



# SELECTED STORIES

EVALUATION OF THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA  
PALESTINE PROGRAMME 2014–2016

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*This is a selection of stories based on interviews and observations made during a field visit to the West Bank and Gaza with the objective of evaluating the Kvinna till Kvinna Palestine Program 2014-2016. While over 50 interviews were made with representatives and staff of partner organisations, their rights holders, and relevant duty bearers, these eight stories are chosen to highlight different angles of the work done by the partner organisations.*

*The interviews were conducted between July 13<sup>th</sup> and August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016. All interviewed persons have consented after being informed of the purpose of the study and about the ethical principles connected to the research procedure.*

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Layout: Heny Maatar*

# WOMEN'S STUDY CENTER

## INTERVIEW WITH WOMAN FROM JERUSALEM

**Jerusalem, July 13<sup>th</sup> 2016**

There were always problems. I was used to it. House arrests, fines, community service, probation. Once my son served 9 months in prison after a mass arrest in the Old City. And after he committed the attack and wounded these two soldiers, he was on the loose for a week. Everyday, they came to search the house. I was scared to death and couldn't sleep until he was caught. I was so afraid they would find him and kill him on the spot. Finally, the Palestinian Authority turned him in. There was no collective punishment like I feared; we were able to keep the house. If it had happened a bit later, after the other attacks, things would have been worse. We paid around 100 000 shekels for legal assistance and the sentence was mitigated from 30 years to 16. I saw him in court but couldn't speak to him. After two months I met him in prison, cuffed to his hands and feet. Just visiting him costs me 1000 shekels, but the Red Cross offers free rides sometimes. I am never able to sleep the night before, and the travel is hard. When I see him, he puts his hand on the dividing glass to meet mine. I tell him news, but not everything. I spare him the worst. And I know that when I tell him about his cousins getting engaged or married, he gets happy and sad at the same time because he will not experience those things.

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He was a loner from the beginning, different from the other children. He was caring but impatient; he wanted things immediately. He always felt victimized and unfairly treated, not only by the Israelis; by everything. He felt he got the blame from his family and from the school for things that he didn't do. He was asocial and didn't really have any close friends. He went to pray, otherwise he stayed at home, reading a lot – books on philosophy, politics, religion, all kinds of books. He worked with his father a bit as a carpenter but he didn't like it. He was never interested in girls the way his younger brothers are, and he didn't accept any talk about marriage. Even when we joked about it, he would say: "Just forget it."

Before the attack, I saw things in our home that I didn't understand. There were signs that I didn't know how to interpret. Violent signs, like hiding knives in his room. It was like he had been practicing somehow. I found strange messages – once, he put a piece of paper in the bathroom where he had written that I would soon be happy and proud of him, and that I should move on with my life. Later, I learned from one of the other women in the group – a

woman whose son was in the same class as my son, and committed a suicide attack – that my son had been coming to visit them. I had no idea. My son was probably inspired by him. We are discovering things about our children that we didn't know before. One thing they seem to have had in common is a previous prison experience. I believe it affects their way of thinking, the injustice they perceive and the influence from the other inmates. I certainly didn't raise my son to do something like this. But I still regret things from his upbringing and mistakes that I made on the emotional level. He is my first born, and I didn't really know how to be a good mother.

Yara from WSC found me like 15 days after it happened. I was saying to myself: "What's her agenda, what does she want? And what can she do for me, how could she possibly help me?" I didn't understand the point, I simply wanted something or someone to help my son, concretely. I didn't think of myself. But I am so happy that I made the choice to join.

Being in the group, listening to the other women, sharing their feelings, it has helped me so much. Sometimes you hear another mother's story and you think: what is my grievance compared to hers? I felt I got perspective. There are those who have worse situations. And at the same time, some mothers who have lost their children would say to me: at least we don't need to worry anymore, they are gone and now they are between God's hands. And I agree in a way. Every day I think about him: how is he, does he sleep, is he being punished? It's like he dies everyday.

You need to bear so much. The home, the other children, your husband. Before I joined the group, my way of dealing with it was really bad – I was sad, angry and tired all the time. Now, afterwards, I feel regret. I didn't claim my right to grieve properly.

"People have a lot of opinions about bereaved women. If they see her in a wedding or a restaurant, they would tell her to her face: 'How do you have a heart to do this?' But people don't know what's inside of her."

People have a lot of opinions about bereaved women. If they see her in a wedding or a restaurant, they would tell her to her face: "How do you have a heart to do this?" But people don't know what's inside of her. The first year you're expected to mourn, but in silence. You shouldn't do anything really; not even go out. You should only receive guests and take care of the household and your husband and kids. And at the same time, there is this... culture. You should always remain strong; you should bear the pain without showing it. They tell you not to be upset, to accept your fate, to be patient. I even know a woman who was told not to cry when she went to see her son's corpse. They ask from us to stay passive and grieve but without letting our feelings out. It is horrible. We can develop our thoughts and understanding in universities but the customs and traditions still keep us closed in. As for the occupation – I am used to it, I just live with it. The families are the biggest problem. Even if the laws are changed, it doesn't matter. As soon as you enter the door of the house, there is another law.

The Palestinian woman is strong but there are limits. Our society is really, really unfair. I speak from my own experience. I live with my extended family; all my in-laws are in the same house. After my son was sentenced, I couldn't even roll wine leaves for dinner or bake a cake; nothing that seemed too relaxed or too joyful. I was afraid from people's reactions. They would see me and say: "her heart is empty." And sometimes you care more about what people think than about your own feelings.

