

# Checkpoints and Barriers: Searching for Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza Gender Dimensions of Economic Collapse

## Executive Summary

An important dimension of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and one that has been extensively documented, concerns Israel's control over the movement of Palestinian people, goods, and resources. Since 1967, control over Palestinian movement has relaxed and tightened, following in part the ebb and flow of the conflict. Over time, however, the apparatus of control itself has gradually become more sophisticated and effective in its ability to interfere in and affect every aspect of Palestinian life, including job opportunities, work, and earnings. Extensive and multilayered, the apparatus of control includes a permit system, physical obstacles known as closures, restricted roads, prohibitions on entering large areas of land in the West Bank, and most notably the Separation Barrier. It has turned the West Bank into a fragmented set of social and economic islands or enclaves cut off from one another. It has surrounded Gaza with a perimeter fence with heavily controlled crossings. This report assesses the impact of the movement and access regime in the period 2000–07 on the economy and the working lives of Palestinians, exploring the gender dimension of restrictions on labor force participation, and how new tensions in the arena of work resulting from movement and access restrictions have affected relations between women and men. The findings of this study are based on an analysis of data covering the years 2000 to 2007 and examine the long-term impacts of restrictions on movement and access.

As controls on movement became more entrenched following the second intifada (2000), a massive economic decline ensued, leading to a drop in male employment and real wages resulting from job losses in Israel, and a corresponding rise in unemployment. Poverty rates, including deep poverty rates, rose as gross domestic product (GDP) fell, and increasing numbers of households found themselves living on food handouts and devising endless coping mechanisms to make ends meet. Thus, the West Bank and Gaza—in the span of a decade—moved from being a middle-income economy to one that is now massively aid dependent. This same period also witnessed a sharp rise in both covert and overt forms of violence. Israeli military incursions, detentions, manned checkpoints, home demolitions, the Separation Barrier (along with its associated permit regime), and the Palestinians' own response spun a web of violence in public and private that touched the everyday lives of all Palestinians. The violence resulting from the occupation has led to loss of life, land, property, and free movement of people, and has fragmented social space, a key source of material and moral support especially for women. With neither Israeli nor Palestinian legal systems able to provide defense or protection, these momentous changes in people's everyday lives created a sense of collapse of the public, social, and moral order (*falataan amni*).

Against this backdrop, the effects on Palestinian society have been extensive and far reaching, on relations between men and women, on intergenerational relations between the young and the old, on ties of kinship, and on social networks. This study, through qualitative sources, provides insights into a chain of events that have and are moderating social behavior and gender relations associated with work. The study also captures what the deteriorating situation has meant for Palestinian females and males of all ages in terms of their economic engagement, their ability to seek alternate livelihoods, their coping strategies, their social and human investments (for example, education, marriage), and their future aspirations.

As the study shows, men's role as the primary provider and protector of the family, traditionally a mainstay of Palestinian gender relations, has been systematically undermined by economic collapse. With the shrinking of the Israeli market for Palestinian labor and the contraction of the productive sectors of the Palestinian economy experienced over the last seven years, men have retreated from the labor market for lack of opportunities. With barely any options available to them, they have flocked to the informal sector, borrowing and starting small businesses to make up for the loss of employment and income, but the success of this strategy has been limited. Movement and access restrictions have stymied the absorptive capacity of the private sector in both the West Bank and Gaza and the ability to trade, and many businesses have been forced to fold.

On the whole, men's labor force participation never returned to the pre-crisis levels of 1999, suggesting that many men are delaying entry into the labor market or are too discouraged to stay in. In 2007, nearly 60 percent of working-age Palestinians neither participated in any type of recorded economic activity, paid or unpaid, nor were searching for work.<sup>1</sup> This desperation was expressed during focus group discussions conducted as part of this study. Men from refugee camps who lost their jobs in Israel complained about spending most of their time idle, except for occasional piecemeal work offered to them by neighbors or by job creation programs. These men also spoke about having become increasingly reliant on humanitarian aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and other charitable associations. Men with small plots of land around their homes have turned to planting crops and raising poultry or livestock, but these activities are insufficient to sustain their families.

