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Challenges of feminist struggles in Palestine in a post-pandemic context

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Challenges of feminist struggles in Palestine in a post-pandemic context

Introduction

Palestinian women and girls face an increasingly hostile scenario for achieving their right to a life free from violence. Their daily life is shaped by the confluence and overlap of various structures of oppression, whose central lines are the occupation, apartheid and dispossession system imposed by Israel and the patriarchy dominant in Palestinian society. In a scenario already characterised by chronic exposure to a complex network of violence, inequalities and discrimination, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a new threat that has exacerbated vulnerability from a gender perspective.¹ As in other parts of the world, the pandemic in Palestine has had a specific and often disproportionate impact on women and girls and has fuelled Palestinian women's organisations concerns about setbacks and threats to the advancement of the feminist agenda in multiple areas.

All this is taking place in a very particular context. Palestinian women and girls face a multifaceted reality stemming from the fragmentation imposed by Israel and the failed Oslo Accords. In practice, this has helped to perpetuate power asymmetries and Israeli settlement policies and the gradual de facto annexation of Palestine. Therefore, as analysts point out, various actors' insistence on the two-state solution can be considered merely diplomatic pantomime that ignores the reality on the ground. In fact, this reality is increasingly denounced internationally as a crime of apartheid, taking into account Israeli government policies that have systematically tried to favour the Jewish population and discriminated against the Palestinian population with the intention of maintaining control over it.² Nevertheless, Israel persists in its policies, including the use of multiple forms of violence with a gender intentionality, and has intensified the persecution and criminalisation of those who try to expose the abuses in Palestine. This is all taking place in a climate of impunity, given the complicity of international actors, including Arab countries that have opted for a gradual and unapologetic rapprochement with Israel. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority is facing a severe crisis of legitimacy and credibility due to accusations of authoritarianism, corruption and uncritical collaboration with the Israeli government. The main Palestinian political forces, Fatah and Hamas, seem to be locked in a division that in practice favours the status quo and the distribution of power between them, while hindering any change of leadership, generational change or possibilities for women to expand their involvement in decision-making. As many Palestinians have warned, added to this is the perception of an increase in social conservatism, with greater visibility for groups that openly position themselves against feminist demands for non-discrimination and for the rights of women.

Taking this scenario into account, this report intends to delve into the gender impacts of the pandemic in Palestine, with special attention paid to the consequences in terms of

1. As an analytical category, gender makes it clear that inequalities between men and women are the product of social norms rather than a result of nature, and sets out to underline this social and cultural construction to distinguish it from the biological differences of the sexes. The gender perspective aims to highlight the social construction of sexual difference and the sexual division of work and power. It also attempts to show that the differences between men and women are a social construction resulting from unequal power relations that have historically been established in the patriarchal system. The goal of gender as an analytical category is to demonstrate the historical and situated nature of sexual differences. It should be noted that this approach must go hand in hand with an intersectional analysis that relates gender to other factors that structure power in a society, such as social class, race, ethnicity, age, or sexuality, among other aspects that generate inequalities, discrimination and privileges.

2. Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*, HRW, 27 April 2021; Amnesty International, *Israel's Apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime against Humanity*, AI, 1 February 2022.

access to health, economic insecurity, gender violence and the exclusion of women and gender considerations in policies responding to COVID-19. Based on the verification of these effects, the report exposes some of the priority challenges of the feminist agenda in Palestine (or rather of “the feminist agendas”, in the plural), assuming the diversity of voices and approaches co-existing in the current scene. Among the priority challenges are the fight against gender violence and for non-discrimination and women’s rights; demands associated with political participation, activism and influence in decision-making; and the denunciation of Israel based on recognition of the interrelation between feminist gender claims and the struggle for the liberation of Palestine.

The report is based on the vast documentation and analysis work carried out by Palestinian women’s and human rights organisations, as well as international NGOs and specialised United Nations agencies. Likewise, it aims to give visibility to some of the main initiatives promoted by feminist organisations and, without claiming to be exhaustive, it features some of the discussions in the Palestinian feminist scene. The report is based on the recognition of gender as a fundamental analytical tool, both in general and also with regard to the violence, peace and security approach and analysis. The analysis presented below is intended to be useful for people interested in gender issues and Palestine, as well as for organisations that work in Palestine and partner with local organisations, for political decision-makers with the capacity for advocacy and other actors. The purpose is to take a look at realities in Palestine from a gender perspective and, above all, feminist claims that seek to build a fairer and violence-free future in Palestine.

Gender impacts of COVID-19 in Palestine

Globally, COVID-19 has amplified gender inequalities and violence against women and girls. Since the

beginning of the pandemic, international and local actors have warned of the multidimensional consequences of COVID-19, which have been observed especially in areas such as the economy (due to variables such as the gender

wage gap, the feminisation of poverty and women’s greater participation in sectors of the informal economy), in health care (due to the reorientation of resources and priorities, which has particularly affected sexual and reproductive health services, among other factors), in care work (accentuating an unequal distribution of tasks in a context of increased need) and in increasing gender violence.³ The United Nations has drawn attention to the “hidden pandemic” of violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19, providing data on the intensification of all types of violence against them, particularly domestic violence.⁴

As feminist approaches have underlined, this set of gender impacts has made it clear that the pandemic cannot be analysed or addressed as a phenomenon disconnected from pre-existing patriarchal structures and dynamics, which determine specific gender inequalities in each context and which interact in turn with other factors of inequality.⁵ In armed conflicts, the gender consequences have been exacerbated by the multiple dynamics of violence associated with the conflicts in question. And in the particular case of Palestine, marked by occupation and apartheid, analysing the gender impacts of the pandemic requires an even more multifaceted approach. The complex network of policies of Israeli domination and segregation, militarisation and territorial fragmentation ensure very diverse daily realities for Palestinian women and girls (just over 2.5 million people, half of the Palestinian population).⁶ Their experiences in relation to COVID-19 have also been shaped by these conditions. Thus, for example, in the Gaza Strip, the pandemic has further aggravated the consequences of periodic escalations of direct violence, massive Israeli offensives and a blockade imposed for more than a decade. In the West Bank, the response of the Palestinian authorities to COVID-19 has been shaped by the various areas of

The pandemic in Palestine has had specific and disproportionate consequences on women and girls and has fuelled Palestinian women’s organisations’ concerns about setbacks and threats to the advancement of the feminist agenda

3. UN Secretary-General, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, Policy Brief, UN Women, 9 April 2020, p. 2.

4. For example, an investigation carried out by UN Women between April and September 2021, focused on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on violence against women in 13 countries, provides a close look at the gender consequences of COVID-19. According to the study, which was conducted in Albania, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Colombia, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Nigeria, Paraguay, Thailand and Ukraine, 45% of the women stated that they or other women they knew had experienced some form of gender-based violence since the start of the pandemic and three out of 10 women thought that violence against women had increased in their communities. Four out of 10 women reported feeling more insecure in public spaces and one in four recognised that they felt more insecure in their own homes. One fourth (25%) of those surveyed also admitted that conflicts at home had become more frequent and seven out of 10 women stated that verbal or physical abuse by their partners had become more common. UN Women, *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19*, UN Women – Women Count, 2021. See also the website with resources and the UN Women awareness campaign: *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*.

5. Ana Vilellas, “Conflicto, COVID-19 y la agenda de mujeres, paz y seguridad”, *Apunts ECP de Conflictos i Pau*, No. 11, Escola de Cultura de Pau, July 2021, p. 2.

6. According to data from the *Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics* (PCBS) in 2020 there were 2.51 million Palestinian women and girls. More updated data from the PCBS raised this number to 2.63 million, or 49% of the estimated population, in mid-2022. PCBS, *Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow*, 8 March 2022, p. 1.

control defined by the Oslo Agreements, as the PA has administrative powers in areas A and B, but not in area C, which represents 60% of the West Bank and is under full Israeli control. In East Jerusalem, occupied and de facto annexed by Israel, the pandemic has further deteriorated the living conditions of the Palestinian population, which was already facing serious problems of impoverishment, access to resources and services.⁷ In Palestine, as the Palestinian organisation Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) has said, COVID-19 has become a "third threat" for Palestinian women and girls, who usually experience two other intersecting threats: the structures of the Israeli military occupation and the dominant patriarchy in Palestinian society (which, in turn, interact with other factors, such as social class, age, functional diversity, etc.). With the pandemic, the WCLAC argues that the triple intersection of threats has accentuated structural inequalities and vulnerabilities, creating risks and aggravating some pre-existing ones.⁸

The pandemic has become a new threat to Palestinian women and girls, accentuating structural inequalities and vulnerabilities, creating risks and aggravating some pre-existing ones

What has the pandemic been like in Palestine? The first cases of COVID-19 were detected in early March 2020 in Beit Jala, in the Bethlehem area, and from there they multiplied in other cities and towns of the West Bank. Following the declaration of a state of emergency by presidential decree issued by Mahmoud Abbas on 5 March, the first confinement was ordered, which lasted until the end of May. Infections intensified from August, with a significant increase in cases at the end of the year. In East Jerusalem, the Palestinian population has been subjected to the policies defined by the Israeli authorities, which have also been accused of discriminatory practices in the response to COVID-19 and towards the Palestinian population as a whole. Restrictions and confinements were also imposed in Gaza, but implementation was difficult due to the high population density in the territory and economic insecurity. As analyses and testimonies have revealed, the pandemic intensified the mobility restrictions previously imposed by the Israeli blockade and for gender reasons in the Gaza Strip. *"In Gaza, nothing much has changed. The occupation has always restricted our movements. We could never think of travelling abroad and my father has always restricted our movements and forced us to stay at home. We have always been in quarantine. Now everyone knows what it feels like"*, a young Gazan

woman illustratively stated in a UN Women report in the first months of the pandemic.⁹

Analysing the consequences of the pandemic from a gender perspective requires identifying and addressing different areas of impact. Based on the work of various international and Palestinian organisations, background information is provided below on four areas that seem especially relevant: the right to health, economic insecurity, gender violence and the marginalisation of women and the gender perspective in decision-making and the formulation of responses to the pandemic.

