

**The Second Palestinian Intifada:
Social and Psychological Implications for Palestinian Women
Resulting from the Israeli Escalation of Violence**

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1. INTRODUCTION

For the past ten months, the Palestinian occupied territories have been engulfed in a bloody popular uprising against what seemed to be the perpetuation of Israel's hegemony and domination, as Israel has employed cruel and excessive military force against a largely defenceless Palestinian population. Over 500 civilians have been killed (including 25 women), a third of whom children. Meanwhile, over 16,000 people have been injured, with one out of every ten suffering permanent disabilities. It is estimated that at least 437 children have become permanently disabled as a result of injuries sustained during the Intifada.²

The international community has universally censured Israel for its actions towards the Palestinian people. The UN Security Council passed resolution 1322 of 7 October 2000 condemning Israel's "excessive use of force against Palestinians." Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and a number of other international and local human rights organisations have documented Israel's systematic abuses of power and violations of international standards of conduct in its policies of attack, intimidation and collective punishment of the Palestinian people. The UN Commission on Human Rights determined in its resolution of 19 October 2000 that Israeli actions against Palestinian civilians, including the "disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force" constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, despite the international consensus and resounding criticism of Israeli practices, the states of the world have yet to discharge their legal obligations as high contracting parties to the IV Geneva Conventions of 1949 to protect the Palestinian population.

Meanwhile, communication between Palestinian and Israeli political leaders has all but ceased and the chances of resuming serious negotiations, at this point in time, appear to be all but none. Despite recent American-led attempts to break the cycle of violence, which has included so-called 'cease-fire' declarations from both sides, the level of violence has not dropped. In fact, if anything, the violence has escalated. The lack of progress on the political front means that Palestinian towns and villages remain under closure, and in some cases curfew, while homes continue to be demolished, adding to the hundreds of families who have already been rendered homeless. In the meanwhile, economic strangulation, military attack, and settler violence and harassment have become the status quo in the West Bank, moreover, Israeli society at large is not feeling any more secure.

In November 2000, we prepared a position paper commenting on the sudden eruption of violent conflict and killing, and outlining our views, concerns and recommendations. The uprising has reached the 10-month mark and our people have adjusted to the daily trials of living in violence and under military attack. To say that the status quo has become 'normal'

for us would be an exaggeration. However, given human nature, Palestinians have adapted to the circumstances that have been forced upon us and have tried, as hard as it may be, to go on with our lives despite the daily suffering.

There is hope when people can still find reason to live, despite the ubiquitous, baleful presence of the death and despair. However, the social and psychological impact of this experience carries with it profound implications for the future. An analogy can be drawn between the psychological experience of a nation under siege and that of a woman living in an abusive relationship. Social interaction becomes strained, trust and confidence in others are eroded, and feelings of helplessness, powerless and isolation are heightened, creating an environment ripe for desperate, or even suicidal, acts.

It is imperative that we deal with the long-term impact of violence on our society in the present, specifically focusing on the implications for women and children, who are the most vulnerable groups. If not, we run the risk that attitudes which are developed in response to the external political threat will be internalised and come to be embedded in local value systems and culture. In other words, attitudes and values, which arise as a defensive reaction in a context of violence and war, may become so engrained in our collective national consciousness that we fail or forget to consider their root causes.

This poses a potentially dangerous situation for women, who will fall victim to a three-tiered process of violation. At present, they are victimised by the political violence, living in perpetual fear for their safety and that of their families, while bearing the additional burdens imposed on them under harrowing conditions, such as the destruction of homes, the razing of agricultural property, the uprooting of trees and rampant unemployment. Additionally, they are victims of heightened violence within the home, but are unable to express any of their suffering or anxiety, as they are forced into silence for fear of being blamed at the public level for being selfish and inconsiderate given the national emergency the whole society is undergoing, and at the private level from being blamed for their own victimisation— a vicious circle. We cannot allow the silencing and victimisation of women to become an ingrained feature of our society.

This paper will examine the nature of the situation in which Palestinians and, specifically, women find themselves today, the impact of organised violence and oppression on the collective psyche, and the future implications of living under such circumstances. It will further outline strategies that may be used to confront these forces, in attempting to mitigate negative social and psychological consequences.

