

Broken Families

Tuesday, 27 August 2013

Falling through the cracks –
How the Israeli occupation breaks Palestinian families

Since the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948 until today, Palestine has been divided geographically. Therefore, the Palestinian people are divided into citizens with different identities in Jerusalem, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli occupation imposes a variety of laws and regulations on Palestinians. Many Palestinian families are separated as a result of the different identity documents and Israeli laws and policies that restrict the movement of Palestinians and limit the reunification of families. The suffering of families is exacerbated by the different judicial systems and laws in force in the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel; it is primarily family issues that end up in courts such as divorce, alimony and child custody.

In 2011, Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW) jointly with the Center for Women's Research and Consulting in the Gaza Strip (CWLRC) and the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling in the West Bank City of Ramallah (WCLAC), in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Open Society Foundation (FOSI) implemented a project to support Palestinian women whose rights are violated due to legislation imposed by the Israeli occupation.

The project has assisted Palestinian women to deal with infringements of their rights, mainly related to family issues such as a woman's right to divorce or obtain assets as documented in the marriage contract, child custody, as well as rights relating to residency, housing, freedom of movement, access to health services, and the right to education and work.

On August 19, 2013 a national conference was held at the Palestinian Red Crescent Society in Ramallah as a concluding event of the project. The organizations invited around 170 individuals from embassies, consulates, international and local organizations, and media agencies. Around 70 people showed up and followed the event. Sadly, Ms. Zainab Al-Ghunaimi and her colleagues from CWLRC from the Gaza Strip couldn't join us because Israel denied their permits.

The conference involved an introduction of the project by Ms. Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas, the director of WCLAC. Ms. Mariam Ikerawi, JCW's director, launched the documentary "Fragmentation of Families" conceptualized and realized by JCW. The findings of the thorough research on the subject and corresponding recommendations were presented by Ms. Manal Jubeh, the coordinator of the project.

This first part of the conference was followed by a panel of experts of legal practice and social counseling.

Mr. Nasser Rayyes, who works as a lawyer with Al-Haq organization detailed how Israel has violated Palestinian Families' Rights and International Humanitarian Law. Mr. Rayyes illustrated Israel's violations of Palestinians' rights as stipulated in the Personal Status Law "for example, in denying Palestinians to freely choose a partner for marriage due to its separation policies and control regime. He asserted that Israel has perpetrated crimes with impunity. He reiterated that Israel must be held accountable in criminal terms for its perpetual violations of International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law. Mr. Rayyes called the Palestinian Authority to join international conventions and treaties to recognize women's rights, the legal status of women. Mr. Rayyes concluded that Palestinians need to be enabled to use legal means to call Israel to account.

Ms. Sana Dweik who works as a lawyer with WCLAC illustrated the legal problems arising from differences in identification documents in Marital Laws. She highlighted that the geographic fragmentation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem and different laws and procedures consolidate violations of women's rights. Ms. Dweik amplified that not only law itself but essentially the execution of court decisions is the major problem. Since there is no coordination between Palestinian and Israeli courts, the applicability of laws and the enforcement of court rulings in other geographic areas are virtually impossible and more often than not, women pay the price.

Ms. Rania Sinjlawi who works with WCLAC as a social worker referred to the various social services women's organizations particularly in Jerusalem are providing. In this context she mentioned a critical point that is that female survivors of violence in East Jerusalem are often blamed if they report to Israeli police. Yet, the Palestinian Authority neglects any affairs in Jerusalem.

In this context the audience appealed coordinated and concerted efforts by women's organizations and legal centers in Jerusalem to confront and solve this problem.

A lively Q&A session concluded the conference. The audience reiterated the relevance and the importance of the explored subject of "broken families".

JCW will coordinate a follow-up campaign in order to continue bringing attention to this severe subject of "broken families", to advocate change to Israel's discriminatory separation policies.

Furthermore, of course, the organizations are going to continue to support Palestinian women whose rights are violated due to the legislation imposed by the Israeli occupation.

The documentary "Fragmentation of Families" and all material the project partners produced is accessible via JCW's website : www.j-c-w.org/brokenfamilies.