Right to health

An analysis of the health sphere requires at least two considerations. First, COVID-19 has stepped up pressure on Palestinian health care systems that were already significantly damaged and limited prior to the pandemic, especially in Gaza. Second, as an occupying power, Israel is responsible for providing health care to the entire Palestinian population. UN human rights experts and many others have repeated the need for Israel to comply with the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which among other issues includes the duty of the occupying power to ensure the provision of medical services, hospitals and medical supplies and to adopt the necessary preventive measures to prevent the spread of pandemics and other infectious diseases, in coordination with local authorities.¹⁰ In practice, however, since the beginning of the pandemic, the Israeli authorities have been singled out not only for failing to fulfil their responsibilities under international law in this area, but also for hampering Palestinian response policies and for adopting other discriminatory measures and/or actions that have further aggravated the humanitarian situation, hindering achievement of the Palestinian population's right to health.

Thus, for example, analyses of the situation in East Jerusalem warned of discrimination in information campaigns at the beginning of the pandemic (in the first few weeks, the messages from the Israeli authorities about COVID-19 were only disseminated in Hebrew and not in Arabic), in carrying out tests for COVID-19 and in providing medicine and treatment compared to West

7. Studies conducted prior to the pandemic indicated that the vast majority (72%) of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem lived below the poverty line and faced problems of overcrowding, with a ratio of people per household that was almost double that of the Jewish neighbourhoods of West Jerusalem. Nearly half (44% of the Palestinian population) had problems with regular and legal access to a service as basic as water. GAPS, Mercy Corps, AIDA and WCLAC, *Now and the Future Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World – Palestine*, 25 January 2021, p. 3.

8. WCLAC, *Compounded Threats: How COVID-19, occupation and patriarchy have impacted Palestinian women in 2020*, February 2021, p. 2 and 4.

9. UN Women, *COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming*, UN Women, April 2020, p. 4.

10. Relevant references to Israel's obligations in the field of health as an occupying power are found in Articles 55, 56, 59 and 60 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. WCLAC (2021), *Compounded threats*, op. cit, p.6.; UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *"Israel/OPT: UN experts call on Israel to ensure equal access to COVID-19 vaccines for Palestinians"*, OHCHR, 14 January 2021.

Jerusalem. In Palestinian neighbourhoods, especially beyond the wall, testing centres were only set up after pressure from human rights NGOs and civil society and Israel intervened in one allegedly linked to the PA.¹¹ While confinement and social distancing were key to preventing the spread of the pandemic, Israel continued and even intensified its policy of demolishing Palestinian homes. According to UN data, as of November 2020, the annual number of demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian property was (after 2016) the highest since 2009 (the year since this practice has been systematically documented) and had led to the forced displacement of almost a thousand people, mostly minors.¹² The demolitions even affected buildings that were intended to be used for COVID-19 care.¹³ Hundreds of Israeli prisoners were released due to the pandemic, but this did not apply to Palestinian prisoners. Israel was repeatedly indicated as one of the leading countries in terms of vaccinations, despite failing to fulfil its obligation to provide equal access to vaccines for the entire Palestinian population. Israel began by vaccinating the Palestinian population living in East Jerusalem and later decided to also include the more than 130,000 Palestinians from the West Bank who work in Jerusalem, in Israel or in the settlements, the vast majority of whom are men.¹⁴ Although this differential treatment of the Palestinian population was denounced as unacceptable from a moral and legal standpoint by UN human rights experts, and even more so during a global pandemic, Israel shrugged off its responsibilities for health care in Occupied Palestine by appealing to the Oslo Accords, arguing that health care management has been in the hands of the Palestinian authorities ever since.¹⁵

Added to this are the factors shaping the evolution of the conflict itself. While there was initially limited coordination between Israel and the PA in the early months of the pandemic, this dynamic was affected by

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Israeli authorities have been singled out not only for failing to fulfil their responsibilities under international law in the field of health, but also for obstructing Palestinian response policies and for adopting discriminatory measures

the Netanyahu government's plans to (formally) annex a third of the West Bank, in contravention of international law.¹⁶ The temporary suspension of coordination between the PA and Israel (between May and November 2020) affected the entry of supplies (including medical supplies) and the blocking of access to funds derived from tax collection further compromised Palestinian capacities to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, in May 2021, a new Israeli military offensive on Gaza caused many deaths and injuries, destroyed homes and led to the forced displacement of more than 100,000 people in just 11 days.¹⁷ The Israeli military operation also destroyed civilian infrastructure, including health centres, and killed the main person responsible for the response to COVID-19 in Gaza, at a time when the UN warned of a significant increase in infections both in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Meanwhile, attacks by Israeli settlers against the Palestinian population and property continued to intensify, even during the pandemic and in a context of impunity. The attacks tried to exploit the fear of contagion of the virus, including practices such as spitting on doors and cars or using unknown substances to contaminate water in Palestinian communities.¹⁸

In addition to the general effects on the Palestinian population, specific repercussions on women's health have also been observed in many areas. Palestinian women have shouldered an immense burden in the response to COVID-19 due to their disproportionate role in caregiving in the context of roles imposed by the patriarchal system in Palestine, but also because of their majority participation in the health care sector. Women make up the majority of care workers and 70% of frontline health personnel in Palestine (in 2020 there were more than 12,500 nurses and doctors in Gaza and the West Bank, according to UN Women data) and therefore have been especially exposed to the spread of the virus.¹⁹ This exposure has also been

11. According to the media and the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Palestine, Israeli security forces raided a COVID-19 testing clinic in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan under the pretext that the PA was directing and supporting it. UN, *Report on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967*, A/75/532, 22 October 2020.

12. As of November 2020, the demolitions and confiscation of Palestinian properties had affected 848 structures, forcibly displacing 996 people, including 518 minors. UN OCHA, "Peak in demolitions and confiscations amidst increasing denial of the right to justice", 8 December 2020.

13. WCLAC (2021), *Compounded threats*, op. cit., pp.6.

14. According to CBS data, in 2020 there were 133,000 Palestinians working in Israel and the settlements, of which only 1,000 were women. UN Women, *COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming*, April 2020, p. 14.

15. OHCHR (2021), op. cit. and BBC, "Covid-19: Palestinians lag behind in vaccine efforts as infections rise", *BBC News*, 22 March 2021.

16. For more information on this situation, see Pamela Urrutia, Ainhoa Ruiz, Jordi Calvo y Karlos Castilla, *A decisive moment? The importance of halting Europe's arms trade with Israel*, Escola de Cultura de Pau, Centre Delàs, IDHC, July 2020.

17. Israel's Operation Guardian of the Walls killed 260 people, half of them civilians (41 Palestinian women, 153 Palestinian men and 66 Palestinian minors); injured another 2,200 people (including 685 minors and 480 women); destroyed or affected 17,000 houses and forcibly displaced 113,000 people. OHCHR, *Situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967*, A/76/433, 22 October 2021; ESCWA, *Gendered needs during the May 2021 conflict in the Gaza Strip*, Reliefweb, 11 March 2022. For further information, see also Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

18. WCLAC (2021), *Compounded threats*, op. cit., pp.34.

19. UN Women, *COVID-19 risks creating and exacerbating women's vulnerabilities and gender inequalities in Palestine, warns UN Women*, Press release, UN Women – Palestine, 6 May 2020.

shaped by the traditional distribution of tasks in the domestic sphere, which has turned Palestinian women into the primary caretakers of children, the elderly and the sick; as well as hygiene and sanitary measures in their homes.²⁰ In addition to the physical exhaustion associated with the added workload, Palestinian women have been affected by increased levels of stress and emotional strain during the COVID-19 crisis.

