

# Palestinian Women and Girls and the Provision of Security

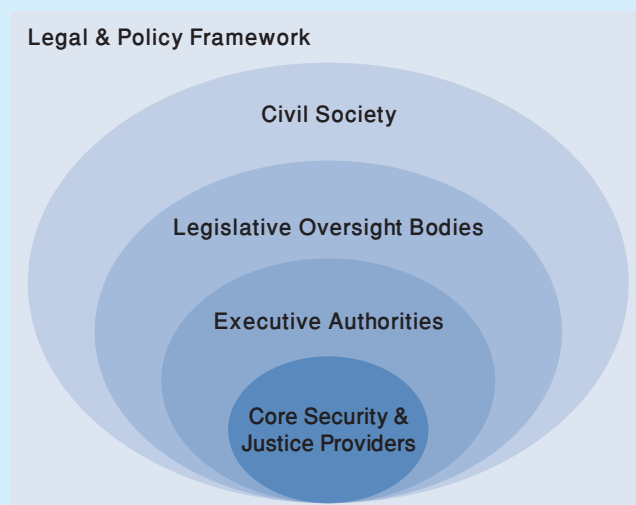
A great many Palestinian and international actors have committed themselves to improving the security of Palestinian women and girls, especially with regard to gender-based violence. On 8 March 2009, President Mahmoud Abbas symbolically signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Palestinian National Authority has committed itself to 'enable women's participation in policy and decision-making processes,' and to 'fight violence against women' in its Programme of the Thirteenth Government (2009). In recent years the Ministry of Social Affairs, in cooperation with local and international women's organisations, developed a multi-service shelter for women and children seeking protection from violence. The Palestinian police have complemented this service with Family Defence Units throughout the West Bank that are specially designated to deal with physical and sexual violence against women and girls.

Against this backdrop, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) published a report, 'Palestinian Women and Security: Why Palestinian Women and Girls Do Not Feel Secure' (February 2010). The report showed that Palestinian women and girls were reluctant to utilise services from the various security sector institutions. As a follow up, DCAF and the Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD) organised six working group sessions with Palestinian service providers in April and May 2010. Individual meetings were also held with service providers.

## Who participated in the working group sessions?

Participants of the working group sessions represented institutions providing services to Palestinian women. These included the core security and justice providers such as courts and police and security forces; executive and legislative bodies, including representatives from the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Palestinian Legislative Council; and civil society, such as women's and

### What is the Security Sector?



The security sector consists of the core security and justice providers and their management and oversight institutions. The legal and policy framework regulates their tasks, authorities and structures.

#### Core security and justice providers:

- ◆ Security forces (armed forces, police, intelligence and security services, but also liberation armies and insurgency groups)
- ◆ Justice and law enforcement institutions (courts, prosecution services, prisons, traditional justice systems)

#### Management and oversight institutions:

- ◆ Executive management and oversight bodies (Presidency, Council of Ministers, ministries of defence, interior, justice and finance)
- ◆ Legislative management and oversight bodies (Parliament and its committees, ombudspersons)
- ◆ Informal oversight institutions (civil society organisations, media, research and advocacy organisations)

human rights organisations, shelters, research and advocacy centres, and media representatives.

## Why did DCAF organise these sessions?

The aim of the working group sessions was to understand the steps needed to better respond to the security needs of Palestinian women and girls and to help identify areas where service providers might network and collaborate to improve service provision.

## Why this Spotlight?

This issue of the DCAF Spotlight series summarises the main concerns revealed in the report 'Palestinian Women and Security: Why Palestinian Women and Girls Do Not Feel Secure' and during meetings and working group sessions with Palestinian service providers. It highlights the obstacles service providers face as they seek to improve the services for Palestinian women and girls facing insecurity. It addresses the following questions:

- ◆ What are the main constraints Palestinian women and girls face in accessing services?
- ◆ How do Palestinian women and girls evaluate services and service providers?
- ◆ What obstacles do service providers face?
- ◆ What are the recommendations of Palestinian women and girls for service providers and security sector institutions?
- ◆ What are the recommendations of Palestinian service providers?