In response to male retreat from the labor market, women have had to step into the public sphere and employ strategies to prevent family destitution and aid dependence. Survival strategies have been diverse and multifaceted and include searching for jobs in the formal sector (public sector and services), delaying their exit from the public sector (traditionally women would have left jobs after marriage), home production of food and other goods, selling or bartering food coupons, borrowing from neighbors, and volunteering with charitable organizations. The nature of women's work is not easily captured in standard labor force surveys; often women themselves do not regard what they do as work and standard questionnaires miss it and therefore it remains hidden from view and difficult to assess. According to the standard labor force survey, Palestinian women's participation is among the world's lowest, but it registered a slight increase during the period most affected by economic decline and rising male unemployment, from 14 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in 2007. The increase actually remains concentrated within a handful of middle- to low-level occupations in the public

sector and unpaid agricultural work. A good share of this increased participation has been in low-status, unprotected jobs (for example, domestic work) or unpaid agricultural work—jobs that men are unprepared to do because the returns are too low and the status demeaning after the loss of more lucrative forms of employment.

Many women—in particular middle-aged and those with little education—also turned to a range of informal activities, from petty trading in Gaza, to grocery shopkeeping, sewing, agriculture, and livestock production. Many informal activities benefited from microcredit schemes introduced by aid agencies, with mixed results. In some cases, women borrowed money on behalf of their husbands, and in other cases they were constrained by the strict repayment policies of the lender. For example, according to the director of UNRWA's microcredit program in Gaza, lending has almost ceased and there has been a flight of female microentrepreneurs from the informal sector of the economy, with many closing their businesses because of bankruptcy. The lack of raw materials or goods mobility, especially in Gaza, compounded by the massive decline in people's purchasing power, has also complicated these projects and created the objective conditions to close businesses.

Women's stepped-up involvement in work in the public sphere has come at a cost: women must carefully navigate the need to behave in a manner that is culturally appropriate with the need for increased mobility; they must tread carefully by not overstating their new role as provider for the sake of preserving family harmony; and they must add to their already burdened productive and reproductive household roles, that of their increased economic participation, particularly in the absence of a male income earner. Many of the women interviewed expressed pride in their work but also pointed to the difficulties they face in dealing with low-paid and unprotected jobs. In many cases, men have learned to cope with diminishing employment opportunities and have voiced appreciation for the new roles their wives are taking on. Social ties and networks have acted to support working women, although they too are suffering the weight of restrictions and economic collapse.

The overall conflict environment has permeated every aspect of Palestinian life and affected both men and women. Violence in the public sphere—through checkpoints, body searches, roadblocks, settler violence, and so forth—has intruded into the domestic sphere, and men and women have had to cope under conditions of tremendous anxiety and uncertainty to ensure family survival. And while men are the direct recipients of violence, women have also had to bear its indirect costs. For instance, although most detainees are men, women must shoulder the responsibility of having and raising children, cooking, cleaning, running the household in the absence of the male figure, and working to secure the release of detained relatives (contacting human rights organizations, obtaining permits to visit the detainee, and so on), among other responsibilities.

The collapse in the public order and the absence of justice have further corroded the dominant image of Palestinian men as the protector of the family, disempowering and forcing some men to retreat to the domestic sphere as they are unable to protect their families and communities. Other men avoid the home as they cannot fulfill their domestic responsibilities, and spend time in coffee houses, the mosque and other spaces where they can find companionship with other out of work men. As men's public role has diminished, they have experienced loss of self-esteem and self-confidence. Their inability to protect or provide, has contributed to enormous psychosocial stress on the family.

Women's heightened role in the public sphere, coinciding with the weakening of men's established role, is leading to tensions within the household. Although few data are available on the prevalence of domestic violence in the West Bank and Gaza, the limited information that is available shows that households in which men have lost employment because of occupation measures may suffer from higher rates of domestic violence, although this remains inconclusive and requires further investigation. What did come across from the focus group discussions was the ever-present anger, frustration, and short-temperedness that men, women, and children have to contend with inside households.