Since before the pandemic, Israel's policies also shaped Palestinian women's right to health care. The obstacles and restrictions on movement, which intensified due to COVID-19, aggravated this situation, especially affecting women in need of specialised and essential treatments for their survival, including cancer patients. The pandemic also accentuated the vulnerabilities of Palestinian women residing in Jerusalem without the documentation required by Israel and, therefore, without the right to access health care in this area. As has happened elsewhere, the concentration of efforts and resources in responding to the pandemic has also relegated other areas of health care to the background, including those related to sexual and reproductive health and maternal and neonatal health.²¹ This has produced special challenges and difficulties for women and girls in remote areas or places that are difficult to access, such as the Gaza Strip, Area C in the West Bank and Area H2 in Hebron.²²

Economic insecurity

Throughout the world, analyses of the economic repercussions of the pandemic from a gender perspective have observed disproportionate consequences for women. In 2021, the director of UN Women warned that a year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 47 million women had been forced into very serious situations of poverty, constrained to live on less than two dollars a day.²³ In Palestine, the coronavirus further accentuated the already precarious general economic situation and exacerbated inequalities

between men and women by widening gender gaps in the labour force and increasing the unpaid workload for women. Of course, the starting point was already complex. As discussed in a previous report in this series of publications,²⁴ economic and work-related opportunities for Palestinian women are restricted by variables related to the impact of Israeli occupation policies, as well as by traditional conceptions about the role that women should play in Palestinian society, with regard to the division of labour and tasks to care for the family and the home. Since before the pandemic, the participation rate of Palestinian women in the job market was already among the lowest in the world and many women who have paid jobs faced insecure situations due to the absence of contracts and/or very low salaries.²⁵ The impact of COVID-19 jeopardised efforts to bring about change in this area.

While confinement and social distancing were key to preventing the spread of the pandemic, Israel continued, and even intensified, its policy of demolishing Palestinian homes

The pandemic increased the workload for women who work in the health care sector and in education. At the same time, in a context marked by confinement and mobility restrictions, and due to the traditional distribution of work to care for the home and family, Palestinian women disproportionately assumed the tasks of caring for the elderly, children and sick. Distance education activities due to the closure of schools and hygiene-related tasks also intensified as a way to prevent the spread of the disease. Many were forced to try to balance this additional unpaid workload with the obligations of their paid jobs. Meanwhile, Palestinian women were more directly affected by the destruction of jobs due to COVID-19 in various fields, including services and commerce.²⁶ After the start of the pandemic, in the first half of 2020, Palestinian women's participation in the labour force fell to 15% and although the most recent data seems to indicate some improvement (17% in 2021), the gap remains wide if we take into account male participation in the labour market (69%).²⁷ In the scenario of transition to a "post-pandemic" phase, unemployment data for Palestinian women is practically double that of men and continues to be especially high among young women with higher levels of education.²⁸

20. UN Women (2020), *COVID-19: Gendered impacts*, op. cit., pp.16-17.

21. An OXFAM study published in 2021 identified an 8% to 39% increase in maternal mortality rates in low- and middle-income countries as a result of reduced perinatal care due to COVID-19. OXFAM International, *5 ways women and girls have been the hardest hit by Covid-19*, 2021.

22. WCLAC (2021) *Compounded threats*, op. cit., p. 13.

23. UN News, "COVID-19 has exposed endemic gender inequality, Guterres tells UN Women's commission", *UN News*, 15 March 2021.

24. See Pamela Urrutia, *Occupation, conflict and patriarchy: Impacts on Palestinian women*, Escola de Cultura de Pau – Hèlia Dones, September 2019.

25. According to UN data, in 2018 the average participation rate of women in the labour force worldwide was 48.5%, 26.5 points less than the average for men. In Palestine, female participation was much lower at only 18%. Additionally, 35% received a salary below the Palestinian average and 25% worked in the private sector without any type of contract. UN Women, *Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment*, July 2018; Randa Siniora, "A gendered perspective on measures to fight the pandemic and recommendations for a gender-sensitive approach" in Saeb Erakat and Mitri Raheb, *The Double Lockdown: Palestine Under Occupation and COVID-19*, 2021, p. 116.

26. UN Women, *A feminist economic analysis on the impact of COVID-19 in the Palestinian economy*, UN Women – Palestine, 2021.

27. PCBS, *Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow*, 8 March 2022, p. 1.

28. According to the most recent official data, in 2021 the unemployment rate among women participating in the labour market was 43% compared to 22% among Palestinian men. Unemployment among the young population (19-29 years old) with higher education was 53%, 66% among women and 39% among men. PCBS (2022), op. cit., p. 2.

Women who own or hold business leadership positions were also more affected than men by the pandemic. Some reports have highlighted that almost a third of businesses run by Palestinian women had to close due to lockdowns and that in the first phase of the pandemic, the vast majority of female small business owners were forced to redirect resources to the household economy (89%), compared to a much lower percentage (50%) of men.²⁹ Notably, many Palestinian women work in the informal economy and therefore face greater vulnerability to loss of jobs and income.

This greater insecurity and the consequent greater economic dependence affected many women's possibilities to leave abusive situations. In fact, Palestinian women's organisations have documented that money problems in the home were behind most cases of gender-based violence in the family during periods of confinement due to the pandemic.³⁰

Gender violence

In Palestine, as in the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the risks of violence for women and again exposed the difficulties they face in finding safe spaces when the interconnections between insecurities, inequalities and violence in the public and private spheres are taken into account from a feminist and gender perspective. The pandemic, its effects and the policies adopted to contain the spread of the virus set off a series of dynamics in which gender-based violence has increased. Confinement, mobility restrictions and forced coexistence for long periods of time, often in small spaces, were accompanied by an increase in violence against women in the home. This violence was also shaped by situations of economic insecurity and expectations of further deterioration in living conditions. The significant decrease in social contact with family and friends and support networks and the difficulties in leaving homes or seeking refuge in situations of escalating violence against women also shaped the reality of many, without the possibility of distancing themselves from their aggressors and with greater difficulties in reporting abuse by phone or online. In Palestine, some voices warned early about how certain

In Palestine, the coronavirus further accentuated the already precarious general economic situation and exacerbated inequalities between men and women by widening gender gaps in the labour force and increasing the unpaid workload for women

traditional conceptions and patriarchal norms about the centrality of the role of women in the home were also encouraged in the context of confinement and mobility limitations due to COVID-19 and how they were helping to normalise or reinforce the stereotype that women should stay in their homes as a protective measure, for their own safety.³¹

In this context, since the beginning of the pandemic, Palestinian women's organisations warned of the increase in gender-based violence and offered data to confirm this trend. Organisations such as the Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD) and Sawa had already cautioned during the first few months of the crisis of the increase in telephone surveys related to abuse and various signs of gender violence in the home.³² Although telephone helplines multiplied during the pandemic, in many cases technological barriers, especially in Gaza, made it more difficult to access external aid. Analysing data from throughout 2020, WCLAC identified a worrying trend of an increasing number of cases and severity of reported physical violence, psychological violence and death threats against Palestinian women. In fact, cases of gender violence and femicides increased significantly during COVID-19 and especially in periods of confinement. Of the 149 murders of women identified between 2015 and 2020, the highest percentage occurred in this last year, which concentrated 25% of all cases during the period.³³

This is the panorama that can be outlined based on the available data, but the real figures are possibly higher, taking into account the social stigma that limits the reporting of acts of gender-based violence in general and the difficulties in monitoring a phenomenon like femicide in particular. Regarding the latter, Palestinian women's and human rights organisations stress that many of these cases are reported as suicides or deaths from unknown causes and are closed without autopsies or adequate investigations. It is indicative, in any case, that the rates of suicide or suicide attempts are significantly higher among Palestinian women than among Palestinian men: 71% adult women compared to 29% adult men and 95% girls in the case of minors, according to a 2018 study.³⁴ Many of the murders of

29. CARE, *Rapid Gender Assessment: Early Gender Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, CARE Palestine West Bank/ Gaza, April 2020.

30. Randa Siniara (2020), op. cit., p. 116.

31. UN Women (2020), *Covid-19: Gendered impacts*, op. cit., p. 17.

32. In mid-April 2020, Sawa reported a 57% increase in calls related to violence compared to the period before the pandemic emergency. UN Women also found that 53% of the organisations providing services to women had observed an increase in gender-based violence at home. UN Women, *Impact of COVID-19 Crisis on the Access of Women Victims and Survivors of Violence to Justice and Security Services in Palestine*, UN Women, 14 May 2020.

33. WCLAC and Al-Muntada, *Femicide in the Palestinian Society*, Report submitted to the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, April 2021, p. 3.

34. WCLAC study cited in WCLAC and al-Muntada (2021), op. cit., pp. 5-6.

Palestinian women and girls are part of what is known as “honour killings”, meaning murders that seek to punish women for deviating from expected behaviour according to traditional patriarchal and religious social norms that involve control of their sexuality. According to a study of 76 cases of femicide in Palestine between 2016 and 2018, most were of young women and girls (37% were between 18 and 29 years old and 18% were minors) and the main perpetrators of the “honour killings” were the victims’ brothers (27%), husbands (23%), fathers (23%), sons (14%), uncles or stepmothers (4%).

