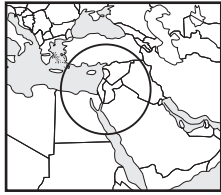


PALESTINE

Women and poverty: the high price of occupation



All development indicators in Palestine are in danger of further decline because of the combination of Israeli occupation and the subsequent deterioration of the economic situation. Women bear the brunt of this burden with female-headed households experiencing an incidence of poverty 1.3 times higher than households headed by men despite humanitarian aid and women's efforts to generate income in household-based activities.

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"In 2004, poverty increased as a result of growing unemployment, declining incomes from those employed, and the loss of property caused by Israeli Defense Forces house demolitions, land requisitions and levelling"¹ reads a recent report of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). With the economic strangulation caused by the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the repressive system of closures, and the Separation Wall (*al-jidar al-faseel*), the continuing occupation impedes access to resources, opportunities, services and aid, compounding the problems faced by Palestinians from all sectors of society. With high unemployment among men and the loss of family members to prison or death, women are experiencing a significant portion of the effects of both the occupation and the resulting widespread and increasingly entrenched poverty in the country.

The numbers speak for themselves

Over 70% of households are currently in need of assistance. Unemployment increased in 2004, and at the close of the year, 32.6% of the workforce were unemployed (nearly 29% in the West Bank and over 41% in the Gaza Strip).² Poverty rates are complex and varying, but statistics show that at the end of 2004 roughly half the population were living on under USD 2.10 per day, up from 22% in 2000; in the Gaza Strip, this number rises to 68%.³

In December 2004 the national poverty line was set at ILS 1,800 (USD 398) per month for a family of two adults and four children. This translates into ILS 300 (USD 66) per person or about USD 2.21 per day per person, the same figure as the previous year. However in a 2003 joint report by the World Bank and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), a subsistence poverty line was set at

ILS 205 (USD 45) per person per month or approximately USD 1.51 per day - ILS 128 (USD 28) per month for food according to minimum calorific intake and ILS 77 (USD 17) for other necessary expenses including housing, clothing, and water. The Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs currently offers assistance to special hardship cases at the rate of ILS 96 (USD 21) per month or USD 0.71 per day. In December 2003, roughly 607,000 West Bank and Gaza inhabitants, or 16% of the population, were living below the USD 1.51 subsistence poverty line, and the proportion has increased since that time.⁴

The causes of poverty

To point a finger at the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as the root of all social, economic, and political problems would not be doing justice to these problems. However in order to understand poverty in Palestine one must understand how the occupation affects all aspects of life. The Israeli system of checkpoints, roadblocks, and closures has separated Palestinians from Israel and Jerusalem and made travel between the West Bank and Gaza Strip nearly impossible. Within the West Bank, there are over 700 kilometres of roadways that Palestinians need a special permit to travel on. Israelis have obstructed roads in hundreds of locations with piles of boulders, cement blocks or trenches to further inhibit movement, cutting off many towns and villages from direct vehicular access. There are 60 permanently staffed Israeli military checkpoints in the West Bank in addition to "flying" or temporary checkpoints. Palestinians require permits from the Israeli authorities to leave their villages or towns, which are difficult to obtain. In addition, Palestinians do not enjoy independent international borders for trade or travel.

Since these closures were imposed at the beginning of the second Intifada in 2000, tens of thousands of workers have been prevented from entering Israel to reach their previous jobs. In 2004 alone 881 Palestinians were killed, 4,009 were injured and over 13,500 people in Gaza lost their homes due to Israeli military actions.⁵

Farmers and fishermen lost USD 1 billion to Israeli measures between the start of the second Intifada on September 2000 and August 2004. During this period, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture, Israeli troops uprooted 1,145,154 trees and levelled 6,185 hectares of land. Agricultural income has plummeted as closure policies raise transportation costs and produce spoils due to long delays at checkpoints.⁶ Fishermen in Gaza have limited access to the Mediterranean Sea and where there is access the coastal waters suffer from over-fishing. It is estimated that the rangeland of livestock in the West Bank (approximately 770,000 sheep and goats) had been reduced by 66% by the end of 2003.⁷ With the cost of goods rising due to transportation costs and Israeli goods entering the market freely at lower prices, income from local production has further decreased. With the destruction of industrial structures estimated at USD 75 million, infrastructure (USD 634 million), and transportation (USD 25 million), few investors are willing to take the risk. It is estimated that between 2000 and 2004 approximately USD 576 million were lost in investment. Overall losses in this period totalled nearly USD 20 billion with the production sectors accounting for more than half that amount.⁸

In addition to the occupation, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, reinforcing an unjust distribution of wealth. The corruption of some segments of the Palestinian Authority is also depriving people of the full benefits of their Government's resources.