Before, I didn't really have a personality. I was living in the house of my in-laws, and I was constantly under the pressure of my husband's relatives. I didn't leave the house. I didn't even go to meetings at my children's school. It was like I had no words. There was always someone above me, deciding over me or helping me with things. I was waiting for others to guide me, I wasn't responsible and I preferred someone else to take charge. The way I grew up, everything was restricted. And the same goes for my husband's family after I married. I wouldn't even go to the doctor without company. But I know now that when you are forced to manage on your own, you discover new things.

"The Palestinian woman is strong but there are limits. Our society is really, really unfair."

Now, my view on life has changed. I am waiting for the days that we meet. WSC chose me to work with them and reach out to other women. I got so much from here, now I feel a duty to share with others and it helps me also. I feel like I have a message, a purpose. During the training with Dr. Hassanein, I felt like I was in university. The location was beautiful, the content was great, and I felt so respected. For the first time in my life I felt important, like I had something to bring to society.

Many of the other organisations, I don't like them. They beg in your name, but you don't get anything from them. This is different. We are like a family here. I want to grow here, to get more knowledge and experience. I was in such a terrible state, both from the traditions and expectations and from within myself. Now I want to see other women and tell them: the things you find proper to do and express – just do it! But I want more practice. I don't really see any physical problems when it comes to logistics. I am more in need of methods. Sahar is helping us a lot, but there is still some fear of doing wrong. When I approach another bereaved woman, I don't want to hurt her with my words. I want to know how to get closer to her and how to open subjects in the right way.

I have a neighbour whose son got imprisoned recently. I invited her and tried to make things easier for her, to guide her a little. I felt like she is waiting for me to come and talk to her. I coached her about how to deal with other peoples' comments and she says that I have helped her a lot. And I also believe in working to affect the attitudes of our society. In Qalandia there were open meetings for bereaved women and the public. The women were able to tell the community: Leave us to cry and to let our feelings out! And afterwards, the women said: come back! We need more things like this!



I want to make myself feel better. Every person has their right, and this is my right. I am the one to decide what's suitable for me. I am not afraid anymore. It has affected my parenting as well. I am encouraging my daughter to do sports, to take the classes she likes, to move around more. She has her own mobile phone now, which was unthinkable before. She is still not allowed to store secret numbers, and she leaves the phone with me at night... but she has a phone! She gets more freedom. There is an openness between me and my daughter that I don't see in others.

I have grown so much and I have gotten to know the other women, we visit one another, we talk on Whatsapp and on the phone. I am surprised at myself and proud. My husband jokes sometimes, and says: "Now we don't know how to speak to you". My relatives have seen videos of me speaking in front of people and they were surprised. "She has changed a lot", they say, "she wasn't like this before".

Now, I am making my own decisions. I feel like an important person. There is no more fear. I feel confident in myself. I know that I can manage. My message to others is this: you can change! There is a new life after difficulties and there is a strange, great strength to be found within. I don't know from where it comes, but it's there.

"I want to make myself feel better. Every person has their right, and this is my right. I am the one to decide what's suitable for me. I am not afraid anymore."



# PALESTINIAN WORKING WOMAN SOCIETY FOR DEVELOPMENT

## INTERVIEW WITH FIELD STAFF (LAWYER) FROM TULKAREM

**Tulkarem, July 17<sup>th</sup> 2016**

I am specialized in family law and violence and I have been with the PWWSD here in Tulkarem on and off since 2008. There is nothing specific about Tulkarem really, it is a small community and people know everything about one another. The unemployment rate is high, it is quite a simple little city, there are not so much community services available and the financial situation is poor.

"The families restrict the girls and women; they limit their freedom. Our traditions and customs turn the entire society against her."

I educate young students in gender perspectives on legal issues and rights. For instance, there are many aspects connected to labour: women get paid a lot less, they are not given vacations and leaves like men. And then there is the family law; things like inheritance and marital contracts and divorce. Practically, I work mainly with family problems. It could be about violence and control in the home, it could be that the man chooses to marry a second wife... Many women can't afford to pay for legal assistance. We are the only local organisation that offers such help to all women, also girls under 18, and who cover all aspects so that the woman feels safe and doesn't need to go to a lot of different places.

As for the technological development, it is very good that girls have more options to search for information about their rights, to seek advice and help and so on, but these possibilities can also have negative consequences. A lot of recent cases revolve around girls having sent private pictures to boys or engaging in romantic or sexual relations over Facebook. The problem is not the technology itself; it is how you use it. But many people want to limit all of this because they are afraid.

There are many cases related to family honour. It is not always about murder; the families restrict the girls and women; they limit their freedom. Our traditions and customs turn the entire society against her. As for the most severe cases, there is a big problem with the law, which is that family honour is regarded as a cause for leniency. While other killers are given long sentences, a guy who murders his sister and claims that she did something to bring shame on the family could spend only a couple of months in prison or walk off after paying a fine. Many times, the real cause would be a conflict related to other things; it could be a dispute about inheritance or land. And the woman is killed by her brother in order for him to get her share as well, and then he fabricates a story about her so he can claim that he did it for the



sake of family honour and get away with minimal punishment. The laws haven't been amended since the 1960s and there is a lot that needs to change. There are great suggestions but in this political stalemate, nothing is happening. We want something secure and concrete.

There is also a lot of backwardness when it comes to the minds of judges, but at least they have to act in accordance with the law. But to tell you the truth, our judges are almost never siding with the woman. They tend to see things from the men's perspective and give them lenient sentences. And a lot of cases don't even reach us. They are so afraid of people's talk. People are embarrassed to take cases to court. Many women who experience violence in the home are afraid even from their own families and would not go to any organisation. Some might come first to get general advice, before opening up and telling us about the real issues. We work with so many things that it is not a big problem for women to be seen here. But yeah, I have had men coming here threatening me for helping their wives. I try to focus on the individual and sometimes tell the parents or the husband to leave the room if they accompany the woman. I am careful about integrity and I work on building confidence slowly. The PWWSD is known for this; we have built a solid reputation, there is a high degree of trust and people recommend it to others.