These and other data indicate that gender-based violence was a significant problem even before COVID-19 and are part of a context of social tolerance of high levels of violence against Palestinian women. A significant percentage face situations of violence by their husbands: according to a study by the official Palestinian statistics centre in 2019, six out of 10 Palestinian women admitted to having suffered some type of violence (physical, psychological, economic or sexual) by their husbands in the previous 12 months³⁵ and there seems to be a widespread belief that women must accept certain levels of violence in order to keep the family together.³⁶

Exclusion of women and the gender perspective in the response to the pandemic

The analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 from a gender perspective has once again exposed the exclusion of women from decision-making and the marginalisation of the gender perspective, in this case in response mechanisms to the pandemic. Human rights and women’s organisations have been openly critical of the Palestinian authorities in this regard and have pointed out the gap between the official discourses and narratives on the commitment to equality and justice for women, on the one hand, and the practical reality, on the other. The organisations have also highlighted the Palestinian authorities’ inconsistencies with the

commitments made at the international level in terms of non-discrimination and denounced the effects of some of the implemented policies that, in practice, exacerbated inequalities and traditional gender stereotypes of the dominant patriarchal system.

Although Palestinian women make up the majority of health workers, men hold positions of power in this area and the situation did not change with the pandemic. Furthermore, Palestinian women were underrepresented in strategic planning and in local emergency committees. Promoted by the Ministry of Local Government, these committees were criticized among other things due to the lack of criteria and guidelines for women’s representation in these spaces. The NGO Palestinian

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Palestinian women’s organizations have warned of the increase in gender-based violence and offered data to verify this trend

Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH) found that there were no gender considerations in the formation of these committees, that the presence of women was very faint and limited to a handful of cities and that, in these cases, their activities were mainly concentrated in information campaigns, the distribution of hygiene packages and the identification of the most impoverished families’ needs.³⁷ Along the same lines, another study based on consultations

with more than 20 Palestinian women’s organisations concluded that the needs of Palestinian women and girls were not among the priorities of the response plan designed by the PA and that the organisations of the sector not were involved in defining or implementing the plan. It was the organisations that mobilised and questioned the authorities, demanding a greater female presence in decision-making and thereby giving them a role to play in the response to the pandemic.³⁸

At the same time, these organisations warned of the gender consequences of some of actions taken to deal with the virus, exposing problems derived from confinement, from the mechanisms put in place to restrict mobility (in Bethlehem, for example, cement blocks were set up without considering the urgent transportation needs of pregnant women or critically ill people) and from underestimating the needs of women, as well as the limitations of some measures stemming

35. According to the study, 57.2% of the women surveyed admitted having suffered psychological violence (20.5%), economic violence (18.5%), physical violence (12.9% in Gaza and 27.5% in the West Bank) and sexual violence (9.4%). PCBS, *Percentage of Currently Married or Ever Married Women (15-64 years) in Palestine who were Exposed (at least once) to One Type of Violence by their Husbands during the Past 12 Months by Background Characteristics and Type Of Violence*, 2019.

36. The IMAGES study on masculinities and gender equality concluded that 63% of Palestinian men and 50% of Palestinian women believed that a woman should tolerate violence in order to keep the family together. More than a third of the men (34%) thought that sometimes women deserved to be beaten, an idea to which 26% of the women consulted agreed. Eileen Kuttab and Brian Heilman, *Understanding Masculinities. International Men and Gender Equality Survey – Middle East and North Africa (IMAGES MENA)- Palestine*, UN Women, Institute of Women’s Studies Birzeit University and PROMUNDO, 2017.

37. According to the MIFTAH study, only 120 women participated in these emergency committees in Jenin, Tulkarem, Nablus, Ramallah and Al-Bireh, Bethlehem, Hebron, Yatta and Gaza. Lubna al-Ashqar and Mohamad Shua’ibi, *The Political and Economic Reality of Palestinian Women after the Declaration of the State of Emergency*, MIFTAH, 2020, pp.12-13.

38. GAPS, Mercy Corps, AIDA and WCLAC, *Now and the Future Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World – Palestine*, 25 January 2021, pp.3.

from prevailing social gender conditions. For example, various NGOs reported that most of the workers in the quarantine centres were men, making it difficult for women to express and see all their needs met in these spaces. The structure and composition of the Wakfet IZZ fund was also questioned. Created during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the most impoverished families, it only had one woman on its executive board out of 30 members and its financial aid was not distributed by taking gender criteria into account. One complaint is that the distribution of aid did not sufficiently consider especially vulnerable situations, such as that of Palestinian women who are heads of households. Thus, Palestinian civil society representatives stressed that action taken to control the pandemic without taking women's specific needs into account from a gender perspective increased the risks of violence. Palestinian women's NGOs publicly asked that the initiatives promoted by the authorities take the situation of women into account, for example regarding the economy and access to justice. Regarding the latter, there were consequences for closing the courts due to the pandemic in legal proceedings related to gender-based violence, divorce and child custody.

Likewise, Palestinian feminists claimed that women should not just be considered victims or passive recipients of services, but also determining agents to delineate a response to the new threat. This is also in line with the international commitments made by Palestine as part of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and UN Resolution 1325, which requires substantive female participation in the field of peace and security. Some Palestinian organisations took advantage of the 20th anniversary of the resolution, in October 2020, to demand effective implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in the context of COVID-19. They warned of the risks of rollback from the progress achieved by feminist activists due to the tendency to reinforce traditional gender roles in times of crisis.

Feminist claims: priorities and challenges

This new scenario created after the COVID-19 pandemic has made feminist demands in Palestine even more

urgent and compelling, if possible. It should be pointed out that it is not possible to speak of a single Palestinian feminist agenda (nor in other contexts and regions). In Palestine, some variables and conditions must be taken into account. As developed in previous reports in this series of publications,³⁹ the different situations faced by Palestinian women and girls as a consequence of the repressive, segregation and apartheid policies imposed by Israel determine a wide variety of needs and priorities, shaped by the context of occupation and by the patriarchal structure of Palestinian society. The geographical fragmentation and the control and separation imposed by Israel have also posed obstacles for the interactions and articulation of the feminist movement in Palestine and for the definition of a common agenda. Added to this are the repercussions of the "NGOisation" process of Palestinian women's organisations after the implementation of the Oslo Accords. As analysts have been warning, this has led to a certain depoliticisation of some groups, with less local and less explicitly political agendas. They are forced to focus their activities on the frameworks defined by the donors and on survival interventions to alleviate Palestinian women's most urgent needs caused by Israel's occupation and apartheid policies.⁴⁰ Additionally, it must be taken into account that in Palestine the very use of the term "feminist" has been the

subject of debate, with growing analysis and discussions among Palestinian academics and activists, especially in recent years, about the scope of the concept, its meaning and application in the Palestinian context.⁴¹

Recognising the difficulties of capturing all its complexity, Palestinian analyst Fidaa Al Zaanin points to the existence of a diverse Palestinian feminist "scene" (more than a movement) where a wide variety of discourses and agendas coexist that all identify some key problems, but differ in how they analyse and/or devise strategies to address them. Thus, according to Al Zaanin (and without trying to be exhaustive) some conservative feminist narratives are recognised, with more limited claims that take religion as a point of reference. There are also secular discourses with broader demands, which in some areas take international frameworks that seek to strengthen gender equality and women's rights as a point of reference. Within this secular narrative, many organisations and activists coexist with varied approaches, some with reformist views and others that are committed to more

Palestinian women's organisations mobilised and questioned the authorities, demanding a greater female presence in decision-making and thereby giving them a role to play in the response to the pandemic

39. See the reports *Occupation, conflict and patriarchy: impacts on Palestinian women* and *Women, peace and security: implementation, challenges and limits in Palestine*, Escola de Cultura de Pau – Associació Helia, 2019.

