

The impact of Israeli settlements on Palestinian women

On top of poverty, siege, ethnic cleansing in Jerusalem and in the Jordan Valley and the substantial increase in organised terrorism practiced by Israeli settlers, Palestinian women suffer from the practices and the policies of the Israeli occupation. In this regard, may God have mercy upon the soul of the martyr Riham Dawabsha, a resident of the town of Douma, who was burned to death with her family when settlers attacked her house with flammable materials in 2015 in a so-called “price tag” attack. We also ask for God’s mercy upon the soul of the martyr Aisha Al-Rabi, a resident of Bidya village located near the Salfit district, who was martyred in 2018 after her car was pelted with stones by settlers who were indulging in debauchery in the streets. Another case to remember is the settlers’ attempt to kidnap Hala Al-Qat, which took place in the village of Madama. The list goes on and we do not forget our martyrs throughout the history of our Palestinian national struggle; we do not forget those women who, struggling side by side with men, have done heroic deeds and were martyred while facing the usurping occupier.

To find out more about the impact of the Israeli settlements on Palestinian women, it is important to refer to the historical milestone when the Oslo Accords, signed in 1995, divided the West Bank into three administrative divisions (A, B and C). These accords were supposed to last for only five years. However, when the negotiations failed in 2000, we faced the reality that only 40 percent of the West Bank (Areas A and B) fell under the civil control of the Palestinian Authority, while the other 60 percent was under the full control of the Israeli occupation. Furthermore, the settlements and the number of settlers doubled, reaching a record high.

If we go back to the classification of these areas, we find that Area C constitutes 60 percent of the West Bank, and most of it is used exclusively for military training, or as nature reserves or for building settlements. The remaining

land is considered by the occupation authorities as “state land,” in a clear violation of international humanitarian law. These areas have been designated for use by settlers. Conversely, Palestinians, who are indigenous people, are not allowed to exploit them even though they are protected by international laws.

In this article, I am going to review the reality lived by Palestinian women in this particular area and in other similar areas in terms of occupation measures. In Area C, women suffer from very bad conditions represented by the absence of infrastructure and basic services. These complex conditions, imposed by the occupation measures, contributed greatly to the perpetuation of violence, the marginalisation of Palestinians, and the deprivation of their basic rights and opportunities for participation. Women's opportunities are reduced due to the harassment and the practices of the occupation, settler attacks and the lack of necessary health and social services, as well as societal restrictions. They also suffer from geographical isolation, poverty, conservative traditions and military occupation that restricts women's movements through fear.

Palestinian women also suffer from deprivation of economic, educational and political opportunities. They, and their whole family, live under the widespread threat of home demolition and forced displacement. For example, the occupation forces displaced the residents of Khirbet Homsa Al-Fuqa and demolished their homes. This village had previously been evacuated more than 11 times with the stated aim of conducting military training and the implicit aim of forcing people to migrate and turning the area into a settlement area. Furthermore, agricultural tools and property belonging to the indigenous people were confiscated, and livestock breeders were prosecuted. We can imagine the magnitude of the psychological effects and the pressure those women were exposed to. Their emotions and psychological state are fragile because they feel unable to provide care to their families who were displaced as a consequence of these measures. Not only that, but women are also subjected to direct violence by occupation soldiers and settlers as they go out to the farmland or to get water, or even inside their homes.

Regarding education, Palestinian women suffer from limited opportunities as a result of the absence of infrastructure, the lack of schools and occasional absences from home, as well as the restrictions imposed on their movement. On the

other side, their economic opportunities range from agricultural and animal husbandry, which is often unpaid, to working in settlements under harsh conditions. Moreover, women's opportunities to set up entrepreneurial projects are hampered by physical obstacles, barriers and a complex permit system that limits their movement. They also find it difficult to access medical services because the occupation and the settlers often disrupt access to health care services in these areas.

