

# The Plight of Forgotten Women: Coping with Gender Based Domestic Violence Among Palestinian Refugee Women

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*Fifty years after their expulsion and displacement from their homeland, over 3 million Palestinian refugees are still registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). This study focuses primarily on the Palestinian refugee women population in one of the camps in Jordan; Al-Wihdat camp. A qualitative study was conducted to examine gender-based domestic violence among the women interviewed and the different coping mechanisms/strategies and modes of adaptation among the female population. Questions asked of the female refugee population assessed the impact of social, economic and cultural norms on that society, and how these factors contribute to the worsening conditions of “domestic” violence leading to different coping mechanisms adapted by the women.*

## **Introduction**

Known by the Israelis as the War of Independence and the Catastrophe (An-Nakba) by the Palestinians, the 1948 Arab-Israeli war has become a landmark case in the exodus and expulsion of many Palestinians (Abu-Sitta, 1998). This war largely contributed to the evolvement of the Palestinian Refugee population (Karsh, 2002). According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), a Palestinian refugee is a person “whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948 who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict” (Adapted from: <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/whois.html>). The UNRWA further expands on its definition to include “descendents through the male line of persons who became refugees in 1948” regardless of whether they live in designated refugee camps or in established communities (Adapted from: <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/whois.html>). According to UNRWA, a camp is “a plot of land placed at the disposal of UNRWA by the host government for accommodating Palestinian refugees and for setting up facilities to cater to their needs” (Adapted from: <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/wheredo.html>). While the refugees have no ownership of these plots of land, they have the right to use the land for residence. In general, the camps are characterized by having poor socioeconomic conditions, are population dense and have inadequate basic infrastructure (Hansen-Bauer *et al.*, 1998).

Most Palestinian refugees who fled to Jordan were granted citizenship rights of the Kingdom (Zureik, 1996). This right was based on article 3, point B of the 1954 law, which stated that “any person with previous Palestinian Nationality, except Jews, before the date of May 15 1948 residing in the Kingdom during the period from December 20 1949 and February 16 1954, is considered a Jordanian citizen (DPA, 2000, p. 12). Citizenship rights were intended to grant the refugees legal employment opportunities, voting rights, and property ownership rights. Refugees from Gaza strip were the only set of refugees not granted citizenship; they were forced to apply for residency and work permits like other non-Palestinian refugees (Zureik, 1996). Political fragmentation of the refugee situation made it only more difficult for

them to maintain residence stability and enjoy civic rights and flexibility in travel, at least between Jordan and the Palestinian territories (Brand, 1995).

Therefore, to overcome the social ills, poverty and political pressures, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was officially established in 1950 to provide social services and support for the Palestinian refugee population (Adapted from <http://www.un.org/unrwa/overview/index.html>). Today, despite the lack of consensus on the exact number of Palestinian refugees, different studies (Plascov, 1981; Zureik, 1996; Khawaja & Tiltnes, 2002) have yielded numbers of over 4 million Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, Kuwait, Egypt, and throughout other parts of the Gulf region (Zureik, 1996). While many Palestinians were expelled during the conflict, others of the middle and upper classes left voluntarily with the “right of return” idea instilled in their hearts and minds (Abu-Sitta, 2007). The remaining refugees, which were approximately 300,000, were a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, also known as An-Naksah, or *The Setback*, and the 1990 Iraq invasion of Kuwait, which led to more Palestinian refugees arriving in Jordan from the Persian Gulf (Plascov, 1981). Initially, the Palestinian refugees were primarily displaced in Jordan, Gaza strip, the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Today, there are 10 officially registered refugee camps in Jordan, 13 in Lebanon, 9 in Syria, 19 in the West Bank, and 8 in Gaza (Adapted from <http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications/index.html>). Despite the refugees’ location within the host countries (in the camp or outside), the registered refugees have access to services provided to them by UNRWA, such as public schools and health care.