40. Vanessa Farr, "UNSCR 1325 and Women's Peace Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13:4, pp. 540-556.

41. For further information, see Fidaa Al Zaanin, *Feminist Protests in Palestine: Mapping the fight for women's liberation in Gaza and the West Bank*, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 8 March 2021; Loubna Qutami, "Why Feminism? Why Now? Reflections on the 'Palestine is a Feminist Issue' Pledge", *Spectre Journal*, 3 May 2021.

radical changes, some with liberal positions, others on the left and some with a position openly contrary to political Islam. In this Palestinian feminist scene, Al Zaanin points out, there are also generational differences. Broadly speaking, and without any desire to pigeonhole, it is possible to identify an older group more closely linked to political parties and NGOs, with activities that are more dependent on and shaped by these relationships. They include activists with a long history and solid commitment to defending the rights of Palestinian women that have built an important legacy for younger generations. There are also young or emerging feminist circles with more fluid structures, in which there is growing activity and online debates, and a language that incorporates the term “feminist” without hesitation. Their agenda goes beyond the heteronormative and includes topics such as sexual orientation and gender identities and takes a particularly critical look at what they consider to be limited or superficial changes that can be exploited by the PA to improve its image. Moreover, they point to the PA as a fundamental part of the patriarchal system responsible for reproducing discrimination and violence against women and other marginalised groups.⁴² This sketch of the Palestinian feminist scene also requires taking the activity of Palestinian women from the diaspora into account. As a way of example they have recently promoted an initiative for recognising Palestine as a feminist issue.⁴³

Recognizing this complexity and diversity, it is possible to highlight some issues of special relevance in the current Palestinian feminist agenda: (1) the fight against gender violence, for non-discrimination and women’s rights; (2) the demand of guarantees for political participation, activism and substantive presence in decision-making; and (3) the denunciation of the Israeli occupation and apartheid policies based on recognition of the interrelation between the demands for Palestinian liberation and feminist and gender-related demands. These dimensions must be understood as pieces of a whole and not as watertight blocks, since they are related, intersect and reinforce each other as part of interconnected struggles. These three issues are addressed below, without the order of their appearance suggesting any hierarchy of importance in the Palestinian feminist agenda.

The fight against gender violence, for non-discrimination and women’s rights

Many Palestinian women’s human rights and activist organisations have been working tirelessly to defend and promote women’s rights in areas such as access to health, education, economic security and justice, among others, alongside their fight against discrimination and gender violence. In this context, the amendment of current regulations, the approval of new legal bodies that may put an end to a series of discriminatory patriarchal provisions that have serious repercussions on the lives of Palestinian women and the establishment of a proper framework to deal with gender-based violence have been identified as especially important. One of the main demands in this area is the harmonisation

The new scenario created after the COVID-19 pandemic has made feminist demands in Palestine even more urgent and compelling, if possible

of Palestinian laws with the principles of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),⁴⁴ which Palestine signed on 10 April 2014. The claims involve the Basic Law (which operates as the provisional constitution of Palestine) the draft of the Penal Code, the legislation bill that aims to regulate family affairs (Family Protection Bill) and personal status laws. This is because Palestinian women and girls remain subject to a varied set of regulations that perpetuate traditional and discriminatory practices as a result of a fragmented legal system, with some clauses even dating from the time of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, for example, the Egyptian Family Rights Law of 1954 is in force in the Gaza Strip and Jordan’s Personal Status Law of 1976 still applies in the West Bank. They regulate matters related to private and family life and allow for continuous discrimination and violations of the rights of Palestinian women in areas such as marriage, divorce, custody of children and inheritance, among others.⁴⁵

At the time, Palestine’s unreserved adherence to CEDAW (the first country in the MENA region to do so) was hailed as a promising step towards gender equality and women’s rights, as well as the response to a decades-long goal of Palestinian feminist organisations. Over time, however, the power of this act has dissipated and criticism has intensified over failures and delays in implementing the Convention. The PA has been criticised for the lack of implementation and attempts

42. Fida Al Zaanin (2021), op. cit.

43. Palestinian Feminist Collective, *Pledge that Palestine is a Feminist Issue*, 2021.

44. UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, (New York, 18 December 1979).

45. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Concluding observations on the initial report of the State of Palestine*, CEDAW/C/PSE/CO/1, 25 July 2018, p. 4.

to promote policy consistency in this area.

Eight years after joining, CEDAW has still not been published in the Palestinian Official Gazette, an essential step for its effective implementation. The international committee for monitoring the implementation of CEDAW and Palestinian organisations have drawn attention to this shortcoming and have also expressed concern about subsequent decisions of the Palestinian Supreme Constitutional Court that have cast doubt on the applicability and implementation of the Convention. In November 2017, this court, which regulates the status of international agreements in the Palestinian legal system, issued a ruling stating that international treaties and conventions take precedence over national law only if they are consistent with the national identity, religious and cultural heritage of the Palestinian people and if they do not contradict the Basic Law. Palestinian analysts and activists have warned that this ruling, described as ambiguous by experts, and a subsequent one issued in March 2018, open the door to maintaining patriarchal interpretations, even if CEDAW is finally published in the Official Gazette.⁴⁶ This is even more the case considering the atmosphere of hostility to the Convention encouraged by some conservative groups, clans and Islamist political parties that consider international treaties, and CEDAW in particular, as Western instruments that go against the values of Palestinian society. Critics of CEDAW, including parties like Al-Tahrir⁴⁷ and tribes from Hebron, Jerusalem and Gaza, have complained that the Convention contravenes sharia law. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and Palestine has also insisted that no legislation that fails to comply with the provisions of Islamic law can be ratified. The debate between those opposed to and in favour of CEDAW has intensified in recent years, to the point that demonstrations have been held in the streets by groups opposed to its implementation alongside protests by human rights and

One of the main demands of the Palestinian feminist agenda is the application of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Palestine signed in 2014, but which in practice has not been implemented

feminist organisations that demand that the Palestinian authorities put it into practice urgently. These latter groups have also criticised the PA for not confronting CEDAW detractors.⁴⁸

Palestinian voices such as the Al-Muntada Coalition to Combat Violence Against Women, a platform that brings together 17 women's and human rights organisations,⁴⁹ stress that the necessary measures must be taken to make CEDAW effectively binding in Palestine. They demand the codification of a definition of "discrimination" in accordance with the provisions of the Convention at the highest level of Palestinian law, starting with the Basic Law. Representatives of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) have stressed the importance of implementing the Convention to strengthen the concept of equality and support Palestinian women's demands for social and political rights. Although the conditions imposed by the policies of occupation, the Israeli blockade and the consequences of the intra-Palestinian division are recognised, feminists argue that it is not possible to continue giving justifications or postponing its implementation and say that adherence to CEDAW cannot be just an empty political gesture to strengthen Palestine's international position.⁵⁰ Furthermore, they add that the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the amplification of violence against women that it has entailed make its implementation even more urgent. However, in the reports submitted to the CEDAW Committee, the Palestinian authorities acknowledge that its implementation has been affected by campaigns against the Convention and rejection by certain parts of Palestinian society and admit that the review and harmonisation of draft laws such as the Penal Code and the Family Protection Law have been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the temporary suspension of the work of some commissions in charge of this task.⁵¹ The lack of progress in this area is also attributed to the paralysis of the Palestinian

46. Yara Hawari, "The Political Marginalization of Palestinian Women in the West Bank", *Al-Shabaka*, 28 July 2019; Birzeit University, "BZU professor examines recent Supreme Constitutional Court decision", 23 December 2017; WCLAC and Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Against Domestic Violence Against Women (Al-Muntada), *Parallel Follow-up Report Prepared by WCLAC and the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Forum to Combat Violence Against Women (Al-Muntada)*, September 2020, p. 4.

47. The Al-Tahrir party or Hizb ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party) is a very popular Islamist group in Hebron with an agenda that seeks to establish a global Islamic caliphate, albeit unrelated to Islamic State. This movement is prohibited in several countries. In Palestine, it has gained notoriety especially for its strong opposition to CEDAW. Ahmad Melhem, "Hebron tribes oppose UN pact, 'suspicious' feminists", *Al-Monitor*, 31 December 2019.

48. Mohanad Adam, "CEDAW faces a fierce battle in Palestine", *Medfeminiswiya* (Mediterranean Network for Feminist Information), 22 March 2021. For more information, see the next section of this report.

49. The Al-Muntada Coalition to Combat Violence against Women is made up of the organisations Bisan Center for Research and Development, Palestinian Working Women Society for Development, Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), Palestinian Counseling Center, Family Defense Society, Women's Studies Center, Sawa Organization, Young Women's Christian Association of Palestine (YWCA), Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association, Rural Women's Development Society, Psycho-Social Counselling Center for Women (PSCCW), Health Work Committees, The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (Miftah), Stars of Hope Society, QADER for Community Development y Mother's School Society.

50. WCLAC and Al-Muntada (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 1.

51. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Information received from the State of Palestine on follow-up to the concluding observations on its initial report*, CEDAW/C/PSE/FCO/1, 19 August 2020.

legislature, although critics say that this argument is an excuse for inaction.