A wider sense of poverty

Poverty cannot be viewed purely as an economic issue. Not only does poverty have many social impacts, but the term needs to be understood in such a way as to incorporate the inhibited access to resources, opportunities, services, and aid. Economically, this translates into a lack of access to markets, raw materials,

1 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). *Review of the Humanitarian Situation in the occupied Palestinian territory for 2004*. Jerusalem, 2004.

2 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). *Second Quarter 2004 Report on Palestinian Socio-Economic Conditions*, December 2004.

3 OCHA, *op cit*.

4 World Bank. "Poverty in the West Bank and Gaza After Three Years of Economic Crisis", 2004, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA/Resources/wbgaza-povertyafterreconcrisis.pdf>

5 OCHA, *op cit*, p. 3.

6 WAFA News Agency. "Losses of the Palestinian Agriculture Exceeds USD 1 Billion", 22 September 2004.

7 International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas. "The Agricultural Sector in Palestine" *Caravan*, Vol. 18-19, June-December 2003.

8 Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction. "Palestinian losses reached USD 20 billion in the last four years". www.pecdar.org/default.asp?page=2750

means of production, job opportunities, and labour. More generally, the repercussions of the lack of sovereignty over borders and Israeli confiscation and expropriation of land prohibit control over natural resources. The lack of freedom of movement negatively affects access to education, mental and physical health services, and meaningful political and social participation. These consequences increase disproportionately for the poor.

The consequences

All development indicators are in danger of further decline because of the combination of Israeli occupation and the subsequent deterioration of the economic situation. The environmental situation is worsening as many municipalities do not have access to waste disposal grounds and garbage is dumped or burnt openly in close proximity to residential areas. Health is deteriorating in proportion to declining nutrition and difficulty of access to health services. In 2002, the then Commissioner-General of the UN Relief and Works Agency stated: "The stark fact is that 22% of the Palestinian children are suffering from acute or chronic malnutrition for purely man-made reasons. No drought has hit Gaza and the West Bank, no crops have failed and the shops are often full of food. But the failure of the peace process and the destruction of the economy by Israel's closure policy have had the effect of a terrible natural disaster."⁹ People are not seeking medical treatment unless absolutely necessary because of cost and mobility issues. Sanitary conditions are substandard in many places with no means to repair them or are direct consequence of Israeli military destruction. There has also been a decrease in water quality and access. Educational enrolment is declining slightly but noticeably due to closures and concern for safety as well as to increasing school fees and transportation costs.

Coping strategies

Many economic coping mechanisms, along with the savings and credit of the poor, have been drained over the past four years. Food consumption has been reduced as much as possible, family jewellery has been sold, phone lines have been disconnected, heating in winter is considered a luxury, and in some areas, families are doing without electricity or running water in order to reduce expenses. Children have been pulled out of school to save on school fees and families with businesses or agricultural work rely more on the unpaid labour of household members. Some children have been sent out to work. People continue to borrow or receive financial support from family members both in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and abroad but the dependency ratio is increasing and over time this strategy is less sustainable. Opening small scale businesses and turning to very localized projects is the main direction of survival strategies besides relying on relief and humanitarian aid.