The camps in Jordan are primarily concentrated around Amman (the capital of Jordan), Zarqa, and Irbid. This study focuses on one of the largest camps located in the southeast region of Amman, known as The Amman New Camp, or Al-Wihdat camp. In particular, the study examines gender-based domestic violence among the Palestinian refugee women population, and coping mechanisms and strategies used by the women to overcome the violence. First, the study provides a brief research overview of how domestic violence has been defined. Second, the study explains the methodology conducted to obtain the data (with specifics on gaining access to the camp). Third, the study describes the camp where the data was collected; *Al-Wihdat camp*, with an overview of its basic socioeconomic conditions and functions. Fourth, the study describes the population examined in this research; specifically the Palestinian refugee population. Fifth, conclusions and implications are presented along with actionable recommendations for state and international agencies to integrate within their current policies and regulations incorporated with the overall well being of the examined population. Finally, the study concludes by emphasizing the significance of UNRWA’s existence in the lives of the Palestinian refugee population and the vital role of funds in support of the Palestinian cause.

### **Domestic Violence**

Examining and defining domestic violence is often circumstantial. For that matter, perspectives on what domestic violence entails depends on various factors, such as, the victims and their abusers’ background, the environment within which they live and function, and most importantly the victims’ perceptions of domestic violence. Very often, domestic violence has been referred to as violence between intimates living together or has previously lived together (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003). In the U.S., measures of domestic violence, such as the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), the National Crime Survey (NCS), the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), and National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) among others have generally worked to address women’s concerns and violence committed against them (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). One of the challenges in collecting and recording reliable data on the issue of domestic violence remains in the rate of reported domestic violence by the states and federal government in determining the underlying causes to the problem.

Surprisingly, despite having reached somewhat of a consensus on so-called “classic” felonies (e.g. murder, robbery), there remains lack of consensus as to what exactly constitutes domestic violence (Gordon, 2000; Straus, 1999). Even more complicated is the level of societal acceptance and assumptions made toward the woman as the victim in a case/incident of domestic violence though males may very well be victims of such abuse (Bograd, 1988; Kurz, 1992). As a result, the definition goes to encompass a

more gender-neutral perspective and definition of “domestic assault” or “domestic violence” in general rather than “wife abuse” or “wife battering.”

Domestic violence also has its cultural definitions in terms of how “women” particularly re perceived and treated as second-class citizens, more likely to be oppressed and experience abuse (Raj & Silverman, 2002; Kulwicky & Miller, 1999). This particular study primarily focuses on a specific population from a cross-cultural perspective--the Palestinian refugee women population. Approaching the issue of domestic violence in a more patriarchal society is challenging (Johnson, 1995; Raj & Silverman, 2002). For instance, the women being interviewed lack sufficient knowledge and expertise in attacking the problem of domestic violence. First, they may fail to report the abuse. Second, they fear retaliation. Third, they have little power in forcing change within the family structure (Bui & Morash, 1999; Morash *et al*, 2000). All these factors combined may negatively impact the empirical evidence used to validate the significance and importance of the issue and hinder any possible mechanisms that women may be equipped with to overcome the abuse. As a result, the women become more submissive and controlled by a male-oriented society. Domestic violence in this study is defined from the respondents’ perspectives as:

- verbal abuse (including yelling and using profanity)
- physical abuse (including physical harm, bruising and spitting)
- forced sexual intercourse (not rape).

The women’s perspective or rather definition of forced sexual intercourse entails being perceived by their husbands as a sex object only, rather than the wife and mother (for those who are married and have children).

### **Methodology**

My interest in closely studying the Palestinian Refugee population stems from my personal, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. It is also driven by my moral imperative and perspective on issues affecting a sizable portion of society that has been displaced and marginalized over the years.