Regarding the Penal Code, there is a draft prepared in 2011, still pending approval, which would replace the regulations in force today: the Jordanian Penal Code (No. 16) of 1960 in the West Bank and the Palestinian Penal Code (No. 74) of 1936 that applies to Gaza. In recent years, pending the green light for this new code, some presidential decrees have been approved that are relevant from a gender perspective, especially those related to crimes of a sexual nature and femicide. Thus, for example, in March 2018 Article 308 of the existing criminal law in the West Bank, which exonerated perpetrators of rape if they married their victim, was repealed. Some provisions were previously revised, including articles 98 and 99 that contemplated mitigating factors to reduce sentences in cases of murders of women and so-called “honour crimes”. However, women’s and human rights organisations denounce that these amendments are not always applied in practice in judicial processes because traditional gender stereotypes continue to prevail in the judiciary.⁵² In addition the draft Penal Code still has many weaknesses when dealing with crimes of a sexual nature, with clauses that still legitimise “honour crimes”, failures when dealing with cases of incest, shortcomings in the legal protection of victims of rape within marriage, recognition of mitigating factors in the case of the rape of girls if the perpetrator alleges that he was unaware of their minority status and the introduction of punishments for practicing anal sex. The feminist and human rights organisations that make up Al-Muntada have demanded the review of these provisions in the draft Penal Code and the inclusion of legal abortion for rape victims, even when it occurs in the domestic sphere.⁵³

Another priority issue in this area is the enactment of the Family Protection Law, initially drafted in 2005, but which has not been made law despite the insistent demands of feminist and human rights organisations that consider it key to criminalising gender violence and guaranteeing a comprehensive legal protection system. Civil society’s attempts to get this law passed date back to 2003 and intensified after Palestine joined CEDAW in 2014. Nevertheless, the law has been continually postponed. Over the years, several versions have been produced, the most recent in 2020. Palestinian civil society organisations have insisted on the need to harmonise this law with the CEDAW recommendations, the incorporation of key definitions (“family”,

“discrimination”) and the need to abandon traditional appeals to protect the family at the expense of victims of violence. Meanwhile, the Palestinian authorities have still not changed the personal status laws that currently regulate the private sphere and family affairs. In its report to CEDAW in 2020, the PA recognised that the impasse is due in part to the fact that some parts of Palestinian society oppose the Convention and reject the changes to current laws, which are largely inspired by religious precepts.⁵⁴ One of the few relevant changes in this area has been the increase in the minimum age for marriage, also by decree, in March 2019 and publicly rejected by Al-Tharir and tribal sectors. This amendment, which affects the personal status laws governing the entire Palestinian population, raised the age from 15 for girls and 16 for boys to 18 for both sexes. However, it is established that sharia courts (Islamic law) can establish some exceptions. According to feminist and human rights organisations, these exceptions are applied on a discretionary basis and have become a common practice. Thus, according to official statistics, in the first half of 2020, one third of the marriages registered in sharia courts in the West Bank were of underage girls.

Beyond obstacles to enshrine or make legal changes effective, social stereotypes persist in practice about the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the family and social sphere and practices that perpetuate the subordination of women, as the CEDAW committee has warned.⁵⁵ Women’s access to justice is also compromised by entrenched discrimination in the judicial system, which especially affects women who try to report crimes of gender violence in court, in defiance of social stigma. Although some initiatives have been promoted that seek to motivate a change in the judiciary, such as the creation of a gender unit, feminist and human rights groups warn that most magistrates continue to adhere to traditional perceptions of social gender norms.⁵⁶ Moreover, although recognised as a right, access to judicial assistance is not guaranteed in practice and falls mostly to civil society organisations.

Political participation, activism and advocacy in decision-making

Many Palestinian feminists have observed with concern how the context of COVID-19 has accentuated traditional trends in Palestinian society and has reinforced certain discourses that point to the private

52. WCLAC and Al-Muntada, *Femicide in the Palestinian Society*, Report Submitted to the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences, April 2021, pp.2

53. WCLAC and Al-Muntada (2020), op. cit. p. 6.

54. CEDAW Committee (2020), op. cit., par. 23, p. 6.

55. CEDAW Committee (2018), op. cit., par.24, pp.7

56. WCLAC and Al-Muntada (2020), op. cit., par. 10, p. 3.

sphere, care tasks and the family as a primary space for women, while also encouraging patriarchal attitudes of control of women's movement and their presence in public space. There is concern about the setbacks identified in the emancipation of women and about the possibility of encountering greater obstacles and hindrances to advancing feminist demands in a scenario that they describe as increasingly hostile and in which women are excluded from decision-making. Despite the formal commitments regarding non-discrimination and gender equality, the historical and significant participation of women in the Palestinian national struggle and constant demands to promote progress in this area, women's participation in various spaces and leadership positions remains limited. According to official statistical data published in March 2022, Palestinian women represented only 11% of the Palestinian National Council,⁵⁷ 12.5% of the Council of Ministers, 11% of the ambassadors in the diplomatic service, 19% of the judges and 20% of the prosecutors. There was only one woman among the 16 governors and the proportion of women in the leadership of local councils amounted to barely 2%, while there were only 1% of women in the boards of directors of the chambers of commerce, agriculture and industry.⁵⁸

Initiatives by women's and human rights organisations have been trying to promote a greater presence of women in public life, encouraging them to vote and overcome obstacles to run as candidates. A minimum quota of 30% women as candidates in the elections has been promoted. Although this threshold has not been achieved, recently (in January 2021) the minimum participation of women in the lists was increased from 20% to 26%.⁵⁹ In the most recent local elections, elected women represented 22% compared to 78% of men and only 1% of the lists (nine in total) were headed by women (the latest available data corresponds to the first round held in December 2021, whereas the second round took place in March 2022). The difficulties and resistance appeared in various areas, such as the lack of institutional support for female candidates, the challenges to place women at the top of the lists and even in the electoral campaign, where in many cases the candidates' photographs and names were replaced by symbols.⁶⁰ The possibilities of participation and

influence of Palestinian women have also been shaped by the chronic political impasse and intra-Palestinian division. In fact, these local elections were only held in the West Bank due to Hamas' boycott of the vote to protest Abbas' suspension of what were to be the first presidential and legislative elections in 15 years, scheduled for the first months of 2021.⁶¹ After a decade and a half, these elections would have renewed the Palestinian Legislative Council, where only 17 of the 132 seats (13%) are held by women. Analysts point out, however, that beyond the rhetoric of mutual accusations and recriminations, Fatah and Hamas seem to have settled in a division that in practice favours the status quo and power-sharing between both groups. This dynamic shapes the emergence of new voices, the renewal of leadership and generational change⁶² and, as has been seen, also has consequences from a gender perspective.

Palestinian women's political participation and activism have also been threatened by an increasingly adverse climate due to the intensifying crackdown on critics in recent years. The PA has been questioned by many Palestinians for its drift towards authoritarianism, its policies of cooperation with Israel on security matters and the repression of dissidents (as dramatically exemplified by the case of the murder of the well-known activist Nizar Banat in June 2021, while he was detained by the Palestinian security forces), and has been resorting to arrests, interrogations, surveillance, movement restrictions and cyber-attacks, among other tactics. Similar to practices deployed by Israel, the PA has also used intimidation and gender-based violence to discourage women from participating in politics.⁶³ Leading Palestinian analysts such as Yara Hawari, of the Al-Shabaka network, have denounced the multiple manifestations of this gender-based violence by security forces connected to the PA and Fatah supporters, including the use and threat of violence and the exploitation of traditional gender stereotypes in Palestinian society. For example, there have been warnings about situations of harassment and physical aggression,⁶⁴ insults and sexual insinuations during demonstrations and protests; the questioning of female protesters alluding to notions of "honour" and "shame" or that order them to stay at home; interventions with relatives or in workplaces to denounce women's activism;

Palestinian feminist organisations demand the approval of the Family Protection Law, considered key to criminalising gender-based violence and guaranteeing a comprehensive legal protection system

57. The Palestinian National Council serves as the parliament of the PLO and has representatives from occupied Palestine and the diaspora, though not from the Palestinian population with Israeli citizenship.

58. PCBS, *Gender Equality Today for a sustainable tomorrow*, 7 March 2022, p. 2.

59. Wafa, *Amendments to the elections law aim to overcome all obstacles related to the electoral process, says official*, 12 January 2021.

60. Mervat Ouf, *Palestinian female candidates struggle to change political, social attitudes*, *Al-Monitor*, 21 March 2022.

61. For further information, see the summary on Palestina in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2021: Report on Trends and Scenarios*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

62. For further information, see Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal, "Praxis of Palestinian Democracy: The Elections that Never Were and the Events of May 2021", *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*, IEMED, November 2021.

63. Yara Hawari, *The political marginalization of Palestinian Women in the West Bank*, *Al-Shabaka*, July 2019, p. 5.

64. Yara Hawari, "Why is the Palestinian Authority attacking Palestinian protests?", *Al-Jazeera*, 16 June 2018.

and actions against activists via social networks. Cases of women being detained and photographed while in detention have also been reported. These types of practices seek to curb women's participation in actions in the public space and often motivate male activists, concerned about the safety of their partners, to try to dissuade them from participating in protests.⁶⁵

As mentioned in the previous section, demands for non-discrimination of women's rights also face a more hostile climate stemming from the activity of certain conservative groups that accuse the activists of promoting a foreign agenda that puts traditional values at risk and that is contrary to Palestinian culture. Palestinian voices recognised for their defence of a feminist agenda, including activists and journalists, have been questioned and criticised on social networks and are disparagingly singled out as *CEDAWiyas* for promoting the implementation of CEDAW, the international convention against discrimination against women. Some of them have even faced intimidation, death threats and threats of sexual violence. This situation has also led to criticism of the Palestinian authorities for not effectively addressing these expressions of rejection of CEDAW and for their inaction in the face of threats to women's rights activists.⁶⁶ Veteran activists recognise that this context shapes and creates fear among some women, who are wary of participating in public demonstrations. However, this climate has not prevented many Palestinian women from promoting prominent actions and campaigns in recent years, structured around the rejection of gender-based violence and the demand for rights, transcending the fragmented geographies of Palestine and committed to agendas of substantive change.