The divorce rate in Tulkarem area is growing, especially the cases where the couple has been engaged for a while and a marriage contract is signed but the marriage is not yet consummated. The girl might discover negative things about the guy along the way and she wants to finish the relationship. Women are not silent anymore, they refuse to accept such a fate. This, of course, is something good. However, the rate of infidelity and problems in marriage which end with divorce is also growing, and this is at the expense of the children. Divorce is not something simple in our society; it is surrounded by a lot of conflicts and people tend to care more about traditions than the law when it comes to this. There are no efforts to solve things smoothly and in cooperation; the issue gets inflamed and becomes complicated. Sometimes the woman is not ready for a decision, she might want to make a drastic move which is not properly thought through or she is not in a good mental state to make decisions. I try to guide her right.

"Divorce is not something simple in our society; it is surrounded by a lot of conflicts and people tend to care more about traditions than the law when it comes to this."

We are having a hard time; we work with a lot of uneducated people who expect us to fix everything and I need to be calm and professional when I deal with them. We would need more staff to come and work with us, we would like to expand our services. Many women need someone to accompany them to court, for instance. Even to leave the house is difficult for some women, and sometimes they have no money to come.

I worked 81 separate cases last year. But I know that they want to refer more women to us. There is a big difference between the judges and how they work. They often try to mitigate the woman's claims and persuade her to ask for less compensation and so on. I always refuse and argue my case consistently. I feel like I am having an influence even though I might not win every time, and I ask rhetorical questions to the court: "What do you think made her come

here? Where were you when she was beaten and mistreated, why didn't you punish her husband or her family in the first place? There must be a reason for all this." I do feel like they are becoming more aware of these things, and that they are listening to me even though they might not always answer me. Change does not happen overnight. And when I get a favourable decision from the court, I feel like there is concrete, tangible improvement.



"We live today, so why destroy the moment with worrying? And we really have made steps forward. *Bijoz boukra ahla!* Maybe tomorrow will be better, not worse!"

The future? It feels hazy and unclear. We have no certainties whatsoever, there is no stability; things are out of our hand. But there is hope – that's the basis of everything. Although I am not sure of anything, I try not to let it affect me. We live today, so why destroy the moment with worrying? And we really have made steps forward. "*Bijoz boukra ahla!*" Maybe tomorrow will be better, not worse!

# S A W A

## INTERVIEW WITH PROJECT STAFF (HELPLINE COORDINATOR) FROM RAMALLAH

**Ramallah, July 7<sup>th</sup> 2016**

I have been in this organisation for seven years and now I work as a coordinator for the helpline. I am responsible for referrals and counselling, but also for cooperating with community based organisations and for conducting professional trainings with different functions such as prosecutors, family protection units within the police, teachers, lawyers and so on. We have worked with a sexual and reproductive health mobile clinic, we have organised workshops for men – lately, we focused on bus drivers! – and we have made a real effort to reach the informal level of power; the tribal mediators in different areas. I used to conduct volunteer training, but now I supervise the trainers instead. We have two hours' debriefing each week with the staff plus individual counselling sessions.

"Even to mention sexual abuse is a challenge for many people."

We are really proud of our cooperation with the family protection unit. We give them trainings each year, about how to deal with victims of gender based violence, about trauma and post trauma, about perpetrators... We do referrals to the unit anonymously, and then it is the person's own choice if they want to go or not. We choose cooperation partners within the unit that we know will take care of the case professionally and that share our values. Ok, sometimes we discover attitudes that go against our ideas; they would say that it is not so serious, there is no risk and so on. But we do detect changes through our trainings.

"When it comes to rape, we have this principle which states that if the perpetrator marries the victim he will not be prosecuted. People would say that she should thank God for covering up her shame."

Then there is the work in schools, of course. Here, there is no proper sex education in the curriculum, it is so sensitive and usually not accepted. Sometimes when we go to inform and discuss with pupils, the staff demands to attend even though we want the children to be able to speak freely. They are afraid of the parents' reactions. And a while ago, they even spoke out against us in a mosque: "this organisation is *haram*, don't call them, don't listen to them..." But yeah, we address it as much as we can, and we do talk about hymen, masturbation and other taboo topics with teenagers. A lot of girls want to make tests to check their virginity status, and many ask about operations for hymen reconstruction. As for these operations,



they are really expensive. We even know of cases where doctors have abused girls sexually in return for performing the surgery! We try to give scientific advice, but also stress the fact that it is her body; that she needs to make the decisions. You know, many times we get calls like... a girl would call and say that she was raped as a child and now she is expected to get married but she keeps rejecting the proposals in order for the rape not to be discovered. Or she might already be in a relationship and doesn't know whether to tell the guy or not. These cases are risky. Sometimes the girl would decide to tell him, and then he would start threatening her into having sex, knowing that she is not a virgin anyway and that he can control her through this secret. We see a lot of such things – sexual blackmailing, cases where private images are captured and then spread on Whatsapp, internet bullying, and sexual abuse through Facebook and other means. Social media is used so much because the young generation is not understood by the older one.

We are known for having this helpline and for how we work in cases of sexual abuse. Some other organisations refer cases to us if a girl has been raped and wants to make a report. Even to mention sexual abuse is a challenge for many people. But in our helpline, we have many cases regarding this. Sexual abuse and rape, sometimes outside of the family and sometimes within it. There is a real problem with our laws. If a girl over 18 claims to have been abused by family members, she would be prosecuted herself because she is deemed to have the capacity to resist. If the perpetrator is a stranger, it is easier for the parents to do something about it. If he is from within the family, no one will believe her. There is a tendency in our society in general not to believe children. And still, there is this mind-set... The home is supposed to be the most relaxed place, right? But sisters are told to dress modestly in front of their brothers even. As if they were responsible, as if something bad was to be expected. When it comes to rape, we have this principle which states that if the perpetrator marries the victim he will not be prosecuted. People would say that she should thank God for covering up her shame.