2. WAR AND ORGANISED VIOLENCE

Contrary to Israeli propaganda, the situation in the Palestinian territories cannot be characterised as ‘war’. The existence of war necessitates the presence of two, organised, armed military forces facing off against one another. What we have here is a situation in which some elements of the Palestinian civilian population have risen up in self-defence against an occupying power that has consistently violated its responsibilities toward them, impinged on their rights and abused its power. Applying the term ‘war’ in the current context by Israel is a self-serving propaganda tool, used in an attempt to justify its use of full military force and tactics against a civilian population. Moreover, the Palestinian people *as*

a people are portrayed as the ‘enemy’ because they represent an obstacle to the realisation of the Zionist dream of establishing an exclusive Jewish state on the entirety of historic Palestine.

Though not war, the situation is one of strategically planned and organised violence. Violence of an occupying power against civilians to keep them under effective control and deny them the right for self determination. This violence is manifested in the form of a low-level military conflict, in which nearly all the casualties are civilians. In terms of the psychological impact on society, situations of organised violence and high civilian casualties can be far worse than war. Indeed, in such a situation, violence is not waged against enemies in military uniforms, but against the people, their popular movements, their collective conception of ‘self’, their values, and their history.

Violence becomes a means not only to defend against a perceived military or security threat, but more profoundly, against any action that is or may be interpreted as an act of *opposition*. Violence is thus a tool to preserve the status quo in terms of power, values and priorities. The authority to determine what may be considered an act of opposition naturally lies in the hands of the dominant power, rendering every person in society susceptible to violence, subject to the power-holder’s whims and interpretations.

We have seen these forces at play throughout the current Intifada. For example, during the week of 17 March, two peaceful demonstrations were held at the A-Ram checkpoint, on the northern border of Jerusalem, and lately to the peaceful demonstrations protesting the closure of the Orient House in East Jerusalem. Soldiers responded to the unarmed, peaceful demonstrators (most of whom were women) with sound bombs, tear gas and rubber-coated metal bullets, and heavy beatings with clubs. The act of public expression – waving flags, carrying banners, singing national songs – a fundamentally entrenched human right, becomes, in the context of organised violence and in the view of the power-holder, an act of opposition which must be suppressed by violent means.

3. MAINTENANCE OF POWER = FORCE + FEAR

Israel claimed historically that it is defending its civilian nationals against Palestinian violence, and has gone to the length of attempting to sustain this construction in the occupied territories while introducing settlers who under the protection of the army systematically violated all aspects of Palestinian fundamental human rights and in violation of all well established international norms and international humanitarian law. This violence has been systematically carried out against the defenceless population ever since occupation started in 1967. In the absence of international protection, the Palestinian population rose and acted against the systematic injustice, excessive Israeli military tactics and force were used in order to smother the popular uprising and entrench further their control of the land and resources by escalating settlement activities. Under the pretext of security for its own people, since 1967, Israel has spared no means to maintain effective control of the Palestinian society and its resources. The violence of the last ten months is just an escalation of the military, political and economic pressure the Palestinian population has been suffering ever since 1967.

Violence of the occupying power is a combination of physical force with psychological terror (fear), generating what can be characterised as social-psychological warfare. Israel's use of force over the past 10 months has been well documented and is well known, both to the Palestinian victims and to the world at-large. What has been more insidious, however, has been Israel's use of psychological tactics, designed to instil fear into the Palestinian people and paralyse them into obedience and acquiescence.

Arbitrariness

Arbitrariness is one such tactic, which Israel has pursued mainly through its policy of closure.³ Everybody knows that it is logistically and realistically impossible to hermetically seal the Palestinian territories. Israel's 'security' justification has consistently proven to be a myth, given that a determined person will always find a way to get to where he wishes to go.

The policy of closure, rather, is a form of collective punishment, preventing 'normal' people from living 'normal' lives – going to work, to school, to hospitals, or to visit family and friends. Moreover, Israel's enforcement of closure, which has been random and inconsistent, has been specifically designed to be unpredictable and arbitrary. One day, a Palestinian is detained at a checkpoint, held up for hours, told he may not pass, and arrested or fined. The next day, he passes unquestioned.

