

# Disseminating findings from research with Palestinian children and adolescents

by Dawn Chatty

*For more than half a century Palestinian children and their care givers have lived a temporary existence in the dramatic and politically volatile landscape of the Middle East.*

These children have been captive to various sorts of stereotyping, both academic and popular. They have been projected, as have their parents and grandparents, as passive victims without the benefit of international protection. And they have become the beneficiaries of numerous humanitarian aid packages based on the Western model of child development and the psychosocial approach to intervention.

In January 1999, a research project examining the impact of prolonged forced migration and armed conflict on the lives of Palestinian children and young people was initiated in Lebanon, Syria,

Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>1</sup> The project had several goals. One was to bridge the theoretical and applied divide common to much of the research directed at Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. Another was to test and challenge some of the Western medical and developmental assumptions concerning child and adolescent development. A third was to engage in multi-disciplinary, participatory research to draw out the similarities and differences between Palestinian refugee communities separated for more than 50 years by the national borders of different states.

## Context of each field site

**Lebanon:** In 1949 Lebanon received nearly 110,000 Palestinian refugees from the newly-created state of Israel. At the end of 2001 there were 385,000 registered refugees in Lebanon, 56% of them living in recognised camps. Lebanon does not give refugees civil rights. Refugees may not attend government schools or use government health services. What health and education services are available are provided by UNRWA (United Nations Works and Relief Agency). Palestinian refugees may not work in Lebanon and 40% of this community is unemployed.<sup>2</sup>

**Syria:** 28% of the 396,000 registered refugees in Syria live in refugee camps. Syria grants Palestinian refugees all the rights of a citizen except the right to vote. Health and education services are provided by UNRWA. In addition, Palestinian refugees may use government health and education services. Many Palestinian youth attend university in Damascus and Aleppo.

Discrimination is more discretionary than embodied in legislation.

**Jordan:** Jordan has the largest number of exiled Palestinians. The 1,662,000 refugees registered with UNRWA make up about 34% of the entire population. 18% of them live in camps. The Palestinian population of Jordan has grown internally and through successive waves of forced migration. Health and education services are provided by UNRWA but access to government schools and health services is also possible.

Jordan is the only Arab country which provides citizenship rights to some Palestinian refugees.

**West Bank and Gaza:** The West Bank has a population of about 1.9 million Palestinians of which 31.5% are refugees, 27% of whom live in camps. In Gaza the 865,000 refugees comprise 81.8% of the total population. 54% of registered refugees live in camps. Most health and education services are provided by UNRWA. Most employment is within the Gaza strip, in government or UNRWA schools, or in agriculture. Prior to the current *intifada*, some had employment in Israel.

## Findings

The research was conducted in two phases: a community-level Participatory Research Approach (PRA) and a household sub-sample of 20 households in each site. Research tools used for gathering data included: collection of narratives and life histories, with a focus on critical incidents, from children and adults of different generations within the same households; semi-structured interviews with key informants; group interviews with men, women and children in homes and in schools; and participant observation.

Certain themes were repeated time and again, including constructed memories of life in Palestine, knowledge of the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) which led to the expulsion of the Palestinian refugees from formerly British-mandated Palestine, a



*Palestinian boy receives a daily meal from UNRWA, Dheishah refugee camp, West Bank.*

consciousness of Palestinian identity, a sense of discrimination and an awareness of gender biases within the community

#### a) Life in Palestine

The first generation (grandparents) of refugees have orally reconstructed life in Palestine before 1948 and this imagery is crucial in the transmission to the children and adolescents of the 'fact' of Palestine, the experience of security and agrarian happiness prior to the community's up-rooting, expulsion and refuge.

*"We were shepherds, we ploughed and harvested, threshed and picked olives... we didn't plant grapes, we planted barley, corn and wheat, God blessed these three seeds. There was milk, yoghurt, oil and cheese ... I was tutored by a person who used to receive an amount of corn or wheat in return for teaching me."* (First generation male.)

#### b) Al Nakba

Memories of the journey into exile appear in the narratives and life histories of all the households. The older generation recalls the peasant way of life while the second and third generation focus on the 'Right of Return' or what some call the 'Dream of Return'. Occasionally, the grandparents in the household talked about their actual flight from Palestine for the first time. For the children and grandchildren, this was a moving lesson in the fears which the older generation had faced and had been too ashamed to admit to before. Many spoke of the fears they had had for their lives, facing superior military might with, at times, only a few old rifles in the entire village.