9 Hansen, Peter. "Hunger in Palestine", *The Hindu*, 10 December 2002.

The poor have been targeted somewhat effectively by relief efforts so that the number of people living at or below the subsistence level has not risen to reflect the actual economic situation. In the West Bank and Gaza food aid served approximately 1.5 million people during 2004 - roughly 40% of the population. These numbers are ten times higher than in 2000. Although relief has been effective, it has taken funds away from development aid which, according to OCHA, has declined by 70%. It is estimated that in 2005 nearly USD 100 million is needed in food aid alone.¹⁰

Women's experience

A 2002 national participatory assessment of poverty states that "as women, men and children, describe their lives, and problems, gender is almost always a salient feature and poverty a gendered experience".¹¹ Women, children, and youth are the most vulnerable sectors in Palestinian society. "Women tend to suffer disproportionately during times of political unrest and instability" and in the Palestinian context "the hardship of daily life was felt most acutely by Palestinian women who carried the burden for responsibility within the household because of the death, imprisonment or unemployment of male members".¹² Women must also bear "the brunt of the anger and frustration of male relatives who feel humiliated because they cannot fulfil their traditional role as providers for the family".¹³ There is concern that in the absence of a strong government, traditional structures that reinforce patriarchal values are re-emerging.

"Female-headed households display an incidence of poverty 1.3 times higher than households headed by men" with nearly 30% of families headed by women falling below the poverty line.¹⁴ In the formal labour sector "women are disadvantaged in terms of wages and social security benefits and... there are unequal barriers for women entrepreneurs in terms of property and inheritance rights, access to credit, penal liability and the availability of childcare facilities".¹⁵ Although women are very active in the informal sector they are not protected from various types of abuse. If informal work is inside the home, it is complicated by other household responsibilities.¹⁶

10 OCHA, *op cit*.

11 Palestinian Authority Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation and the United Nations Development Programme. "Project Policy Briefing Paper: Women, Gender and Poverty in Palestine: Learning about Family Crisis, Survival and Development from Poor Women, Men, and Children", *Palestinian Participatory Poverty Assessment: October 2002*. Ramallah, p. 2.

12 Commission on the Status of Women. "Situation of and assistance to Palestinian women: Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations Economic and Social Council", (E/CN.6/2005/4), 10 December, 2004.

13 Amnesty International (AI). "Israel and the Occupied Territories: Conflict, occupation, and patriarchy: Women Carry the Burden", AI Index: MDE/016/2005. London, 31 March 2005.

14 Commission on the Status of Women, *op cit*.

15 *Ibid*.

16 AI, *op cit*.

Women have had more than economic burdens placed upon them during the recent conflict since they are most often responsible for the wounded or disabled, which adds extra caregiving responsibilities. High fertility rates, especially among the poor and less educated, are a physical, psychological, and financial burden that along with early childbearing and local social traditions, present obstacles to women who wish to enter the workforce.

As funds diminish, it is common for the education of girls to be sacrificed before the education of boys. Since girls are expected to marry and live outside their parents' home, they are not considered a worthwhile investment. Social traditions also make women more vulnerable to isolation due to lack of freedom of movement. Families worry about the honour of the women in their household and are reluctant to allow them to run the risk of harassment at checkpoints, or of being unable to return home due to the unstable political situation. In addition, transportation and travel time has become more costly. This means that women have less access to their personal support network of friends and family who live in other areas. Nor do they have access to activities, services, and household decision-making that take place outside the home. They also suffer from poor access to healthcare, especially reproductive healthcare, family planning, and ante and post natal care. In some areas school attendance by girls and female teachers is dropping despite generally high enrolment rates. Women's health is in decline and it is affecting children. According to a recent World Health Organization study 70% of new mothers suffer from anaemia.¹⁷

Government actions and policies

The Palestinian Authority has taken some steps to address gender and poverty, but the results and impact have not yet been seen. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established in late 2003, and in early 2004 it announced its goals of instituting a government commitment to gender equity, and working to promote gender equity, democracy and human rights through effective networking and advocacy. Its three areas of intervention were defined as 1) empowering women in policy and decision making, 2) combating poverty among young women and female heads of household, and 3) improving vocational and technical training opportunities for women.

(Continued on page 256)

17 Commission on the Status of Women, *op cit*.

18 Palestinian Authority Ministry of Planning (MOP). "Draft Medium Term Development Plan, 2005-2007", Ramallah, February 2005.