In this bleak environment, family investment in education has surprisingly been on the increase, with record numbers of Palestinian boys and girls enrolling in secondary and post-secondary education. Education has become an insurance policy for Palestinians, and not simply a means to gain employment. For girls in particular, higher education can bring about better marriage prospects, enable them to supplement family income, and serve as an insurance policy against future vulnerability in case of the loss of a male breadwinner. For boys, education is a key to emigrating in search of more gainful employment opportunities abroad. In practice, educated young men and women, but particularly young women, have had a hard time finding work: an educated young woman waits four times as long as an educated young man to find work.

In addition to the challenge of finding work is the challenge of getting married. While the age of marriage has been increasing and fertility rates—though still high—have fallen,<sup>2</sup> other important changes are taking place within this sphere: while young unmarried women are more culturally constrained to find good jobs, many have also expressed their willingness to take on poorly paid or temporary work for the sake of gaining experience and supplementing family income; while young men are often-times reluctant to allow their sisters or young wives increased mobility (more so than older men), they also recognize the limitations of the single breadwinner model and are thus more willing to allow their educated sisters or wives to work.

The relaxations on restrictions on movement that have started in 2009 have not been sufficient to reverse the trends described above: the Israeli labor market remains closed to Palestinians, restrictions for those Palestinians living in Area C remain as entrenched as ever, and settlements continue to expand. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether tensions arising from the changes to employment that have arisen from movement and access restrictions and economic decline will have lasting effects on gender roles, particularly the extent to which the male breadwinner model remains the dominant paradigm in gender relations. The main preoccupation voiced by women and girls interviewed for this study was their need for husbands, brothers, and fathers to be employed as this is the principal way they will reduce their stress, anger and frustration and regain their dignity, sense of self-esteem, and empowerment. The undignified manner in which many women have had to participate economically—such as taking on low-paid jobs, borrowing, bartering and enduring 'humiliating searches' at checkpoints—has in some ways only strengthened many women's desire for things to revert to "normal" and for the men once again to support their families. Yet, there seems to be a generational shift where educated young women, married and single are more eager to work, and to play a role in society, and their increasing involvement in civil society organizations is one such expression of this desire. As already noted, there are men who are coping with cycles of employment and unemployment and who appreciate the new roles women are taking on. In such cases it is cooperation rather than conflict that characterizes gender relations.

## **Recommendations**

The most effective way to improve economic opportunities for Palestinian men and women in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem is to lift movement and access restrictions which disadvantage women in specific gendered ways. There are four additional areas where specific local actions could create opportunities to improve family income by providing opportunities to women and men. These actions ought to be addressed by the Palestinian Authority (PA) as it prepares its new development plan and supported by the international community, including Israel.

### *1. Create and support enabling environments for safe and decent work.*

• Women's economic participation can increase their personal security and prevent abuse only if family members see the work as "decent" and "dignified." The PA can promote such an enabling environment through the following actions.

- Support indigenous efforts to affect positive change in the law regarding equal protection of men and women in the workplace, especially in the informal sector. The Palestinian Labor Law enacted in 2001 provides for equal protection of men and women, and includes specific provisions for women, but does not specify penalties for employers who violate these provisions of law. Moreover, the law excludes large segments of the labor force where most of the workers are women: own-account workers, seasonal workers, unpaid family workers, domestic worker, and those involved in unpaid domestic care and reproductive work at home. Mechanisms that support women in the informal labor market, for example, trade unions that provide insurance schemes, can enable workers to protect themselves.
- Enhance the role of trade unions to monitor and encourage employers to take up fairer policies. On the supply side, given high fertility rates, provision of quality, affordable childcare would encourage women to join the labor market.
- Improve the regulation of the public transport sector to enhance women's mobility. In addition to Israeli-imposed restrictions on movement, women face special constraints due to the lack of a safe, well-regulated public transport system. The PA can do much to increase both safety and gender-sensitivity in the system. Such interventions could include making the routes and schedules of public transport clear and predictable to reduce waiting time, particularly from outlying villages to major towns; establishing safety and service standards and ensuring operator compliance; providing a seating area with priority access for women in vehicles that do not have dividers between seats to ensure women can maintain proper distance from male passengers.<sup>3</sup>
- As the family operates as an economic unit, livelihood programs should focus on supporting its cohesiveness rather than promoting work for one gender over the other. This can be done by promoting home- or community-based production systems that involve men and women working together. This is especially important for agricultural production, which requires the efforts of more than one family member. There is also considerable potential for improving the production and marketing of food and artisanal products through better processing, packaging, marketing, and advertising.