*"I was 20 years old ... At 10 o'clock Jews entered and occupied the village. They used to threaten us that they would shoot us if we stayed. ... people went to the Red Cross and asked to leave because Jews wanted to kill us and there was no security... My family left every thing behind, they only carried some blankets on two donkeys."* (First generation female.)

#### c) Palestinian identity

Palestinian identity, we found, is consciously reconstructed, for example through popular story telling and oral memory. It is also supported by

external factors - host government policy - which heighten the sense of 'otherness'. This historical consciousness appears to be waning as the younger generations learn less about their past.

*"My grandmother tells me about Palestine, she is like a dictionary, she has many stories to tell about Palestine... I wish I could visit Palestine..."* (Third generation male, 17 years old.)

#### d) Sense of discrimination

The sense of facing discrimination varied significantly from country to country. Although reported in all interviews, this sense of otherness and marginalisation was expressed most strongly in Lebanon where parents spoke of the denial of their civil rights by the Lebanese government and children and youth expressed their sense of isolation and discrimination. Although in Syria most civil rights are granted to Palestinian refugees, there is, nevertheless, a sense of otherness.

*"Many people from the outside think we are terrible and we are all bad. They call us 'mukhawaymjiyyeh' [campers]. Even my sister's family who live in Zarqa, they say that people in the camp are garbage, good for nothing, cows, etc."* (Third generation male, 13 years old.)

Within this broad theme of discrimination we heard many views and statements about life in refugee camps. It was impossible to isolate certain issues such as overcrowding, violence, close kin relations and early marriage from the general 'culture of poverty' and the absence of alternative institutions to support individuals.

*"Over-crowdedness makes us very close to each other... When a problem occurs we hear the shouting at their houses. The most important problem is the narrowness of the place. Children can't play. People ask their neighbours to keep their children home"* (Second generation female.)

*"Our moral losses are greater than our material losses. When I was a young man I had the ambition of establishing an educated family but I was not able to do much for my children because of war and displacement. We were displaced five to six times and every time*

*we lost everything and had to start again"*. (Second generation male.)

#### e) Gender bias

Domestic violence and discrimination against females at home and at school were widely reported. Much of this violence is structural and institutionalised. Early marriage is sometimes used by girls as a way of escaping family or male tyranny and at other times it is forced upon them in order to improve their family's physical, economic or social situation.

*"A suitor came for my sister. My mother is the one who forced her to marry, not my father... She was the first in school, but my mother insisted she get married. The first suitor who came she forced her to marry him. ... My sister was fifteen when she married."* (Third generation female, 14 years old.)

*"There are differences between my thinking and my parents'. When I am bored I like to go out of the house but my mum prefers me at home. I can see the discrimination between boys and girls - boys can spend 24 hours outside the house but we stay home. It is true that it is better for girls to stay home but it is boring..."* (Third generation female.)

#### Themes and concerns raised by Palestinian adolescents

Foremost among the themes which emerged across all five field sites were young people's concern about their identity as Palestinians, refugees, camp residents and Moslems or Christians. The transmission of Palestinian identity remains important. The presence in many extended family homes of 'Generation 1' individuals is considered crucial. 'Generation 2' is less well-informed about Palestine and 'Generation 3' knows even less - generally the village of origin's name but nothing more specific. In Jordan, naturalisation policy has created a split population where the middle classes are often well-integrated into Jordanian society while the lower classes identify more with the general Palestinian refugee population. In Syria, Palestinian refugees tend to intermarry with the refugee camp population. This appears to be tied to the widespread feeling of discrimination as refugees among host country populations. Education also emerged as an important theme throughout, though the

push to gain higher education was treated with reluctance by some because of the very limited opportunities for gaining a university education (especially in Lebanon). Furthermore there was a growing perception that there was a scarcity of jobs available to Palestinians and that pay was low. These factors were seen to discourage greater numbers of adolescents from continuing in school. In some field sites, places in UNRWA schools were highly sought (Lebanon); in others they were spurned (Jordan).

Overall, adolescents were concerned with the quality of their education, the limited and overcrowded educational facilities, the limited capacity for vocational training, the absence of physical education, the shortage of libraries and computer laboratories, the limited playing areas and the very slim opportunities for gaining a university education.