It is widely known that Palestinians in general and the Area C residents, in particular, do not control their resources and cannot obtain permits to build their homes. Therefore, they find themselves obliged to build them without a permit; that is why their homes can be demolished at any time by the occupation authorities. Additionally, land confiscation for settlement expansion besieges Palestinians and their sources of livelihood and deprives them of the exploitation of their territory. Moreover, Palestinians suffer from water scarcity and they are deprived of digging wells as the Israeli water company, Makrot, monopolizes water, controls Palestinian water resources, and does not provide them the minimum amount of it, all while providing water permanently to the settlements. Women also face the injustice of the occupation authorities and forces, the deprivation of electricity, and even the use of solar panels for lighting, which are usually subject to vandalism or confiscation, which makes the life of Palestinian families very difficult.

Another example of women's suffering can be seen in the city of Hebron after the signing of the Hebron Protocol with Israel in 1997, which divided the city into two areas (H1 and H2). The Palestinians controlled 80 percent of the city in the H1 area, while 20 percent – the H2 area – was completely under Israeli control. In this area, women suffer the significant violation of their rights, especially restriction of freedom of movement and harassment by the occupying soldiers and settlers. In this context, the dark side of racial discrimination becomes crystal clear all over the city, creating racial discrimination regimes whereby the Palestinians in that area are subject to the occupation military laws, while the settlers are subject to the Israeli civil law.

Another example that reflects the suffering of women is in Jerusalem. The policies of the Israeli occupation authorities are based on the transfer and silent

ethnic cleansing through countless means such as demolishing homes or forcing Jerusalem residents to demolish their own homes in order to avoid the heavy fines for the pretext of being unlicensed. At the same time, Jerusalem residents get construction licenses only rarely. All these actions aim to evacuate Jerusalem of its indigenous people in order to expand settlements. When families become homeless, women bear the major burden and are forced to live in another house where privacy may be lacking. Women of Jerusalem live in constant concern about the possibility of residency cancellation, identity withdrawal and family dispersal.

There is another kind of suffering for the Palestinian women that is clearly represented in Israel's separation wall and the racist annexation that (according to the former USA President, George W. Bush) penetrated the West Bank and Jerusalem like a snake, damaging the lives of Palestinians in the seam zones. Women suffer from poor housing conditions, difficulties that obstruct their access to services and education, a miserable permit system that destroys family and social life and the consequent lack of job opportunities and means of transportation, which affects their lives and livelihoods.

In the Gaza Strip, women have suffered unprecedentedly and continuously due to the huge devastation caused by Israel's wars in 2008/2009, 2012, 2014 and 2019. They suffered from the destruction of homes, murder, destruction, loss of breadwinners and children and displacement when they are forced to evacuate their homes by military operations. This obliged women to face double challenges as they tried to provide shelter because of poverty and siege, and getting a house that can provide them security and safety.

Considering what has just been mentioned, what is required to protect these women?

It is important to have a plan to protect women in the seam zones, who are the most affected by violations. This includes economic support that, through small grants, creates job opportunities and enables them to establish productive or service projects that provide a regular return for a decent life. Additionally, legal, psychological and social support, especially because of the shocks caused by the occupation, is also needed.

We must also invoke International Resolution 1325 to provide protection for women against human rights violations and to guarantee access to services and justice during armed conflicts, as stipulated in the Geneva Conventions and additional protocols, which impose on the occupying power the obligation to provide protection for civilians under the power of occupation forces. Besides all this, official and civil bodies, especially the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), have to monitor and document the violations against women, expose the practices and crimes of the occupation forces and those committed by the settlers' flocks. There is also a need to prepare files to be presented to the International Criminal Court, including those in which Palestinian women were victims of the violence of the occupation forces and settlers.

The international community must fulfill its legal and moral obligations to protect civilian inhabitants living under occupation in general and women in particular. At the same time, a set of laws and legislations must be created to protect women's rights by harmonising local laws and legislations with the relevant international laws and treaties that Palestine has acceded to or approved such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and any other laws that combat discrimination against women.