“Within many Palestinian NGOs, the occupation is claimed to be the reason for everything; for violence, even for sexual abuse. We don't believe in this. It may be a factor, but not the reason.”

Rape in marriage is not punishable by law, and we meet this attitude a lot also among other organisations, that a woman is the property of her husband somehow, that she needs to accept this. Sometimes we find ourselves in disagreements with other NGOs. For example, in a case where a woman has been killed and it turns out, after the autopsy, that she had not engaged in any sexual relation, they would say “ah, it's a pity, she was still a virgin”. As if she would have deserved to be killed otherwise! I remember once, in an advocacy rally against honour killings, a representative from another organisation said that she couldn't protest against this killing because the victim had indeed been in a relation outside of marriage. There is really a problem with people not practicing what they preach!

And when it comes to prostitution, a lot of people think that these women need a separate shelter not to destroy the other “innocent” girls, while we believe that they are victims. We did a report on trafficking where we interviewed hotel employees, taxi drivers and so on, and

we found that most of the girls were either incest victims or raped within relations and psychologically violated. We claim that prostitutes are not here simply because of sexual desire or need of money, but we are probably the only ones to believe this.

As for homosexuality, a lot of people say straight out that they are disgusted. Professionals even. In trainings with police, we always need to stress the difference between voluntary homosexuality and abuse. They claim it's an illness, they confuse paedophilia and homosexuality, and they use improper terminology. Women NGOs say that it's disgusting and would refuse to work with such cases even though they are providing social counselling or therapy. We always say that we are not here to encourage or not, it's the person's own body, it's not a matter of our choice.

"It all begins from the first steps of childhood.  
Kids are being raised differently according to gender."

Another issue regards the views on violence. Within many Palestinian NGOs, the occupation is claimed to be the reason for everything; for violence, even for sexual abuse. We don't believe in this. It may be a factor, but not the reason. Violence is about using authority and strength to humiliate others. You can find one man who is violated by a soldier or by his boss, and when he can't retaliate, he takes it out on his family. But if you look around, you will find lots of other men who deal with it differently. It all begins from the first steps of childhood. Kids are being raised differently according to gender. If the father is out for a visit somewhere, he tells the son to take responsibility for the family. This implies control and restriction of his mother and sisters. And so it continues... We need to work more with masculinity!

Our biggest challenge? I would say the subject of our work itself. But our aim is not to make a revolution. We just want to raise questions; to make people think.

# PALESTINIAN CENTER FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

## INTERVIEW WITH YOUNG WOMAN FROM NABLUS

**Ramallah, July 21<sup>st</sup> 2016**

Who I am? I am a young woman from Palestine. And for me, human rights stand over everything. My focus right now is the place of women in the upcoming elections. There needs to be more female attendance. I want everyone to know that this is your right: to be present, to vote, to run for elections even! Our traditions make this something strange. It's like, if you are a woman, you are inferior, on a lower level somehow. There is this view that a woman is not capable to make decisions. And this change takes time. Long time. But we have patience!

The challenges are present on so many stages: there is the personal one, with your family. And then you have the community around you, and then you have the political level. There are some women who really serve as role models, but not everywhere. In the place where I come from, the main priority is the interests of the family, not of society. As for my own family, they are not very educated and not really aware. They had a lot of problems with me coming and going in the beginning. I couldn't travel or go to different places. They were afraid that something would happen to me. So I did things behind their back. And they also thought I was strange, the way I was talking about these subjects as a young girl. But step by step, they started to see that I was doing important things and that I affected people around me; people with problems. I had a good influence even on my brother when he had conflicts with his wife.

"There is this view that a woman is not capable to make decisions. And this change takes time. Long time. But we have patience!"



They finally accepted what I am doing. Now, I feel like I got everything. They can't prohibit me anymore. They trust me, and other people around us got used to it and stopped talking about me. It was really tough, but it was necessary. There shouldn't be a conflict between your political standpoint and your personal situation. If you can't change things on your own level, then how are you going to change society?

I would say that I have gone through a development of my personality by the training that I received. It felt like we were really joining in and sharing, not only listening. And we were able to go to summer camps where we were learning about rights and political participation, we went all over the West Bank and talked to communities, we used social media to reach out to the youth, and Skype to communicate with people in Gaza. And there is continuation. It gave me the possibility to build experience until I finally reached a level where I could enter a local NGO and really have something to say, something to contribute with. I am making a difference.



In school, we were only told to copy stuff from the blackboard and read texts and memorize them and then there would be tests. I forgot everything I learned in school! But here, the style of teaching is so different. All the trainings we get in aspects of life and society, and the way they approach it... "What do you want to be in the future? What do you want to learn? What do you think is missing?" They would ask us, and we would get to choose and affect things. We would specialize in a subject, we researched it, we made priorities and worked on them. For example, we would use CEDAW as a framework and then assess the needs of women in a certain area and focus on them. Or we would look at the different needs related to people living in a village, or a town, or a city.

"But in the long run, if you believe in yourself, others will too."

Do you want an example? Ok, I saw it happen once, in front of me, how a driver refused to pick up a disabled woman even though there was plenty of space in the car. I asked him why, and he said it was too much extra effort with the wheelchair and all. I got so angry. I went to the disability organisation and asked: "why are you not claiming your rights?". And then I mobilized people and we went to talk to the drivers. There were different reactions, some of them were really understanding towards the cause, while some remained negative. But still! And we talked to the ministry of transport and communication, and we had stickers printed for public awareness, and there were really some changes made... not only in our town, it spread to other cities as well. And yeah, from this incident I chose to focus on disabilities!