PAKISTAN

(continued from page 223)

- democracy should be restored in the country
- the rights of the provinces should be honoured
- human rights must be protected
- violence against women should be stopped by all legal and administrative means
- freedom of expression should be enforced
- fundamentalism and religious extremism should be eliminated
- poverty and unemployment should be reduced
- debt bondage³¹ should be eliminated
- the gap between the rich and the poor should be narrowed
- social development, employment and poverty alleviation should be given priority in the Government's development policies
- a detailed Millennium Development Goal work plan is needed, complete with investment allocation
- a social security programme should be started for poor, vulnerable groups and poor women
- child labour should be eradicated with social support from the Government
- defence spending should be reduced and the funds spent on social development
- the agricultural sector should be developed to increase income and employment opportunities for rural people
- industrialization should be promoted in rural areas to generate employment
- the rights of fishermen, herdsmen and rural communities should be protected with respect to common natural resources
- government lands should be allotted to the landless
- access to health, education, electricity, water supply, sanitation, public transport and other basic needs should be increased for the poor. ■

29 Ministry of Finance, *op cit.* "Poverty". www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters/05-Poverty.pdf

30 Nadeem Malik. *The News*. "4.2% reduction in poverty, claims Economic Survey." 12 June 2004, www.jang.com.pk/thenews/jun2004-daily/12-06-2004/main/main1.htm

31 Paying off a family's loans via the labour of family members or heirs.

PALESTINE

(continued from page 225)

The 2005 Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP) of the Palestinian Ministry of Planning includes a substantial section on poverty alleviation. The document does not articulate any gendered notion of poverty, although it declares that "MTDP projects and programmes that are gender sensitive and contribute to female empowerment will receive special attention".¹⁸ While the MTDP "recognizes the role of women in furthering Palestinian development... as dynamic members of the labour force... and... active political players in the democratic process", there are no plans or suggestions of how to operationalize these values.

A National Committee for Poverty Eradication has been established by the Palestinian Cabinet and is comprised of representatives from various civil society bodies, ministries, and private sector institutions. Its purpose is to develop a national strategy for poverty alleviation, to monitor policy documents to ensure an appropriate poverty focus, and to lobby the donors to allocate more resources for poverty eradication.

The PCBS is also working to integrate a gender component into all of its research in order to complement the ministries' move towards addressing gender issues.

The role of civil society

With hundreds of millions of dollars of assistance destined for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, civil society is committed to poverty alleviation programmes that link relief with development in order to encourage productive, responsible, and accountable state-building measures; promote indigenous development priorities; and combat heavy dependence on foreign aid despite the ongoing occupation.

Civil society is participating in a UNDP initiative in partnership with the PCBS to localize the Millennium Development Goals through the development and monitoring of indigenous poverty indicators. There is also an attempt to establish a credit bank for the poor which currently has a seed fund of USD 10 million. Palestine now boasts its own annual Human Development Report, and the 4 year-old national Palestinian Participatory Poverty Assessment Project is currently entering its second phase. Regionally Arab and Palestinian civil society actors have joined together in a United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia initiative to rehabilitate socio-economic infrastructure in Palestine; and internationally the Palestinian NGO Network is participating in the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP). With the optimistic vision that peace negotiations are imminent with Israel, there are also a large number of new programmes promoting meaningful employment for youth and women, as well as microcredit, and microenterprise.

With men unable to find employment, many women are turning to home-based businesses as a means of coping with both the need for income and the social restrictions that discourage women from working outside the home. Local and international NGOs are working to increase and strengthen microcredit and microenterprise programmes since many women lack access to information, resources or credit services.

Recommendations for local and international action include:

- To develop and implement an international advocacy plan to implement international humanitarian law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.
- To conduct effective international advocacy campaigns to end the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem.
- To link the poverty alleviation agenda to global agendas.
- To involve civil society organizations in the GCAP campaigns.
- To pressure the Palestinian Authority to modify the MTDP to be gender sensitive and appropriately operationalize the focus on poverty.
- To involve and engage local communities and grassroots organizations in the development of poverty alleviation strategies and programmes and to increase the role of women and other marginalized groups in decision-making processes.
- To expand the institutional and organization capacity of NGOs working in poverty alleviation programmes.
- To encourage rigorous and participatory research on poverty and gender.
- To strengthen and enhance networking and cooperation among organizations working to fight poverty, incorporating all stakeholders including Arab and regional counterparts. ■