While in Amman, Jordan, during the summer of 2007, I began my field research by contacting key individuals who will more likely lead me to at least one of the refugee camps located in Jordan. I spoke with individuals (policy makers as well as volunteers in humanitarian affairs) about their knowledge of the Palestinian refugee population in terms of work opportunities, education benefits and health issues. Eventually, I was led to speak with senior poverty advisors working with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) seeking permission to conduct my research inside at least one of the camps.

Collaborating with key individuals who have had extensive knowledge and experience working with the refugee population was essential to gather sensitive data relevant to the research study. Conducting research in these settings is by no means an easy task given the obstacles that must be overcome. These involve, but not limited to, gaining access to the camp, providing a rationale for the field visits, providing relevant documentation for the purpose of the research, and ensuring the confidentiality when working with participants and the like. Although I encountered minor obstacles in having to provide legal information and documentation, reasons for conducting the research and other information relevant to legitimately pursuing the study, eventually I managed to gain access to Al-Wihdat camp, located in Amman’s southeast.

Throughout my research, I primarily worked in the fashion of a participant observer and made no attempt to disguise my identity or scholarly work. While most of the women had reservations about sharing personal and very sensitive information with me in the beginning of the interview process, I eventually had 100% rate of the women opening up and sharing their experiences. I relate part of this common ground and “understanding” established to shared language, culture and most importantly gender. I was therefore able to converse openly and informally with the women. The social complexity however of leaving the camp after many visits is inevitable. Therefore, creating a level of understanding between the participants and myself was vital in having the women voluntarily participate in my research study, knowing that I will soon be gone. More complicated, however, is their feelings of “hopelessness” that stem from their cynicism in that my research will likely contribute little if any changes to their existing way of life.

## **The Camp**

Al-Wihdat camp is located in the southeast region of Amman, Jordan. It is referred to by some as the 1948 camp since it was established in 1955 to house the exiled Palestinian refugee population of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. Compared with many of the other camps in Jordan, Al-Wihdat is more urban-like. According to UNRWA, Al-Wihdat has 50,061 registered refugees, 16 schools (run by UNRWA) for 22,474 pupils in 2006/2007, with 359 teaching staff. Furthermore, there are two health centers run by nine doctors, two dentists, and 44 nurses and assistants for approximately 1200 patients daily. Over 500 families receive assistance through the agency's special hardship case program (Adapted from: <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/jordan.html>).

A Women's Program Center run by the Wihdat local women under the supervision and technical support of UNRWA was established in 1987 providing different forms of vocational training, coursework and training in cosmetology, computer classes, exercise classes and typing. Finally, a community rehabilitation center established in 1996 provides day care facilities for refugees with disabilities (Adapted from: <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/jordan.html>).

Similarly to the Women's Center, the local community under the financial control and technical support and supervision of UNRWA also runs the rehabilitation center. Gaining permission to access the camp required some background information about, legitimacy in the type of research conducted and ability to gain the respondents' trust and cooperation in participating. In addition to the sociopolitical dilemmas, cultural dynamics, and economic issues governing the camps, I was primarily interested in closely examining gender based domestic violence and coping mechanisms/strategies used among the women to overcome the abuse.

## **The Population**

The female population that was examined in this research consisted of a random sample of women living in the Al-Wihdat refugee camp. Since women may be domestically abused by any member in the household (husband, father, brother), their marriage status was not significant in this study. Therefore, the women interviewed could be single, married or divorced and still be eligible to participate in the study.

The participant population consisted of 30 women. The female respondents were first asked to provide their own definition and/or perception of domestic violence, followed by whether or not they have been victims of such violence, reasons for the violence, as they perceive them, and finally their coping strategies/mechanisms to dealing with such abuse. These were the four primary questions asked along with supplemental and secondary questions pertaining to the number of years they have been married, the number of children they have, their age, educational level (including their husbands'), employment status (including their husbands'), and the number of rooms in their house. The secondary questions were asked to first build a comfort level between the respondents and myself as the researcher. Second, the questions were a way to conclude on how certain factors such as population density within a household, lack of education, and financial stressors contribute to the escalation of conflict; in this case domestic violence within the family structure. Finally, the women concluded by providing me with their mechanisms and coping strategies in overcoming the abuse and their perceived solution to overcoming this cycle of violence.