These initiatives include massive protests against femicides and honour crimes, such as those that occurred after the murder of a 21-year-old girl by her relatives in August 2019, which activated the campaign "We are all Israa Ghrayeb" to demand justice, denounce gender violence and demand a system to protect women.⁶⁷ The crime is considered one of the catalysts of the Tal'at movement (there is no literal translation of the term, which alludes to the idea of going out to the street). This movement played an active role in protests highlighted by analysts for their magnitude, level of coordination and structure around explicitly political and feminist slogans. Thousands of women demonstrated in September 2019 in a dozen Palestinian cities and abroad denouncing

the many expressions of gender violence and patriarchy (femicides, domestic violence, sexism, exploitation, political exclusion, hegemonic masculinities that normalise violence against women and patriarchal laws) and upholding a message that stresses that the path to liberation must include the emancipation of the entire Palestinian population, including women. Their priority is not to make institutional demands, but rather to support a profound redefinition of what the struggle for national liberation means.⁶⁸ Based on an argument that recognises the deep interactions between colonisation and other signs of social oppression, Tala't is deeply critical of the PA and does not view the Palestinian police as a protective body or as an ally, but rather as part of the colonial structure that monitors and controls the lives of the Palestinian population.⁶⁹

In Gaza, other serious acts of violence, such as the murders of the young woman Madeline Jarab'a and girl Amal al Jamaly in mid-2020, have also encouraged specific campaigns and demands related to mothers' rights to child custody.⁷⁰ Other recent initiatives in the Gaza Strip include activities denouncing the tightening of the requirements of a male guardian for unmarried young women after a ruling by the Islamic High Court of Gaza in 2021 and the alarm raised by young Gazans on social networks about situations of sexual abuse and harassment in the family in September 2020 that triggered what is known as #MeTooGaza, challenging the traditional treatment of this type of violence as a private matter. Additionally, platforms such as al-Muntada have carried out important work in critically monitoring gender policies, for example by preparing shadow reports on the implementation of CEDAW in Palestine and producing thematic documents that analyse the violence faced by Palestinian women.

More recently, spaces have also been articulated that challenge the fragmentation imposed by Israeli policies, such as the Palestinian Women's Coalition Against Violence (FADA), the first network that brings together feminist organisations and activists from Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem and Palestinian women from 1948 (with Israeli citizenship), which also seeks to coordinate with Palestinian women from the diaspora. This transnational Palestinian feminist coalition aims to coordinate the feminist discourse around violence against women and stresses that all social groups are responsible for confronting this scourge.⁷¹ In the

65. Yara Hawari, *PA security forces are not serving the Palestinian people*, *Al-Jazeera*, 14 July 2021.

66. Tristan Arlaud, "Women's rights activists facing intimidation in Palestine", Geneva International Center for Justice (GICJ), 2021.

67. Israa Ghrayeb was admitted to hospital after being severely beaten by members of her family. Videos suggest that some relatives attacked her again while she was in the medical centre, causing injuries that ended with her death. Rothna Begum, *The Deadly Toll for Palestinian Women*, Human Rights Watch, 19 September 2019.

68. For more information, see the next section of this report.

69. Hala Marshood and Riya Alsanah, "Tal'at: a feminist movement that is redefining liberation and reimagining Palestine", *Mondoweiss*, 25 February 2020.

70. Madeline Jarab'a, a 20-year-old woman, was killed for staying in contact with her mother and after divorcing from her father. Ten-year-old Amal al Jamaly was killed by her father after disagreeing with her mother.

context of COVID-19 and given the increase in cases of gender-based violence, FADA launched the “We Are Your Voice” campaign to try to raise awareness and encourage complaints. Some of the members of FADA, such as Sama Aweidah from the Women’s Studies Center, stress that this network has common principles, a search for complementarity, exchanges of experiences and materials, and agreement on the need to build new leadership.⁷² The coalition is the result of an intensification of the common struggle of Palestinian feminist organisations for a fairer and safer society for women in the face of a shared diagnosis of the seriousness of patriarchal domination and violence and its interconnections with Israeli colonial violence.⁷³

Added to this is the follow-up work on the implementation of United Nations Resolution 1325 and the commitments made as part of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Palestine. As discussed in a previous report in this series, discussions are ongoing about the relevance and applicability of this agenda to the Palestinian context. However, despite initial reluctance and even acknowledgement of the limitations of the agenda in relation to Palestine (mainly because it does not refer to a situation such as the occupation) various women’s organisations and feminist activists have decided to get involved in its implementation. They have valued the possibility of framing their claims in a “common language” that gives them greater visibility and of having a mechanism with which they can demand accountability from the PA and Israel. The joint work of civil society organisations and various PA bodies, including the Ministry of Women, led to the adoption in 2016 of the first National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of Resolution 1325 for the period 2017-2019, making Palestine the second country after Iraq to develop a NAP in the MENA region. In October 2020, with the support of Norway, a second version of the NAP was launched for the period 2020-2024⁷⁴ that maintains the general lines of the first, subject to certain criticism by Palestinian feminist organisations due to the lack of political will and resources for its implementation.

In the field of peace and security, the work carried out

The demands for women’s rights face a more hostile climate due to the action of conservative groups that accuse the activists of promoting a foreign agenda that puts traditional values and Palestinian culture at risk

by platforms such as the Palestinian Women’s Coalition for the Implementation of Resolution 1325 (PWC), created in 2010, stands out,⁷⁵ as well as organisations such as MIFTAH, which have promoted consultative processes between Palestinian women living under Israeli occupation and refugees in Lebanon and Jordan to identify priorities and needs in this area. The PWC’s work has identified the importance for Palestinian women of a concept of security rooted in the idea of human security and the right to a dignified life free of violence. They also give priority to mobilising international solidarity to put an end to the Israeli occupation, identified as the main cause of the adversities they face and the abuse of their rights.⁷⁶ They also demand the necessary representation of women in decision-making on peace and security, including efforts to reverse intra-Palestinian divisions and in actions to claim the right of return for the refugee population. Given the limitations and obstacles imposed by social norms for the participation and contribution of women to political decision-making at the national and community levels, and in particular in the field of peace and security, the emergence of a stronger women’s movement is considered key. It must be supported and promoted for the reconfiguration of gender relations and a greater presence in the public space.

Criticism of Israel and the fight for liberation: Palestine as a feminist issue

The denunciation of Israel due to its policies of occupation, apartheid, hypermilitarisation and the multifaceted violations of human rights, along with the impacts from a gender perspective, in particular, constitute another main area of activity of Palestinian feminist organisations. Various organisations have been carrying out enormous documentation and reporting work, often relying on international tools with which they try to give greater visibility to their claims. Some platforms of Palestinian women’s organisations have developed specific advocacy strategies abroad with the intention of increasing information about the

71. Euro-Mediterranean Women’s Foundation, *Kayan formed the Fada Coalition of Palestinian Women Against Violence*, 31 May 2022.

72. Sama Aweidah, the director of the Women’s Studies Center, in a working session at LaFede.cat, 17 May 2022.

73. Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD), *FADA: Palestinian Women Against Violence Concludes its Campaign We Are Your Voice*, PWWSD, 30 June 2020.

74. Ministry of Women’s Affairs – State of Palestine, *The Second Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2020-2024*, October 2020.

75. The Palestinian Women’s Coalition for the Implementation of Resolution 1325 was created in 2010 and consists of MIFTAH; WCLAC; The Women’s Affair Technical Committee (WATC); Women’s Studies Center (WSC); Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD); Young Christian Association (YWCA); Filastiniyat; Women, Media and Development (TAM); Women’s Affair Center (WAC); Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA), Center for Women’s Legal Research and Consulting (CWLRC) and Palestinian Developmental Women Studies Association (PDWSA).

76. MIFTAH, *Analytical Report to Assess Palestinian Women’s Needs & Priorities Within UNSCR 1325* (report in Arabic, abstract in English), 31 December 2020, pp. 124-128.

consequences of the Israeli occupation on the rights of Palestinian women and girls in regional and global forums and with the aim of challenging the international community for its responsibilities in ending the Israeli occupation and impunity.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Israel persists in its policies to prevent, dismiss and boycott attempts to set up mechanisms of accountability at the international level, which can be achieved with the unconditional support of key foreign actors.