## *2. Support quality education and youth employment.*

The West Bank and Gaza enjoys gender parity in all levels of education. Families value and invest in their children's education—a contributing factor to high rates of educational attainment. Households' investments in their children's secondary and higher education need to be matched by public investment in quality education that leads to employment. Young men should not be left behind in the process of empowering young women's entry to the labor market; young women's gains and social well-being depend not only on parental and family attitudes, but on whether young men also have meaningful opportunities and purposeful lives. Lack of hope and opportunity among young men has a debilitating effect throughout the whole of society—but especially on the possibilities and aspirations of young women. The PA can do much to harness the potential of its youthful population through the following actions.

- Develop innovative programs that promote first-time employment for young men and women equally, especially among those with a tertiary education, by drawing on partnerships with the private sector and civil society organizations. Even under the current dismal economic conditions, short-term, voluntary, and make-work programs for new graduates have proven effective in Gaza—especially for young women (as this report has shown). Short-term income to families from such programs affirms that investing in daughters' education is worthwhile.
- Expand the skills base of the young so they become more market-oriented and marketready—favoring skills that lead to products that can cross borders without restrictions, for example, IT design, telecommunications, and electronics.

## *3. Facilitate social cohesion, especially in Area C and others isolated by movement and access restrictions.*

This report shows that when communities are able to organize, drawing on all segments of their population (including male and female youth), they are more resilient in coping with stress factors resulting from the occupation. Civil society and social networks play an important role in sustaining the social capital of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza under these conditions of duress. These enabling networks are key to supporting communities that are under stress, and ensure that communities do not break down under the pressure of conflict.

- Promote and encourage the development of local institutions for community empowerment as these ultimately also protect women: they can be formal or informal, and can be a good source of involvement and experience for youth, both male and female. These institutions can also provide much needed support (in the form of legal advice; counseling; income support; transport; skills development; marketing assistance) to unemployed men and women facing tensions in the household.
- Support indigenous efforts to promote outlets of expression and debate. These can lead to greater social cohesion and community-building and instill positive changes in attitude toward and practice of gender roles through, for example, theater, soap operas, chat shows, art exhibitions, and film on broadcast media.

## *4. Collect better data on gender-disaggregated economic participation.*

Much effort has gone into the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data in the West Bank and Gaza. However, the changing conditions on the ground require continual rethinking of tools and methods for gathering information that captures as much of the situation on the ground as possible. For example, labor market surveys tend to focus on formal employment and often miss the hidden forms of employment in which women are engaged, particularly in these past few years. More careful and rigorous research on these hidden forms needs to be carried out to better capture the full extent of women's economic participation and provide guidance to policy-makers on supporting the three areas highlighted above.

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<sup>1</sup> PCBS, "Labor Force Survey" (2007).

<sup>2</sup> According to some estimates, in 1968 the fertility rate was 7.0 children per woman (UNCTAD 1994), and in 1995 it was 7.4 (PCBS 1998). In 2000, it decreased to 5.1 children per woman (World Bank World Development Indicators [WDI] 2009), and continued to decrease to 4.5 children per woman in 2007 (WDI 2009).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, "Gender and Transport in the Middle East and North Africa Region: Case Studies from West Bank and Yemen," (October 2009).