I have learned how to approach older people and make them listen to me. I can sit with ministers and decision makers; I am no longer shy or insecure. I believe in myself and my message. Many times they are surprised. "How can you be so small and have all this experience?" But I think that your personality decides if they listen to you or not. Well, some people wouldn't at first anyway. But in the long run, if you believe in yourself, others will too.

In my local municipality, there were all men, no girls or women. I started to question why there were no young people and no females. I know that this generational change takes time, but it is necessary. Back in the days, it wasn't the way it is now. There was no freedom of movement for girls, no openness, no social media... I know that these women of the older generation were an important part of the resistance and I respect their experience, but there needs to be some development. Year by year, things change. Now with technology and social media you can reach a lot more people. We can do things in new ways.

Our traditions are a big problem, and the new generation needs to get this right. When you are a girl from a village, it is really hard to break the customs, to move, to go and do things. We got used to believe that everything is *aeb*; shameful. And this gives different opportunities for girls from different areas. Girls from the cities have more freedom, there is transportation, more openness. Girls from the villages are still stuck in the old ways.

"There shouldn't be a conflict between your political standpoint and your personal situation. If you can't change things on your own level, then how are you going to change society?"

One of the obstacles is women themselves. Like, some women... they don't claim their rights. Sometimes they don't know them, or they know, but they are not able to stand up for them. Some women are so afraid. They are afraid of taking a breath if it's not in their husband's name. There is so much violence and pressure, they wouldn't dare to vote even. And they don't believe in themselves, they don't believe that they are able to take responsibility. Patriarchy itself is frightening! And there are men who are afraid. They believe that women are taking their role. A man might think that a woman, if she gets in his position, she would affect more than he does. It is like a threat, there is a rivalry sometimes between the man and the woman. Some men are not letting their wives evolve at all. In my case, it was my brother who was trying to restrict me and sabotage my efforts. I was developing more than him, and he wasn't able to accept it. I couldn't even speak on the phone in front of him about the things I was doing. We still have a problematic relation. But no one should destroy what you have built up! And my nieces look up to me. I want to be someone who affects their lives.

When I sit and talk with other girls, they are shocked. They simply don't understand how I can do all this, how I have so much freedom. I always tell them that nothing is impossible, but that this freedom took time and it wasn't easy. And through this, I affect others. A lot of young people tell me that they want to be like me. And my nieces say it too: "we want to be like you".

"I used to be so restricted, and I suffered a lot. But the pressure builds resistance. It just makes me stronger."



The work with PCPD has been really successful. So many that took part in their trainings are now running for elections. Their camps were amazing, they made a huge imprint and the entire idea behind it was great. I would love to do it again but with a new message – connected to the upcoming elections maybe! Women need to be present in the elections, speak to other women, challenge patriarchy, be in the streets with people, go to shelters and meet with battered women... And to run, and get elected of course! We are aiming for 50/50 in the future. The first time it might be hard to achieve our goals, but with time we will make it.

I have gained so much from the PCPD. I get so much development and learn so much all the time when I see something new, and you meet people from outside... I have had the opportunity to travel through the project. I went to Holland once. I liked it a lot, but it was difficult to deliver the image of all the beautiful things here, the work we do, the strength of our women... they had so many stereotypes. As if everything was just suffering and misery, and they couldn't understand how I was allowed to be active and to do the things I do, being a Palestinian girl. But eventually some of them came and visited. And they were so surprised!

I missed many chances in my life. I really wanted to study journalism, but my family wouldn't accept it. And at the time, I wasn't strong enough to stand up against them. I used to be so restricted, and I suffered a lot. But the pressure builds resistance. It just makes me stronger. Now I am committed to always spreading my message. We need change, we need it so much. We can't run out of faith. Even if we don't succeed immediately, the things we do today will be something for the next generation. I won't raise my children like I was raised, I will raise them in full equality. I have great hope! It was hard to get here, and the efforts shouldn't be in vain. How I see the future? Me, on a personal level? I am going to become a minister! You will see when you come back!

# STARS OF HOPE SOCIETY

## INTERVIEW WITH YOUNG WOMAN FROM BETHLEHEM

**Ramallah, August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016**

I come from Bethlehem where I am working at the moment as an assistant nurse in a hospital. I got to know Stars of Hope because they came and made a training there, it was five years ago. Since then, I've gotten a lot of information and skills development from them, and they arranged work training for me twice in different places. I really learned a lot. I like being around older people, educated people like doctors and lawyers who I can talk to and make a difference with my words now that I know more. People like me can give an inside view on disability, create awareness and talk about our rights.

It is really hard dealing with a community that is not understanding and has so much prejudice when it comes to disabilities. It's like they don't think that you hear, or understand, or maybe they simply don't care. They would say mean things out loud, sometimes behind your back, sometimes straight to your face. When I finished secondary school, I wanted to just drop out of everything and not continue because there were so many problems. But now I focus only on myself and my closest family, I don't care about other people and how they speak or act towards me. I just try to make them aware, to be a positive example and give a good impression.

I do think that there has been positive change over the last years. We demand our rights, we go out and we are more visible. I see people with disabilities getting married nowadays, to someone they love and have chosen themselves – this has always been a difficult issue; people here are obsessed with the idea of normality somehow, and don't think that a disabled person is worthy of marriage, or of love even. But like I said, this is changing, at least in some families. And well, there is braille information in certain places, there are lifts and ramps now in some of the newer buildings...

