

# Plight of Palestinian Women: A Societal Explanation

Tuesday 20 January 2009, by [HAMMAD Ahmad](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2007).

The gruesome incident in which a husband inflicted near fatal wounds to his wife and killed his little baby, in small village near to Nablus, underlines the plight of women in Palestine. In another incident a few days ago, a woman in her twenties was found dead in the Gaza Strip, suspected to have been killed due to reasons of a family dispute.

Palestinian security sources said that the police found the bullet-ridden body of the young woman in the Beit Lahiya, in the northern part of the Gaza Strip. She had been shot at least ten times, the sources said. Such incidents highlight the need for further research and investigation into different dimensions of the problems of women in Arab societies. The kinds of violence and atrocities that occur in poor villages can only be appreciated, and even then marginally, by those who are aware of the routine agony that such women go through in Arab society. These are almost daily events, if you count domestic violence against women, as in many cases in Gaza, Nablus and elsewhere in our homeland, and it paints a picture of how a large number of women live in Palestine.

There is no dearth of explanations for the miserable lives that some women lead in our society. Lack of education, economic deprivation, political marginalization, are put forward as basic factors contributing to this phenomenon. There is no doubt that all these theories are valid in their own right, as each sheds at least some light on the nature of trials and tribulations of women. However, most such explanations are narrow in their scope and hence miss the overall framework within which violence against women takes place. And this framework is the social environment, traditions and values in which women are born, bred and brought up.

One feature of this local social environment is that it is male-dominated. This in itself is not as comparatively bad as may seem, because even the most developed countries of the world, despite their phenomenal achievements in terms of liberating women and providing them equal right, cannot boast of being completely gender-natural societies. Neither can they claim to have made their societies a safe heaven of females. The rising incidents of sexual harassment in the West are an example that discrimination based on gender does take place. However, what is specifically problematic about our male-dominated social structure is that it does not provide women with the necessary relief at any level. Moreover, it casts women in inherently negative terms, a species that is born with half the rights of men and no will of its own. The sad part is that the promotion and reinforcement of these values and view of women that men take, begins from the foundational unit of society-family. With the exception of a very thin slice of the social hierarchy, the richest of rich, in all social classes, women are seen less as human beings and more as the weaker sex. Women are recognized and defined in relation to men. A's daughter, B's mother, C's sister, D's wife. From the very word go, women are condemned to live an identity-less life, where they have to forego their rights in favor of fulfilling their obligations to their male relations.

Another feature of this social environment is its dichotomous value system. What is bad for women is good for men. And most of the time, all the joys of life are defined as good for men and bad for women. It is quite common to dismiss as a foible, men's tendency to womanize and a penchant for lecherousness. Many a time, the stories of the emotional escapades of men are related, by

themselves or their friends, as heroic deeds—things to be proud of. However, a woman who is even remotely suspected of the same indulgence is immediately dubbed as demimonde, a social outcast and a sinner. At a more ordinary level, it is the woman who has to vacate the room during a family gathering when an odd scene flashes on the tv-screen of the West's easy morals.

The men folk will sit tight with eyes riveted to the television. These small examples tell big things. These reflect the basis of the status of women, which is defined for them by society itself. Women can only reject and disown this status at the pain of challenging the existing family value system in the first place, which institutionalizes discrimination and repression against them.

The logical conclusion to draw from the foregoing is that as long as the unit of the family is not reformed and is not made more favorable towards women, there is little chance that the curse of violence against women will be eradicated and their misery end. In addition, for this very reason, it would be more appropriate for women activists and the torchbearers of feminist movements in Palestine, to work for the betterment of women's lot in the home, along with demanding equal participation in all aspect of life in Palestine.

It is essential to develop appropriate services and train skilled therapeutic practitioners to deal with this problem. An interdisciplinary and collaborative approach that integrates professionals in the fields of law, mental health, welfare, and education in governmental and nongovernmental organizations may provide a strong basis for providing appropriate responses to victims of family violence. Undoubtedly, there is much to be learned from the experience of other societies in this area. However, this knowledge must be applied with sensitivity to the cultural, political, and religious context of Arab Palestinian society.

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