon Governmental and non-governmental institutions to assist in building an independent Palestinian State that ensures gender equality.<sup>209</sup> To that end, in June 2009, the Council of Ministers requested that all Governmental departments prepare gender-sensitive annual budgets.<sup>210</sup> Palestinian women are able to obtain passports, open bank accounts without the permission of a male guardian, and pass on their nationality to their children.

Proposals are submitted by women's NGOs with regard to amending the Criminal Code and the Personal Status Law in order to address gender inequities, while also ensuring that women's rights are safeguarded and respected. To compliment this process, a first-ever Family Protection Law has also been proposed.<sup>211</sup>

The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) together with other civil society organizations and Governmental institutions, have taken steps to create the first comprehensive family violence referral system in Palestine. The system will involve a range of service providers, including core security and justice providers, in addition to medical and social services.

Al Muntada (the Forum) is a Palestinian NGO that deals with violence against women which was established in 2000 by a coalition of women's organizations in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. The Forum aims to raise awareness of violence against women (VAW) and to work towards its prevention and eradication throughout Palestine. Leadership rotates every other year among the various members in the coalition. Each year, a specific form of violence is addressed through campaigns. It should be noted that there are only two functioning shelters for women and girls fleeing violence, and that both are located in the West Bank.<sup>212</sup> One serves as a transitional shelter, while the other, called Mehwar (the core), functions on a long-term basis. Established in 2007, Mehwar operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs and is capable of housing an average of 30 women and their children.<sup>213</sup> It provides multiple services to survivors of gender-based violence, including counselling and psychological and legal support, in addition to vocational training and educational opportunities.

The Palestinian Declaration of Independence (1988) explicitly states that, "The State of Palestine proclaims its commitment to the principles and purposes of the United Nations and to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". Likewise, Article 10 of the Amended Basic Law (2003) states that, "The Palestinian National Authority shall work without delay to become a party to regional and international declarations and covenants that protect human rights". These passages indicate to many human rights advocates, especially women's rights advocates, that the Palestinian Government is committed to implementing all international instruments and conventions that promote the human rights of women and girls.

A review of the Criminal Code (Jordanian Criminal Code, No. 16 (1960) in the West Bank and Egyptian Criminal Code, No. 74 (1936) in the Gaza Strip) or the Personal Status Law (Jordanian Personal Status Law, No. 61 (1976) in the West Bank and Egyptian Family Law (1954) in the Gaza Strip) will reveal that there are no laws that address gender-based violence, whether physical or sexual and that there are no provisions against the harassment of women in the public sphere or in the work place. Similarly, murder in

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<sup>209</sup> Palestinian National Authority, 2009, p. 12.

<sup>210</sup> CSW, 2010, p. 8, op.cit.

<sup>211</sup> The momentum in the region for such reform is tangible. It is worth noting that in 2008, the Jordanian Parliament enacted a Family Protection Law that was supported by both Government and civil society, one of the first in the region.

<sup>212</sup> A third shelter, in Nablus, is currently closed, but is hoped to reopen with assistance from the Palestinian Government and international supporters.

<sup>213</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2010, p. 12-13.

the name of honour is perpetrated with impunity. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs and a number of civil society organizations have supported a decree which proposes to amend existing legislation that allows crimes of honour to occur with impunity. There also appears to be wide support in the PLC for gender-sensitive reform. A PCBS poll revealed that 74.3 per cent of PLC members do not support reduced punishment for perpetrators of so-called “honour crimes”. Likewise, 66.5 per cent of PLC members support, or support to some extent, revising the Personal Status Law and 57.4 per cent support revising the Criminal Code. Additionally, 85 per cent of PLC members would support a law to punish those who commit violence against women.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Assaf, 2010b, p. 6, op.cit.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations build upon previous ESCWA reports. These recommendations seek to advance the status of Palestinian women and girls through gender-sensitive economic and social policy, as well as judicial and legal reform. They also seek to utilize international standards and conventions such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the MDGs as a framework for promoting human rights and ensuring the security of Palestinian women and girls.

1. Ensure a commitment on behalf of the Palestinian Authority to develop an economic and social policy that is inclusive and gender-sensitive and utilizes international documents and conventions as a framework for change. Set clear interim targets for achieving the MDGs, develop a strategy to ensure that the tenets of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are respected and ensure that the participation of women is viable and visible in peace and security matters, in accordance with United Nations Security Resolution 1325 (2000).
2. Strengthen the rule of law by criminalizing violence against women and girls, including so-called “honour killings” and undertake comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns in this context in order to change the public mindset. Undertake legislative reform for a unified Personal Status Law and Criminal Code. Adopt the Palestinian Women’s Bill of Rights and sign all international instruments promoting the human rights of women and girls. Develop indicators to monitor crimes against women, including rape and so-called “honour killings”.
3. Ensure gender-sensitive budgeting within all Governmental policies with a special emphasis on vulnerable female populations, such as female-headed households and women in the Gaza Strip, in order to ensure that sufficient public funds are provided for eliminating inequalities between men and women.
4. Empower the Ministry of Women’s Affairs to implement greater gender-sensitive reform and increase the capacity and profile of ministerial gender units. Integrate a gender perspective into the programmes of all ministries and institutions.
5. Apply a quota system to all areas of politics in order to attain a target of a minimum of 30 per cent female representation.
6. Increase female representation and participation in core security and justice sectors such as the judicial system, the security forces and the civilian police.
7. Set targets for improving access to and the quality of services within the health sector, including reproductive health services. Reduce maternal mortality and infant mortality rates, address the rates of non-communicable disease most affecting females, especially breast cancer, and ensure mental health services are available for those in need.
8. Support the efforts of civil society, religious organizations and the media to empower women and girls and create a network to prevent and combat gender-based violence. It is especially important that services extend to the Gaza Strip, as well as to rural areas and refugee camps.
9. Review and amend basic and secondary school curricula to ensure that a gender-sensitive perspective is present. At the tertiary level, encourage female participation in non-traditional specializations, including science and technology.
10. Develop opportunities to increase female labour-force participation. Encourage economic growth through the empowerment of female entrepreneurs, with a particular focus on training and vocational education, and building their capacity in business, economic development and ICT for socio-economic development. Additionally, create a programme of action for women in the field of business with an emphasis on entrepreneurship and women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises.



11. Develop policies that address the needs of all vulnerable female populations with a view of promoting empowerment, sustainability and participation.

12. Develop policies that acknowledge the unique situation of women and girls in the Gaza Strip, bearing in mind the requirements of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). Ensure that females in the Gaza Strip have access to educational and economic opportunities, as well as to decent and timely health care and reproductive health services.

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