The views expressed in this Spotlight are those of Palestinian service providers and women and girls.

## What are the main constraints Palestinian women and girls face in accessing services?

Palestinian women and girls, as well as service providers, identified multiple obstacles in accessing services that ensure security. Some obstacles were institutional, while others were economic and social. Participants in the working groups, as well as Palestinian women from the focus groups, indicated a spectrum of constraints that prevented women and girls from properly accessing services.

## Absence of appropriate legal and regulatory frameworks

Participants said that the absence of a contemporary and unified legal and regulatory framework was the greatest impediment to ensuring women's security:

*'We lack clear Palestinian laws to regulate women's rights. There are many gaps in the law that undermine women's rights.'* (Security Sector Representative, Ramallah)

*'Concerning the Personal Status Law, we depend on the unjust Jordanian law that is not fair to women.'* (Housewife, Jenin)

*'I will not have my rights because rules and regulations, even laws, are missing. I do not know whom I should refer to for help.'* (University Student, Gaza Strip)

## Ignorance of service providers' tasks

Service providers acknowledged that women and girls were generally unaware of services offered:

*'The services are not enough and people do not know about them.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

*'There is a lack of knowledge concerning services.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

*'Most women don't know about services. They don't know that there are qualified people to help them.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

## Women's ignorance of their rights

Many service providers said that women's ignorance of their rights contributed to women's overall insecurity:

*'Most of the reasons that make women or girls vulnerable to violence and feel insecure are the result of their ignorance of the law and their rights.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

*'Some men think it is their right to beat their women. They believe religion says they can beat them, but not severely. Even women and girls do not know that it is violence they are subjected to.'* (Human Rights Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

## Fear of disclosure

Palestinian service providers and women said that the availability of services alone was not sufficient. Often, the social stigma of asking for help outside of the family prevented women from accessing services:

*'If you gave me a million dinars as an abused woman to refer to the police, I still wouldn't go. It appears like a stigma and scandal and dishonour.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Nablus)

*'Even if you direct women to certain institutions, they will not go because they will say: "it is better to suffer silently than to suffer with a scandal".'* (Working Woman, Jenin)

*'Palestine is a conservative society. Even if a woman goes to the police regarding her husband she is under pressure to deal with the issue outside of the police department. They are afraid of divorce and alienation.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

## **How do Palestinian women and girls evaluate services and service providers?**

Palestinian women and girls said that they were sceptical toward service providers tasked with addressing their security needs. While some women and girls have benefited from service providers, many had a critical view of the services provided by them. Palestinian women and girls identified a greater need for confidence-building and outreach to overcome these problems. Additionally, service providers noted their own difficulties in rendering services.

## **Lack of faith in core security and justice providers**

A lack of faith in core security and justice providers indicated that women and girls, in some cases, turn to traditional methods of support to resolve disputes:

*'The mukhtar (community elder) resolves personal status issues, so why go to the police? People only go to the police or security officials if they know someone, not because they trust them.'* (Human Rights Organisation Representative, Nablus)

Similarly, trust in the judiciary is weak:

*'The courts are not administering justice to women. If a woman complains against her father or brother on an inheritance case or any claim for example, she does not get her rights.'* (Working Woman, Jenin)

## **Limited public services**

Women's organisations pointed out that their ability to reach women and girls was severely hindered by the Israeli occupation:

*'The focus should be on exposing how the occupation interrupts the work of service providers.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

For organisations that provide services, especially those provided by the government, their functions were not clearly known by other service providers:

*'There are services offered by the Palestinian Authority but, honestly speaking, we do not even know the names of these organisations or the services they provide.'* (Ministry of Health Representative, Ramallah)

Additionally, a number of public services were singled out for lack of capacity and effectiveness:

*'The shelters cannot provide women with the necessary protection.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

*'In hospitals, medical staff, including myself, cannot provide the necessary care. Our staff does not know how to deal with abused women.'* (Ministry of Health Representative, Ramallah)

## **Weakness of women's and human rights organisations**

Representatives from women's organisations and the government explained how they tried their best to understand the needs of women. However, they also pointed out their limited resources or capabilities:

*'The problem is that society is expecting too much from service providers. Are they able to reach everyone? It is not about the number of organisations but about the quality.'* (Shelter Representative, Ramallah)

*'The provision of service is limited in organisations. They are in high towers and don't know what is going on "downstairs".'* (PLC Member, Ramallah)

*'Our problem in the government and the NGOs is that we start working on something and don't follow through.'* (Ministry of Labour Representative, Ramallah)

## **What obstacles do service providers face?**

A lack of networking and cooperation between service providers negatively impacts the provision of services to Palestinian women and girls. Limited awareness within the community on the topic of women and insecurity also contributed to difficulties in rendering services.

## **Lack of cooperation and networking**

Service providers said that many institutions do not cooperate with each other. Often, they are not familiar with each others' services. Furthermore, service providers claimed that an appropriate framework for networking and cooperation does not exist:

*'Networking is a problem. We don't have the infrastructure and referrals are difficult.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

*'The problem is not in the procedures, it is in the advertisement of services. Other organisations do not know we exist.'* (Women's Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

*‘Civil society organisations have a crucial role in developing women’s security. However, they are also competing and not working on one aim. A project is completed and that’s it. To achieve something, we need to follow up and be serious. There is no networking between civil society organisations.’* (Prime Minister’s Office Representative, Ramallah)

*‘We realise there are problems in communication but we don’t know how to solve them.’* (Women’s Organisation Representative, Ramallah)

## Limits on raising awareness

Service providers acknowledged that social attitudes make it difficult to talk about women’s insecurity:

*‘All of these activities are difficult to start, especially in a society that believes that you cannot question what goes on in the family.’* (Ministry of Social Affairs Representative, Ramallah)

Participants believed it was necessary to raise awareness amongst the male population, but acknowledged that engaging men is very difficult:

*‘Civil society organisations help women and offer awareness. However, they tend to ignore men.’* (Women’s Organisation Representative, Nablus)

*‘The use of societal education has not been very successful. Men don’t come to trainings. We invite husbands and wives, but only the women come and, therefore, the education is not balanced.’* (Shelter Representative, Nablus)

## What are the recommendations of Palestinian women and girls for service providers and security sector institutions?

Women and girls participating in the working group sessions were sceptical of the ability of service providers and security sector institutions to ensure their security. They made a number of recommendations on how to improve services. However, women and girls also said that they were not sure whether they would feel comfortable accessing these services due to the social stigma attached to them:

- ◆ **Strengthening service providers and security sector institutions:** Women and girls recommended improving the skills sets and networking of service providers. Some

suggested social workers should be present at the police stations and hospitals, while others wished for a stronger presence of female police officers in all sectors. An increase in shelters was recommended with staff able to deal with clients in a professional and compassionate manner.

- ◆ **Implementing legal reform:** Women and girls viewed reforming the legal system as paramount for any significant impact on service provision. The Personal Status Law was highlighted for reform, while others stated that a Family Violence Law is needed to protect women and their families.
- ◆ **Improving awareness-raising:** Palestinian women and girls also called for service providers to raise awareness amongst various populations, instead of focusing on women only. This would increase trust in service provision and offer greater support to women and girls. Furthermore, awareness-raising was recommended for the police and security forces, hospitals, and decision-makers.

## What are the recommendations of Palestinian service providers?

A number of service providers indicated that increasing the networking, collaboration and promotion of services between organisations and institutions were important factors for improving the overall provision of service for Palestinian women and girls. Furthermore, Palestinian service providers noted that media should play a more significant role in promoting such services.

- ◆ **Increasing networking and collaboration:** Service providers recommended greater networking and partnerships between those with differing roles as a way to enhance service provision, especially when developing referral protocols and planning programme agendas. Regular meetings between all invested parties including, citizens, decision-makers, civil society organisations and security agencies, was seen as a way to engender dialogue and ensure greater security for women and girls.
- ◆ **Promoting services:** Service providers recommended a greater promotion of their services, especially for women in villages, through a referral phone line and at the hospitals. Other venues for promoting services could be through the media and in school curricula.

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