

Time to end violence against Palestinian women and girls

by the FMR editors

Domestic violence is an all too common response to the pressures of life in crowded refugee camps and communities living under occupation. The Palestinian Authority (PA) has failed to establish a framework to respond to violence against women and girls.

A report from Human Rights Watch (HRW) has documented how cases of violence ranging from spousal and child abuse to rape, incest and murders committed under the guise of family 'honour' often go unreported and unpunished. Discriminatory criminal legislation in force in the West Bank and Gaza has led to virtual impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence and has deterred victims from reporting abuse. These laws include provisions that: reduce penalties for men who kill or attack female relatives who commit adultery; allow rapists who agree to marry their victims to escape criminal prosecution; and allow only male relatives to file incest charges on behalf of minors.

With some exceptions, Palestinian police lack the expertise and the will to address violence against women in a manner that is effective, sensitive to the needs of the victim and respectful of their privacy. As a result, police officers often turn to informal measures rather than serious investigations. When questioned, many were unapologetic about their efforts to encourage marriage – sometimes with the assistance of influential clan leaders – between a rapist and his victim. They see intervention as a means of 'solving' these cases. In addition, police often force women to return to their families even when there is a substantial threat of further harm.

"PA officials across the political spectrum appear to view security only within the context of the ongoing conflict and occupation, all but ignoring the very real security threats that women and girls face at home."
Farida Deif, Women's Rights Division, HRW

The absence of medical guidelines for doctors also seriously affects the quality of treatment afforded to female victims of violence. The health care system is typically the first and sometimes the only government institution that victims of abuse come into contact with, yet doctors are ill-equipped to deal with such cases. The Ministry of Health has no medical procedures or protocols to guide medical professionals or ministry staff in their treatment of domestic violence cases. Doctors lack specialised training and guidance on how to treat women victims of violence, preserve evidence of the abuse and maintain confidentiality.

While the availability of shelters has increased in the West Bank, Israeli-imposed movement restrictions within and between the West Bank and Gaza make it impossible for some victims of violence to reach them. At times the lack of shelters and socially acceptable living arrangements for single women has forced Palestinian women's organisations and the police to house victims in police stations, governors' offices, private homes, schools and orphanages.

Israeli actions – including attacks on PA institutions and security services and Israel's refusal to remit tax revenues – have significantly weakened PA capabilities but, argues HRW, this is no excuse for inaction. HRW calls on the PA to establish guidelines for responding to family violence in line with international standards and to train government employees to recognise and respond appropriately to the needs of gender-based violence (GBV) survivors. The PA should enact a specific law criminalising domestic violence

and repeal discriminatory laws that hinder efforts to tackle GBV.

The PA urgently needs to adopt a zero-tolerance policy for all forms of violence against women and girls. Failing to offer women and all members of Palestinian society the highest protection of the law will only further erode faith in the Palestinian criminal justice system.

A Question of Security: Violence Against Palestinian Women and Girls is available at <http://hrw.org/reports/2006/opt1106>

Sameera, her three daughters and husband, Adel, live in dire circumstances in Gaza's Al-Bureij refugee camp. For years Sameera was regularly beaten, Adel accusing her of having a genetic defect since she had not given birth to a boy. Fearing Adel's wrath, Sameera's first visits to the UNFPA-supported Al-Bureij Women's Centre were veiled in secrecy. Centre staff provided Sameera with psychosocial counselling and medical support that nurtured her back to health. She learned about reproductive health and rights and how to care for her daughters. Counsellors in the centre's Male Intervention Unit succeeded in getting Adel involved in their 'man-to-man' programme and, later, in group counselling. Adel's attitude to his family has been transformed. Sameera and Adel credit the centre with changing their lives and are encouraging other couples to learn about building non-violent partnerships and to take advantage of the ante- and post-natal care, family planning, legal and psychosocial counselling, health education, physiotherapy, exercise classes and lab services the centre provides.

For more information about the Bureij Women's Health Centre contact the director, Feryal Thabet (whc_cfa@hotmail.com) or see UNFPA News www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=676