All the women were initially contacted by one of the legal counselors from the Women's Center and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. None of the women were offered incentives to participate. For those women who were contacted but refused to participate expressed their reasons for doing so:

- lack of time, lack of interest, no means of transportation
- shame of discussing such *personal* issues
- fear of retaliation from their husbands (with the assumption that their husbands or family members will find out about their participation)
- their feelings of hopelessness that anything will change in their life and current living situation.

While I gained access to some of the women's homes to speak with them about my research agenda and allow them to express their experiences with domestic violence, I met others at the Women's Center

and vocational school located in Al-Wihdat camp. All the visits were arranged by the legal counselor at the Center who accompanied me to all my visits.

### **Results**

This research was intended to examine the women's perspective on domestic violence, whether it occurs between a husband and wife, or from any other male figure living in the household. The women's participation was voluntary, with no incentives offered. Thirty women participated in the research study. Two of the participants were single, two were married but their husbands had left them for the past two or more years and one was divorced and lived with her children and parents. All the remaining women were married and lived with their husbands and children.

When asked about their perception of domestic violence, the women defined it as physical abuse (including the use of objects used in the act), verbal abuse (using humiliating language), and forced sexual intercourse (not rape). At least 35% of the women explained that their husbands' perception of them is no longer the wife, the child bearer, or even the partner in life. Rather, they were perceived and treated as a sex object. Two women (one whose husband lives abroad for work and only visits for a couple of weeks during the year and the other whose husband is currently married to one other woman at the same time) explained:

*"...I'm looked upon as a sex object, available only for sexual gratification when my husband needs it. Even if I'm not in the mood to engage in sexual intercourse, my husband forces me to do so, otherwise he will physically and verbally humiliate me..."*

*"...the relationship between my husband and I is simply physical. There is not other connection between us; besides our kids of course..."*

*"...despite having the feelings that my husband perceives me as a sex object, I believe that I will be jeopardizing my marriage if I do not submit..."*

Those recurring themes emphasize that the role of women is for reproduction and for sexual gratification, which they express to produce an even larger gap between them and their husbands. Not engaging in such acts, however, is only seen to be detrimental to the family bond.

Other forms of violence that the women described included using objects to get their frustration out or other ways to humiliate the woman:

*"...he spits in my face. Even worse, he does it in front of our children..."*

*"...he once used a curtain pole to beat me in front of my children...I was bruised for days..."*

*"...his way of abusing me and humiliating me is often verbal...particularly while the kids are watching..."*

For these women, having their children watch their fathers humiliate their mothers was more damaging to the women than the act itself. This expressed humiliation was damaging to the women particularly that their children are growing up in a cycle of violence and abuse. As a result, it becomes the norm and a socially acceptable behavior that the children grow to adopt.

### **Why Violence?**

The women attributed the violence in its different forms to a number of reasons. At least five women attributed the violence to the use of alcohol and other illicit drugs. Four women attributed the violence to interference from the mother-in-law and the impact this has on the husband's behavior. For these four women, their mother-in-law lived with them and their children, and they see violence escalating so long as the mother-in-law continued to live with them.