A distorted and unclear perception of Palestinian history emerged from many of the interviews. There was a tendency to confuse dates and names of political rulers. Furthermore, the interval between 1967 and 1990 seemed to elicit no sense of any occurrence of importance to Palestinians. This is directly related to the lack of any Palestinian curriculum in the UNRWA schools in all five field sites. Until recently, UNRWA schools had to follow the national curriculum and hence the interpretation of the history of the host country. Recently, international pressure has resulted in some effort to teach Palestinian history alongside Lebanese history in UNRWA schools in Lebanon.

Most Palestinian youth considered emigration a viable option to improve their lives, reflecting loss of confidence in a just settlement of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It was only in the Syrian data that emigration did not emerge as a major theme, perhaps because of a greater sense of solidarity with the rest of the host population's sense of hopelessness. Family solidarity was still regarded as important and most youth talked about making sacrifices for the sake of family members.

The sense of gender discrimination among adolescent girls emerged in most of the field reports. Girls complained that they faced restricted movement and freedom of expression,



Jorgen Schytte/Still Pictures

*Young Palestinian with eye injury inflicted by Israeli military after the boy was caught throwing stones at soldiers, Gaza.*

were given heavy workloads at home, and were expected to let educational opportunities go first to their brothers. Early or 'arranged' marriages were reported to be still widespread.

Violence in schools and in the home, as well as gender-related abuse, was reported but it was difficult to determine whether this is on the rise or a persistent long-term problem. Abuse at home – verbal, physical and psychological – seemed to persist, with fathers abusing wives, parents abusing children, and boys abusing girls. Each generation discussed the tradition of beating as punishment in school and at home in order to control unsocial behaviour or to force girls into accepting decisions made on their behalf by their elders. These behavioural traits are accepted as part of tradition, though increasingly abhorred by youth.

Nearly all children and adolescents taking part in the study complained about overcrowding and the lack of privacy and green space. They discussed the overcrowded camps, the poor sanitation and lack of public services and the non-existence of public libraries, playing areas or clubs where girls could meet. The only public spaces outside the home were the street and the alleyways between buildings.

Political activism of youth, both girls and boys, was widespread and a source of prestige among their peers.

This active participation in political events has emerged as a major coping mechanism, giving youth a sense of hope, if not choice, in determining their future.

### What next?

Palestinian children and adolescents are active, politically aware individuals who have taken up the burden of looking after themselves and their families. They recognise the gross inequalities and lack of infrastructure, opportunities and rights which they have inherited. They cope by dropping out of school, seeking employment or entering into early marriage. They rely on the support of their families and community relations, and they find solace in religion and political activism.

Programming and policy-making on their behalf should start with their input. Unfortunately, however, many programmes and humanitarian aid packages for adolescents are created and initiated far from the field. Programmes are often recognised by local workers as not entirely suitable; much effort is then made at local levels to modify and 'tailor' such projects. During our period of study we observed and supported the efforts which one national office made to repackage 'a good parenting' programme for Palestinian families into something which would be found useful by the community. Eventually, social workers and a liaison team set

up a 'safe marriage' programme for adolescents out of the original materials. NGOs and donors need to draw young people into the whole process of planning, designing and implementing projects for their benefit. We would strongly encourage the reversing of current relationships between international organisations and the local communities so that programmes are culturally sensitive and shaped by local priorities.

In the context of Palestinian refugee children and young peoples, we strongly recommend listening to their concerns expressed in this study. This should include creating spaces for children and youth to express themselves physically through playgrounds and centres (especially for girls) and supporting public libraries and computer and cultural centres. Palestinian history needs to be promoted through formal and informal education. Given the high value placed on education in Palestinian society, family-school dialogue is needed to address problems of adolescent violence. Finally, we would recommend international programmes to bring together refugee children from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank in order to meet, share experiences and strengthen their ties with one another's communities.

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1. The project's five Palestinian research teams were overseen by the author in the case of the teams working in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Teams working in the West Bank and Gaza were supervised by Profesor Gillian Hundt, School of Health and Social Studies, University of Warwick. Local Research Team Leaders were: Dr A Thabet, Gaza Health Services Research Centre (Gaza); Dr S Al Zaroo, Ministry of Labour, Palestinian National Authority (West Bank); Dr R Farah, CERMOC (Jordan); Dr B Serhan, Welfare Association (Lebanon); Dr A Abdul Rahim, Union of Palestinian Women (Syria).

2. For more information, see *Grim prospects for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon*, FMR11, pp40-41.