Nevertheless, Palestinian activists stress that Israel is concerned about the activities of Palestinian women's and human rights organisations. As proof, they cite the recent criminalisation of six leading Palestinian NGOs, designated as terrorist organisations in October 2021, including the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC), together with the Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, Al-Haq, the Bisan Center for Research and Development, Defense for Children International-Palestine (DCI-P) and the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC). They also note the actions taken against Health Work Committees (HWC) staff, another benchmark organisation for its work with Palestinian women in the health care sector from a gender perspective. Palestinians also warn that the murder of al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh⁷⁸ in May 2022 could be interpreted along the same lines of attempts to intimidate and silence Palestinians who expose abuses perpetrated by Israel, including high-profile women such as Abu Akleh.

Feminist initiatives in this field are not limited to denouncing the gender intentionality of Israeli policies or exposing the way in which the occupation influences, interacts with and reinforces the dominant patriarchal system in Palestinian society. Various people argue for the need to revitalise the struggle for liberation through feminism. Along this line, analysts such as Yara Hawari raise the importance of restructuring the Palestinian women's movement to commit to the liberation of women in all spheres, convinced that the struggle for women's rights must be individual and collective and that it cannot be separated from the right of the Palestinian population to liberate itself from colonial rule. Hawari defends the adoption of a new national liberation policy document that incorporates feminism

not only as a theory, but as a practice that seeks to transform the lives of all people and the Palestinian population as a whole, as a subject of rights harmed by the occupation.⁷⁹

Tal'at's action and message are framed along this same line. It has emerged with an explicit call for independence, horizontality and distance from institutions and has mobilised around the slogan "There is no free land without free women". Tal'at states that the struggle for the safety and dignity of women cannot be considered "secondary", nor postponed until a "geographical" liberation is achieved.⁸⁰ This movement has warned of the false dichotomies that attempt to distinguish between social and political struggles, underlining that the struggle for the emancipation of all oppressed and marginalised groups is an eminently political issue and that the struggle for Palestinian liberation requires making women's narratives and experiences visible and central.⁸¹ With a perspective critical of the Oslo process and its consequences, Tal'at deplores that the struggle for Palestinian liberation has been reduced to building a bureaucratised state and fragmented rights, making it difficult to articulate a broader collective vision of Palestinian liberation. For this reason, for Tal'at it is essential to put on the table

a revolutionary feminist discourse that redefines the Palestinian national struggle. Although several feminist activists continue to consider the PA important, some Palestinian feminists reject approaches that they deem superficial or reformist and support dismantling it as part of the structures of oppression and patriarchal domination.⁸² Regarding the organisation of the women's rights movement, analysts such as Yara Hawari have stressed the importance of feminist organisations reconnecting with grassroots movements and political discourse and acquiring greater independence from donors. She also suggest committing to more democratic and representative networking processes and taking some initiatives of women involved in processes of political change in the region as benchmarks, rather than having Western experiences as the predominant model.

While recognising the uniqueness of the Palestinian experience, Palestinian feminist groups are committed to an intersectional and transnational approach based on anti-capitalist and decolonial analytical frameworks.

77. MIFTAH, *The Strategic Framework for Lobbying and Advocacy - Palestinian Women's Coalition for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325*, 31 December 2020.

78. CNN, "They were shooting directly at the journalists': New evidence suggests Shireen Abu Akleh was killed in targeted attack by Israeli forces", *CNN*, 26 May 2022; United Nations-OHCHR, *Killing of journalist in the occupied Palestinian territory*, OHCHR, 24 June 2022.

79. Yara Hawari, *The political marginalization of Palestinian Women in the West Bank, Al-Shabaka*, July 2019, p. 6.

80. Hala Marshood and Riya Alsanah, "Tal'at: a feminist movement that is redefining liberation and reimagining Palestine", *Mondoweiss*, 25 February 2020.

81. Rosa de Luxemburgo Stiftung, "A discussion about the new Palestinian feminist initiative, Tal'at – Part of the Revolutionary Feminist Tradition", interview conducted by Sari Harb with Riya al-Sanah (Tal'at activist), 26 September 2019.

82. Fidaa Al Zanin (2021), op. cit.

Initiatives such as the “Palestine is a Feminist Issue Pledge”, promoted by feminists in the diaspora, are also part of this line of thought. Made public on 15 March 2021, the declaration has been promoted by the Palestinian Feminist Collective (a US-based network based that brings together Palestinian and Arab women) and has attracted the support of many organisations and personalities.⁸³ The text proposes a series of concrete actions that include recognising the liberation of Palestine as a feminist issue, supporting the right to political organisation and freedom of expression for Palestinians everywhere, rejecting the confusion between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism encouraged by Israel, responding to the call of Palestinian civil society to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel and demanding the end of US political, economic and military support for Israel.⁸⁴

These kinds of initiatives question women and feminist organisations. In practice, they also expose some contradictions, especially (but not only) in feminisms of the Global North in relation to Palestine. Feminists like Nada Elia and Loubna Qutami have warned about a certain “selective sisterhood”, highlighting that some Western feminists have shown a greater predisposition to criticise the oppression of women as a result of Islamic fundamentalism or local expressions of patriarchy, but not as much as a result of the structural violence of the occupation and Israeli colonialism; and who seem not to have understood Palestinian women’s insistence on connecting their struggles from gender equality to national liberation.⁸⁵

Therefore, demonstrations of solidarity based only on gender issues that ignore Palestinian political demands as a collective are called into question. Activists warn that this line of thought also shapes relations with Israeli women, since many of them are opposed to the idea of “normalisation”⁸⁶ and hope to establish relationships of respect and collaboration based not only on recognition as women, but also on the political rights of the Palestinian people. The same

happens with the Palestinian LGBTIQ collective, which through organisations such as Al-Qaws (“Rainbow”) has spoken out against practices such as the “pinkwashing” of Israel⁸⁷, which it considers colonial violence, questioning its attempts to present itself as a “queer friendly” liberal democracy and its support for the rights of homosexual and trans people as a way to divert attention from Palestinian oppression. Al-Qaws has insisted that analyses of the situation of the LGBTIQ population in Palestine cannot ignore the context of occupation, marginalisation and dispossession resulting from the Israeli occupation.

Organisations such as Tal’at stress that the struggle for women’s safety and dignity cannot be considered “secondary” or postponed until geographical liberation is achieved

Final thoughts

The analysis of the impacts of the coronavirus in Palestine from a gender perspective makes it clear that the demands of Palestinian feminist activists and groups are even more important and urgent and enable to confirm that a phenomenon such as the pandemic cannot be addressed without recognising discrimination and pre-existing structural inequalities. In this case, it must take into account the oppression and violence resulting from the Israeli occupation and apartheid policies and from the dominant patriarchal system in Palestine, together with other specific variables that shape the lives and perspectives of Palestinian women and girls. Given the deterioration caused by the impact of COVID-19 in access to health care, economic insecurity and gender-based violence, and faced with women’s persistent exclusion from decision-making spheres (also with regard to the pandemic), some of the main demands of the Palestinian feminist agenda have gained relevance. It is an agenda under construction, articulated by the many different voices of the Palestinian feminist scene, and its main demands include the establishment of an effective legal framework against gender violence; the real implementation of the commitments made to equal rights and non-discrimination; the right to political participation, influence in decision-making and freedom from repression due to their

From diverse spaces and in the streets, Palestinian women continue to demand to be considered active subjects in building a Palestine free of all types of violence

83. Feminists who have supported this public statement include Judith Butler, Mariame Kaba and Cherrie Moraga, in addition to nearly 200 US organisations linked to the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) and other organisations from different countries. Loubna Qutami, “Why Feminism? Why Now? Reflections on the ‘Palestine is a Feminist Issue’ Pledge”, *Spectre Journal*, 3 May 2021.

84. Palestinian Feminist Collective, Pledge that Palestine is a Feminist Issue, 2021.

85. Nada Elia, “Justice is indivisible: Palestine as a feminist issue”, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2017, pp. 45-63 and Loubna Qutami (2021), op. cit.

86. In this case, “normalisation” refers to the reluctance of Palestinian groups to carry out joint activism with Israelis due to the deep inequalities between occupiers and occupied, because they believe that the root causes of Palestinian dispossession are not addressed and because these joint initiatives can be used to “whitewash” the Israeli occupation.

87. Nada Elia (2017), op.cit, pp.51; Loubna Qutami (2021), op.cit, y Al-Qaws, *Beyond Propaganda: Pinkwashing as Colonial Violence*, alQaws for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, 18 de octubre de 2021.

activism; and the recognition of the interrelation between feminist demands and a liberation of Palestine, in which bodies and territory are intertwined.

The demands of the feminist agenda are not covered exhaustively by these issues (economic empowerment is another important issue, which will be studied in a future report in this series), but the topics analysed in this publication show the commitment and enormous

work done by Palestinian feminist organisations to expose the violations affecting them and make their demands visible, as well as their determination to mobilise against discrimination and the political exploitation of their rights in an increasingly adverse and hostile context. From diverse spaces and in the streets, they continue to demand to be considered active subjects in building a Palestine free of all types of violence.