*"...my husband uses and abuses illicit drugs. I'm not exactly sure where he gets them from but I know he uses them..."*

*"...he is alcoholic, which only caused him to be fired from his previous job and probably the current one as well..."*

*"...he is unreliable and his behavior is unpredictable. I attribute that to drugs and alcohol. I'm surprised he can afford to use illicit drugs, particularly that our financial situation is suffering..."*

*"...as long as my mother-in-law is living with us, I only see my marriage relationship worsening. She gets involved in almost everything and her influence is rather damaging..."*

*"...my mother-in-law has been living with us since the day we got married. We have no privacy..."*

*"...I feel that my husband is his "mama's boy" especially that he is the only boy in the family. He is spoiled and takes advantage of it. His family, particularly his mother only supports his radical behavior..."*

Almost all the women (including those who were either divorced or single) attributed the violence to economic and financial stressors as the most important factor and most detrimental to the family's structure. Despite 13 of the women being married to working husbands, the women as well as their husbands continue to feel financially deprived, particularly that 90% of the women have between 2-6 children to support. Only two of the men had an Associate degree, six had a high school diploma, and the remaining never completed high school (the women were not very specific on the level of education attained at that point). Almost 13 of the women worked in different professions; teaching, typing, secretarial positions, and cosmetology.

*"...he doesn't want me to work even though I have vocational training and have worked since I've been single..."*

*"...he beats me if I don't give him the money I earn, which he uses primarily to support his addiction to alcohol and drugs..."*

*"...I think money is the most important factor contributing to the violence in my family. We have children and they have basic needs that sometimes we are unable to provide them with..."*

*"...not being allowed to work makes me feel weak. I have no contribution to the family, at least not in the financial sense. I want to provide to my children, buy them toys and take them places...I'm a mother..."*

*"...even though I work, my husband demands the money because he believes that he should be the financial guru of the family. This is just the way society is, male-oriented..."*

Despite some of the women's financial contribution to their family, the women believe that their husbands are intimidated by them having work experience and contributing to financially stabilize the family, particularly because of the nature of a patriarchal society. One of the women, who is single and lives with her parents, experiences physical and verbal abuse from her father and uncles.

*"...I feel isolated lacking love and emotion. I never think to get married. I do not have any good role models for marriage around me. I want to study and work. Women in this society want to get married as a way of life, nothing more, and nothing less. I feel that marriage is simply a form of social control and I detest it..."*

On the other hand, another woman, who is also single and lives with her parents, perceives marriage and violence slightly differently.

*"I've never been abused by my family, only verbally, but I do not personally perceive it as abuse. I want to get married. I am 30 years old and society looks at you differently when you're single at this age. I've learned cosmetology after high school and worked for some time and now I'm waiting for someone to ask for my hand. I'm ready..."*

The women all agreed, however, that violence was a cycle and that it will never end. As one participant puts it, *"...my husband looks at it as a form of control, of power, and macho behavior. I perceive it as a weakness, but it's a way of life I got used to..."*

### **Coping Mechanisms**

The women were then asked to explain how they cope with violence. In other words, what coping mechanisms have they implemented to overcome the abuse? While some women got used to their way of living with violence, others have pursued counseling and help from the Women's Center. Many have also

tried to get “closer to God” in search for peace and mental sanity. Their efforts, as they have expressed, were all directed toward keeping the family net intact, especially for the children.

*“...In the beginning I used to cry and lock myself up in the room. But now, I gave up, and I would not leave my husband. I can’t stay away from my kids or make them suffer without a father figure. They are my life, and I would do anything for them...”*

*“...I come to the Center to talk to the other women. I feel better venting to them; especially that many of us share the same issue....”*

*“...I would not get divorced. Society looks at you differently and I don’t want to be stigmatized with being divorced...”*

*“...divorce is damaging. I did get divorced for one month and then came back to my husband. I come from a family of drug addicts and incarcerated offenders, so there is nowhere for me to go...”*

*“...I talk to my kids about violence. I try to educate them and encourage them to pursue success and happiness. I bring my youngest child to the Center with me, to teach him good religious values and help him get closer to God. I also continue to work, purchase goods, polish them, fix them, and resell them. I want to contribute to some sort of financial stability, at least for my children’s sake.”*

Despite some of the women expressing how violence and abuse has become a part of their lifestyle, almost 90% of them preferred that over divorce. While some explained that divorce would be damaging, particularly to the children, many perceived divorce as a social stigma that will haunt them for the rest of their life. Therefore, they were unwilling to use it as a solution to their problems.