"It is really hard dealing with a community that is not understanding and has so much prejudice when it comes to disabilities."

But there are a lot of problems still. Some of them are connected to the occupation. In our society, we have many young people who got injured and disabled by Israeli military. They don't adjust as easily, they were different before and it takes time to accept and realize and deal with the new. Even people around them would say "oh, look at him, poor guy, he used to be good, he used to be normal..." I saw a lot of people who did not accept themselves. And on the governmental level there is no proper support: everything is on our own expense; medicines, treatment, technical aid, transportation... Every 5 months we get 750 shekels which are supposed to cover everything, but it is of no real help. And if we go to media and talk about our rights people will say that we beg. These things are connected – we don't have




the accessibility or the financial possibility to move around and get opportunities to build our lives like other people. But I won't stay quiet – I have experience and I want to work! When I put something in my mind I achieve it. I stay active and try to catch my chances. I don't give up. I am really, really stubborn. I know that if something seems impossible, it is your brain that is the limit. I changed a lot of things in my life. And I know that God is with me.

I come from a big family; we are ten children. I was quite introvert when I was younger but my family changed me, they always gave me possibilities and pushed me forward in a good way. Some families are so protective of their girls. Especially if their daughter has a disability, they are so afraid that she would get abused or harassed or raped, maybe if she uses public transportation, if she ends up in a situation where she can't protect herself... Me, I only say to my parents that I am going out, I need to be somewhere, there is no problem with them. And anyway, I am not planning to stay dependent on my family. I am about to take my driver's license, and eventually I will move out. Just as they taught me to be autonomous, my family taught me from the beginning to talk about myself, to be open with my feelings, to tell them what happens around me. I know that there are people who are violent or negative towards their kids because of their disabilities. Some of the other girls in the group, for example, they have stepmothers who are really mean to them. Growing up like that affects the personality for life. There needs to be love and care and warmth in the family, like I had. This gave me so much security for the future.

Even if I am quite mature, I still am like a child inside in a way, because I like to play and not be so serious at all times. There are so many things to enjoy! I love the sea; I love to ride horses... Even when I don't feel too good, I try to hide my sadness and smile. There is a lot of trouble in life, not just your own, I mean look at others around you! Like the other girls in the group. We have started to call each other and keep in contact, we help each other practically. And while going out and doing activities together, I have realized that others have even worse situations, or kinds of disabilities that I wasn't familiar with before. I'm learning a lot. And even if we come from the same country, there is a huge diversity between us in terms of in traditions and possibilities. I appreciate this so much, getting the chance to connect with new people. This is one of the greatest benefits from being with Stars of Hope. And they keep caring about you and you feel welcome whenever you meet them, they have such a nice, relaxed approach. But I would hope for more things to happen, that maybe they would help us with things like laptops or by finding work for us, I mean real work, something lasting and not just training.

Personally, I would like to get employed by some kind of disability organisation in the future or keep on working in hospitals like I am doing now, where I mostly meet cancer patients. I like to help others. And I want to meet foreigners... People from other places, like you! I would love to travel around and see how other countries do with their disabled, to find out more about their laws, their attitudes... I want to see new things; I want to be one of those girls who get to see the world!



"When I put something in my mind I achieve it.  
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# WOMEN'S AFFAIRS CENTER

## INTERVIEW WITH WOMAN FROM GAZA

**Gaza, July 24<sup>th</sup> 2016**

It was beautiful, I tell you: we used to grow tomatoes, olives, cucumbers, clementines... Now it's all gone. It's not just that the plantations are destroyed; the soil is poisoned by their chemicals, it's not possible to grow anything there anymore. And since 2008, the house is gone. All of the houses in the entire neighbourhood. Gone.

I have eight girls and one son. The youngest girl had an accident when she was three years old and since then she can't walk or speak. She is eleven now. A while after our house was bombed I went back to the place to see if I could get some clothes for my children at least, but all was burned, I didn't find a scarf even.

"A while after our house was bombed I went back to the place to see if I could get some clothes for my children at least, but all was burned, I didn't find a scarf even."

Hundreds of homes were ruined. The Israelis would give us warnings during the night, and then we had to flee. All of us, from the same place in the same time, with all the kids, can you imagine? The ambulances couldn't reach us because the area was already so destroyed from earlier bombings. My husband is ill, but he carried our daughter on his back, the one who can't walk. We had to move around from place to place, it was awfully hard with the little ones. We stayed one night with my husband's relatives, a few nights in my brother's place... Like that. From place to place.

I married early; I was barely 15. It wasn't my own decision. He is from the same family; a cousin. That's how it happened. My life was easy until then, but suddenly I had all this responsibility. I was so young and had no idea what it meant to be married. And in my in-laws' household, things were very tough. We worked in the fields all day, even when I was pregnant I had to work just as hard. And their land is just by the Israeli borders, sometimes they would shoot at us when we worked.

And then the war. Again and again. It was not just the destruction of our neighbourhood; I have seen so much violence. My nephew found an undetonated shell once and hid it, and when he took it out to examine it closer, it exploded. I was in their home the same day. He lost his sight and both arms and was injured in the lower parts of his body as well. He was 16 years old at the time. I saw everything with my own eyes, right after it happened, but I was totally silent. I couldn't make a sound. And I have a cousin who lost both his legs in an explosion, and I have seen people die in front of me, one man, I remember the scene, his brains were all over the wall behind him, it was...

"Our hearts are so affected from the things we have seen, so heavy. The violence became something normal, although it shouldn't be."

Our hearts are so affected from the things we have seen, so heavy. The violence became something normal, although it shouldn't be.

