

# **Gender dynamics in the Palestinian society: Domestic and political violence**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Several studies have shown how political conflict can lead to the "normalization" of violence within a society, at the same time increasing domestic violence against women. We analyse here the levels and determinants of domestic violence in the Palestinian society, assessing the extent to which patriarchy and Israeli occupation are major determinants of this violence.

**Background:** We use data from the Palestinian Health Survey (2006) database on cases of violence reported by married women during the six months preceding the survey and on their attitudes towards violence. The analysis was conducted among 5291 women.

**Findings:** Our first result is that the probability of accepting violent behavior is significantly related to the experience that women themselves have of domestic violence (OR=1.48 [95%CI 1.10-1.99] for the acceptance of violence among respondents who experienced violence from their spouse versus those who did not experience this domestic violence). Second, the probability of accepting domestic violence and to report acts of violence is significantly associated with exposure to political violence: women who live in the areas most affected by political violence and mobility restrictions are more likely to report having experienced violence and to accept it; their households also suffer from economic insecurity.

**Interpretation:** In the Palestinian context, the violence experienced by the society as a whole seems to legitimize and increase violence in the couple.

## LONG ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence is increasingly acknowledged as an important concern in the Palestinian territories, including in research, programs and in some ways in policies. Indeed, the impact of the patriarchal nature of Palestinian society on male/female relationships and the prevalence of domestic violence are relatively well documented (Haj-Yahia, 2000, Khawaja et al., 2008, Human Rights Watch, 2006). However, the factors influencing the occurrence of domestic violence have rarely been studied (Johnson, 2006).

The Palestinian society is facing the structural violence generated by Israeli occupation, such as barriers to mobility, massive land and housing confiscation, or arrests. Several studies have highlighted the relationship between political violence and domestic violence: among Palestinian refugees residing in Jordan (Khawaja et al., 2008) or after the Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip after which a resurgence of domestic violence has been observed (Hammami, 2009). Clark et al. (2010) showed that the Palestinian women whose partner was exposed to political violence were more likely than others to suffer physical and sexual abuse. Thus, a political conflict could lead to the "normalization" of violence within a society, at the same time increasing domestic violence against women. Based on this hypothesis, the originality of this research is to analyze jointly the two types of mechanisms constraining domestic violence: patriarchy and occupation.

**Methods:** This work is based on a dual methodological approach. First, a secondary analysis of the Palestinian Health Survey, a cross-national survey conducted by the Pan-Arab Project for Family Health and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2006. 13 238 households were randomly selected with a multistage random cluster design, from which 5673 women of reproductive age (15-54 years) were selected. We focused our present analysis on married women (n=5291, 93.3%). We measured among these women the level of acceptance of domestic violence (n=5288) and the level of violence experienced (n=5289). Then we analyzed how these two indicators are related to the socio-demographic characteristics of women, to gender relationships within the couple and to structural and political violence faced by couples. Gender relationships are defined by different variables: 1) marital homogamy/heterogamy: age, educational level and employment status of men and women; 2) entry into marriage: age at marriage, polygamy, consanguinity; 3) women's empowerment, as measured by the following questions: "Are going outdoors or spending money major obstacles to your access to health care?", "Who makes the decisions about contraception?"; 4) the support of women to their own emancipation, as measured by the questions: "What is the best age for marriage among girls?", "If you were offered a paid job in the future, would you accept it?". Exposure to external violence is characterized by the

standard of living and economic instability of the household (unemployment), the area of residence (East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza Strip) and the difficulties in accessing health care related to mobility barriers (military checkpoints or curfew). We performed univariable and multivariable logistic regression models to estimate how gender relationships within couples and the structural and/or political violence that these couples experience are related to domestic violence against women.

Second, exploratory semi-structured interviews (11) were conducted with development actors working in public institutions and international NGOs (Islamic Relief France, Palestinian Family Planning) and local associations.

**Findings :** In our sample, 7.7% of women (n=408) reported accepting domestic violence and 9.3% (n=494) reported having experienced violence from their partner within the six months preceding the survey.

Domestic violence appears to be related to how couples have integrated the paradigm of male dominance. The lower the level of education of women or of their husbands, the more likely women are to have experienced acts of violence: OR=4.28 [95%IC 2.20-8,34] among respondents who have basic education vs those who have higher levels of education. Housewives (vs. those who work or are unemployed) justify more than the other women the occurrence of domestic violence when the woman fails in completing certain chores ("caring for children", "preparing a good meal", "looking after her home"). Finally, the probability of accepting violent behaviors is significantly related to the experience that women themselves have of domestic violence: OR=1.48 [1.10-1.99] for the acceptance of violence among respondents who have experienced violence from their spouse vs. those who have not experienced violence.

However, the interactions between gender relationships, women's social status and domestic violence are complex. Indeed, women who aspire to a higher social status are more likely than the others to be exposed to violence (10% vs. 8%,  $p = 0.01$ ).

Our results also show that women living in the Gaza Strip report having experienced more violence than women in the West Bank: OR=1.81 [1.42-2.32]. Having experienced mobility restrictions also appears to be associated with the acceptance of violence.

Economic instability also figures among the external constraints. Among the women who accept violence, more than a third have an unemployed husband. Exclusion from the workplace for men and women, over short or long periods, contributes to conflictual conjugal relationships. Furthermore, it is the women who work while their husband is not working (vs both work or none work or the husband works but not his wife) who are more likely to report events of violence (OR=2.37) [1.36-4, 12]. Violence within the couple also seems to be the

result of a conflict between the distribution of material resources and the paradigm of male dominance that is prevalent in this society.

The political context thus acts as an aggravating factor for violence, since it affects the economic stability and increases the vulnerability of men particular in terms of employment. The fact that male power is, at least partially, challenged by economic insecurity frustrates and undermines men in their role as head of the family, thereby increasing tensions and sources of conflict. Finally our interviews show that women are more likely to accept violent behaviors from men when their loved ones are victims of violations that they consider as more serious (such as murder, imprisonment, demolition of houses, extreme poverty, job loss, etc.). Women are more understanding regarding their husband's behavior because of the overall increase in poverty and unemployment and of the political situation.

**Interpretation :** This research highlights the link between domestic violence and chronic exposure to structural violence, emphasizing how inseparable private and public spaces are in the study of violence. Without fail to remember that in a patriarchal society, Palestinian women are victims of unequal relationships within the couple, these results clearly show the effects of political violence on domestic violence. Men seem to use violence to reassert their power when they can not assume the role traditionally assigned to them, resulting in what some authors call a "masculinity crisis" (UNFPA, 2010, Yaish, 2009). We observe a "cycle of violence" from which women but also men are the main victims, thus highlighting that programs against domestic violence can not be considered without taking into account at the same time the political and economic context.

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