### **Hope for the Future**

The women were all certain that the laws are not only gender biased, but politically discriminatory. They see their chances of possibly overcoming the subculture of poverty, violence and social exclusion almost invisible. They hope that their husbands will perhaps consider marriage counseling, though it looked upon as shameful within their subculture of living. Nonetheless, some of the women had mixed feelings about the changes that *may* happen for the betterment of their current situation:

*“...the laws must change. It seems like everything is gender biased...”*

*“...I hope to see some sort of counseling programs implemented to help my husbands...I think he’s a good person...”*

*“...I’m not sure that counseling is possible. I do not believe that our men are open to the idea. Besides, it’s too late now; this has become their way of living and surviving...”*

The women plead for social welfare, also be granted the right to add their children to their passports, and hope to see more activities and recreational investment for their children in their neighborhood.

*“...the playgrounds are sterile. My children use kitchen utensils for toys because they have no other option...”*

*“...their learning and developmental stages will only suffer...”*

*“...I write poetry, and I come to the Center for advice. I fill in the void in my life by reading religion books and getting closer to God...”*

*“...my husband is a good man, despite his verbal humiliation and sometimes physical abuse. I think I might be the problem, so I have to either suffer or learn new ways and behaviors to deal with him...”*

Despite some variations in the women’s coping mechanisms, they all seem to agree that the laws should be amended, and more should be provided for the kids. In their minds, the refugee population has become generational and the kids are the ones likely to suffer the most because they are growing up within a deprived subculture.

### **Implications and Concluding Remarks**

One of the most detrimental factors contributing to domestic violence among the Palestinian refugee women population, as the respondents perceive it, is money. Their financial stressors coupled with their limited opportunities for work and advancement have contributed to the rise of a subculture of poverty

and violence. Furthermore, the women contributed the violence to the man's educational levels. The lower the educational level, the more likely the man will engage in violence against the woman. This is partly because of the women's perception that the man is intimidated by their educational achievements and therefore power.

One of the interesting points that some of the women pointed out was the fact that their husbands humiliated them in front of their children. It seems that the public humiliation, in that regard, the children, matters to the extent that the women feel:

- their children are likely to learn violence from their father figure
- their children may lose respect to their mother nurturing figure
- their children are likely to be traumatized by the experience
- their children's developmental abilities and progression will likely be negatively impacted

The women's feelings of hopelessness were rather obvious. Despite their willingness to eventually speak about the issue of domestic violence, it appeared that their cynicism of the political situation prevailed. In fact, as UNRWA continues to exist and operate, the women see no hope in returning home; in that regard, to the Palestinian state. Therefore, their so-called "right of return" ideal remains a fantasy that has been instilled within generations of Palestinian refugees. As a result, the persistence of the sociopolitical dilemmas, the allocation of resources and succession remain in conflict with the survival of the refugee population.

There is no doubt that the 1948 as well as the 1967 conflicts have contributed to social displacement of the refugee population. In addition, other conflicts within the region and lack of consensus on foreign policies have only made the matter worse. Equally important is how the female population has been impacted by migration, displacement, limited opportunities and societal expectations of women. These factors have contributed to doubling the gender biases and discrimination toward women. Frustration, hopelessness and financial stressors only added more complications to the structure of a Palestinian family. Maintaining cultural behaviors, social norms and survival within a slightly different ethnic group can only be challenging. However, to overcome the clash of interests, the refugee population has been in exile, far from the everyday social norms guiding societies. In fact, with modern technology and the different forms of media venues, little attention if any has been given to the Palestinian refugee population. Very seldom are they noticed, compared with other issues such as terrorism; particularly in the past decade or so. It is thus vital that sociological as well as criminological perspectives that are particularly focused on conflict within worldly cultures and subcultures begin diverting their attention to studying the *plight of forgotten women*.

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