Life is really hard in Shujaiyyeh, even after they started rebuilding some of the houses. When the water comes, the electricity stops. When the electricity comes back, the water is gone. You know? And as for my little girl, I have tried so hard to get an answer for what's wrong with her, and if she could be cured somehow. I want to take her outside of Gaza, to doctors who might be able to help her. But you need a permit for that. And this requires connections. It's pure corruption. You need to know the right people in the right places, or pay your way out. And my husband is not working, he is ill and has been unemployed for many years now. So there is no such option for us.

I was depressed and isolated for so long. I had such a weak personality, I was afraid to talk back. I never used to go out. Afraid of everything. And then the WAC approached us, and it all changed. They invited us to take part of their activities, to be in a group with other women and talk about our experiences. It was difficult at first; I was so shy. During the first sessions, I would be silent and just listen. But now, I am so different. My personality has changed a lot.

Before I started to go here, I felt no hope. And my children, I didn't know how to deal with them. They are so many, and my patience was so limited. I was sad, disconnected. But the meetings here have eased my mind a lot. I feel closer to my children, and I am more social. Braver; stronger. I can sit with people now and talk to them in a way I couldn't before. And the women from the group have started to go and visit one another, we talk on the phone and stay in contact between the meetings. I would love to work with the WAC in the future, to use the things that we learned from them when we meet other women.

The discussions and the activities here are so beautiful. They help us build ourselves, they make us become stronger and happier and more relaxed and they give us tools to deal with all the difficulties. Now, I have ways of making myself feel better; I know what to tell myself: "I am here, I am alive, I am healthy." I have learned to focus on the little things that I have between my hands, and to do something positive with them. And they invite people from outside to talk about important topics, information that we can learn from. I think to myself sometimes: this is like things I only used to watch on TV. And now I am with them!

"Now, I have ways of making myself feel better; I know what to tell myself: 'I am here, I am alive, I am healthy.' I have learned to focus on the little things that I have between my hands, and to do something positive with them."





# AISHA

## INTERVIEW WITH WOMAN FROM GAZA

**Gaza, July 26<sup>th</sup> 2016**

My parents had debts that they couldn't pay, so I was married already at 14 just because they owed other people money. The man I married was more than 30 years older than me. It was... It was horrible. I don't even know how to describe it. I was just a child, I had no idea about anything, about men, about marriage, about sex, about love even. It was such a shock. He treated me really bad, and his family too. I could only stand it for a few weeks until I fled to my parents and begged for a divorce. They took me back into the home and the divorce was processed, but by then I was already pregnant.

I gave birth to a baby boy, and after only three months, my ex-husband's family came and took him away from me. Right out of my arms, they took him. I couldn't do anything. And time passed, years passed, and I didn't see him again. I got married to my second husband when I was 20 and we had some good years together.

"The man I married was more than 30 years older than me. It was... It was horrible. I don't even know how to describe it. I was just a child, I had no idea about anything, about men, about marriage, about sex, about love even. It was such a shock."

One day, there was a knock on the door. When I opened, my brother was standing outside and he had a young man in his company. I was surprised and asked: "Who are you bringing to my house like this, I'm not properly dressed, I can't show myself to this stranger!" But my brother just kept saying that it was all right, that I should let them in anyway. He asked me to sit down, and then he told me: "This is your son. He is 18 now, so he could finally choose to meet you. Here he is." I fainted. For two hours, I was unable to move or to touch him, I just cried. He was so big and tall and beautiful. All those years... And just shortly after I got him back in my arms, he left Gaza to get married, and then the borders were closed and there was no way to return. Now he is in the West Bank and we can't meet again. I had him, and I lost him, and then I got him back just to lose him again.

I haven't really been lucky with anything. God didn't give me the chances. I went to the seamstress course here to learn some new things. I took the course for six months, and I was really successful. I have good hands for these things, for embroidery and sewing. I learned how to take measures and make clothes like a real professional! And then I was selected to receive a financial grant after the course. They know about my situation; how poor I am. We live in a rented house but we can barely pay for it. My husband is sick since many years so I am responsible for eight persons who all eat from the work of my needle.

"I would need a generator to get backup electricity, but I don't even have any food to feed my children, how could I buy a generator?"

With the money, I could buy the things I needed: a sewing machine, fabric, and thread. I was so happy! I set everything up and started my little business in a corner of the room where we live. And still, here I am, just as poor as before. How am I to work when there is no electricity for the machine?

But I have so much hope, I really do. I am so grateful that Aisha helped me so much. Now, I can put my feet on the ground. Before, I didn't have anything. Really, the electricity is the only major problem right now. I have everything ready to work and I can't because there is no power. It disappears at 7 in the morning and returns at night. I can't wash or cook or bake, let alone use the machine, how is it going to work, this business? I would need a generator to get backup electricity, but I don't even have any food to feed my children, how could I buy a generator? People come to order from me and when they see that I don't have electricity they will go to another place so they won't have to wait. The only solution is to switch to wool craft instead; I am quite good at it and I am thinking of doing it because I can work by candle light, I won't need electricity.

In any case, I won't stay idle. I am always trying to keep busy, to do things. You need to kill time with your hands, otherwise it will kill you. I always say I prefer to make sweat instead of tears, it's more useful. And I will tell you this: I am happy even if I am poor; I have good things in my life, things that you can't buy with money. I have love, and I always look for the little miracles to be found around me. You know, it's all in your mind. The beauty comes from within if you just focus on it!

"I am happy even if I am poor; I have good things in my life, things that you can't buy with money. I have love, and I always look for the little miracles to be found around me. You know, it's all in your mind. The beauty comes from within if you just focus on it!"



# PALESTINIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

## NOTES FROM NETWORK MEETING AT BEIT AL-AMAN IN GAZA

**Gaza, July 31<sup>st</sup> 2016**

*Some short observation notes from a bi-weekly network meeting at Beit al-Aman, the only women's shelter in Gaza. The purpose of the meeting was to assess and mediate new cases of clients seeking help from the shelter. The participants, besides the consultant and the clients, were one police officer, one mukhtar (local tribal mediator), two shelter employees and two PCHR lawyers. The presented cases are the first and the last to be handled on that day.*

### **Case I**

A young woman steps into the meeting room with her sister and aunt. She is dressed in black from head to toe and looks cautiously at us through her rimmed glasses. There is a sofa next to the door; she is asked to take a seat so that she faces the group of people already present and placed in a half circle opposite her. The situation resembles a court, except for the coffee glasses on the low table in the middle. The policeman asks her to state the reason for her visit, and as she starts talking, she is interrupted by her aunt who comes to dominate much of the session: "She is too stubborn! I told her a thousand times, you need to adapt to things, you need to calm down, be good!"

"She is too stubborn! I told her a thousand times,  
you need to adapt to things, you need to calm down,  
be good!"

The woman is just over 30 and has been married and divorced twice. She has no children, which seems to have been a contributing factor to the divorces. She lives alone with her elderly father, and she has come to seek help because she is frustrated with her situation. Her father nags at her constantly, he forbids her from leaving the house and he beats her when she talks back at him. She tells her story quietly and composedly, but her aunt and the police officer won't let her finish. "You need to respect your father! He is an old man, and you are a burden for him, the way you behave!" She protests: "But is it right that he beats me? Should I really have to put up with this?" A dispute breaks out and the aunt starts walking back and forth in the room, shouting loudly. "You scandalize him by moving around, going from here to there! It is not suitable for someone in your position!" The woman fixes her gaze at a point behind us and repeats, in a low but steady voice, that it is not right of the father to hit her, and that she needs to have a life of her own, not just sit trapped in the house.



"But is it right that he beats me? Should I really have to put up with this?"

One of the lawyers pleads with her: "You need to be patient. You are the only one he has got, he is old, and it is his duty to worry about you." As the woman slumps deeper into her seat, the police officer continues: "We want you to work on your ways, to learn how to treat him so he doesn't get mad at you. You have been in here for less than half an hour, and we can already tell that you have a snappy personality." He strokes his long beard and stares her straight in the eye for the first time. "Besides that, what choices do you have? Really? There is no other place to go!" A content chuckle is heard from the aunt as silent tears trickle down the woman's cheeks.

"Besides that, what choices do you have? Really? There is no other place to go!"

At this point, the *mukhtar* steps in. "I know why you are sad and bitter", he says. "It's because you are divorced twice, and because you wear glasses. Listen to me! You should not be sad because of this. You need to accept that you are who you are. A lot of girls wear glasses, not just you. And complexes about appearance are against God's intentions. He has created you like this. Now the question is: are you willing to do as we say?"

As she walks out, defeated, the group turns back to their coffee for a short break before the next person comes in; a teenage girl, seemingly intellectually disabled, who is to be interrogated about having continued her intimate relationship with an older man that she was previously engaged to.

"I know why you are sad and bitter! It's because you are divorced twice, and because you wear glasses. Listen to me! You should not be sad because of this. You need to accept that you are who you are."

## Case II

The final session of the day; the police officer is yawning discretely as a weathered man in his late 40s enters the room and takes a seat. He is coming from Rafah, he says, to pick up his wife's passport that she left behind after seeking help at the shelter a couple of days ago. It turns out that she is wife number three in the household – he is married since before to one woman from Gaza and another one from Syria. The three women all live together in one house, and he has 17 children in total from the marriages. This statement is met with some cheerful comments from the group, although the police officer is not far behind with his own brood of eleven.

This last wife, the man tells us, is from Egypt. He went there and got her from her family, “fresh as a baby bird”, and although she has been in his village for a few years now, he boasts that she still cannot find her way anywhere outside the house, she knows nothing and no one, not even the neighbours. Still, she seems to have managed to flee in the middle of the night, get a ride all the way to Gaza city, and seek refuge at the shelter. She wanted to return to her family in Egypt, but at the shelter they were not able to help her. When she returned to Rafah, she forgot her passport and now he wants it back.

“I am a Bedouin! This is not how we do things! You are insulting my dignity! She is my wife, she is not going anywhere, I swear to God, I am not bringing her to this place, not to any place!”

He admits to them having had a small argument, but sees no reason whatsoever for her to make such a commotion. He is a very good husband and she should have nothing to complain about; this is typical of women, making scenes out of nothing and reacting all emotional. The mood is light and almost joking, and he is just about to reach for the passport when a lawyer is alerted: “I am not sure if I missed something here, but how are you sure that the woman is ok? She wouldn't have run away for no reason, would she?” The lawyer nods, and clears her throat. She asks the man if his wife has a phone, and if so, whether she could have the number. The man stares at her in disbelief. “Did you just ask for my wife's telephone number?” The lawyer straightens her back. “Yes. I was thinking maybe we could call her and talk to her a little, you know, just to make sure that everything is all right?” The man's facial expression changes. No, she has no phone, he says. Or maybe she does, but he can not recall her number. And he does not have it stored in his own phone either. “Perhaps you could bring her here then, so we could talk to her and check on her a little?” At this suggestion from the lawyer, the man explodes. “I am a Bedouin! This is not how we do things! You are insulting my dignity! She is my wife, she is not going anywhere, I swear to God, I am not bringing her to this place, not to any place!”

After a joint effort from the *mukhtar* and the policeman to calm him down, the man reluctantly agrees to facilitate things by letting his wife make a call from his own phone, with him present, the next day. He gets up and leaves to return to Rafah, holding the woman's passport firmly in his right hand as he exits the room.