The psychological impact of arbitrariness is that it leaves the subjugated population confused, not knowing what to expect from their oppressors, and in turn, fearing for the worst all the time.

Blaming the victim

Another such tactic, which we outlined in a previous paper, is blaming the victim. As in abusive domestic relationships or rape, a tragic reversal of roles is constructed in which the victim is portrayed as the cause of her own suffering and for bringing whatever harm she has suffered upon herself. Israel has largely succeeded in presenting the Palestinians as the aggressors and has held Palestinian mothers personally responsible for the deaths of their sons in stone-throwing clashes, as if the soldiers firing at unarmed boys are somehow external to the chain of causation. This adds to the trauma of Palestinian mothers, who not only have to absorb the loss of a child, but also bear the burden of Israeli (and international) blame for being 'bad' mothers.

Because of the frequent loss of life on the Palestinian side for often what seemed to be no justified reasons, one mechanism of survival and coping has been the elevation of the concept of the 'martyr' within Palestinian society. However, this has led to Palestinian women being blamed not only for being 'bad' mothers by the international community, but also to bear additional burdens from within their community. Under the concept of 'martyrdom', Palestinian society and culture demand of women to suppress their grief when their children are killed, for they are believed to have died a 'noble', 'worthy' and, indeed, 'holy' death. Thus, women are often denied the right to cry openly, and are even urged to 'ululate' in celebration, which many of them do while in a state of shock, hysteria or total breakdown.⁴

Finally, because the victimiser commands the power to interpret, he not only succeeds in ridding himself of responsibility for the suffering of his victims, but he creates a situation in which the individual victims are 'guilty' by the mere fact that they are not passive victims. The Palestinian society has been denied protection by third parties pursuant to law, and individuals and groups have resorted for their own self defence. Ineffectual peaceful means, because they were not supported by the political will of major powers, have ultimately given way to violent means, which in reality are also ineffectual because it provided Israel the cover to use all military facilities available against the society which these individuals and groups are member of. Indeed, we hear that the Israeli 'defence' forces are 'forced' to 'retaliate' against Palestinian 'terrorists' by bombing parts of the West Bank and Gaza to smithereens. The fact that Palestinian civilians are killed or maimed in the process is irrelevant because the act is one of 'defence', necessary for 'security' purposes, and launched against an entire population of 'terrorists'. That any one of these 'terrorists' could be a victim is simply beyond the scope of the oppressor's narrative. The Palestinians are thus caught in a vicious circle from which there appears to be no escape, and which further heightens their sense of helplessness and powerlessness.

4. ESTABLISHING AND DESTROYING MEANING

The foundation of social organisation, human interaction and self-awareness is communication – the healthy performance in a social context. State sponsored organised violence (particularly if it is systemic and perpetual) destroys the conditions in a society which foster healthy human interaction, and replaces them with a situation replete with uncertainties. Human life is always challenged by uncertainties, which disrupt our systems of meaning, truths and values. A healthy society provides conditions to cope with such normal uncertainties. However, the presence of organised violence and oppression systematically destroys the conditions that allow people in a healthy society to cope, and leaves in its wake instability and uncertainty.

The 'destruction of meaning' and the creation of a situation of uncertainty is characterised by a number of features: the disintegration of systems of organisation; the disruption of communication and dialogue; the collapse of collective and individual life stories through social fragmentation and confusion; difficulty in making attachments through the mistrust of oneself and others; and the destruction of predictability and consistency. Many examples of this social-psychological phenomenon have been revealed in WCLAC's documentation of the stories of Palestinian women in the current conflict, and most clearly in the cases of women who have survived the shelling of their homes and neighbourhoods.⁵

Bombing Homes

The people of Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, Al Bireh, Beitunia, Tulkarem, Gaza and KhanYounis, amongst others, have been subjected to periodic bombings of their homes since the beginning of October 2000. Aside from those who have seen their homes, farms and businesses completely demolished and the dreams of their families shattered, the long-term psychological effects on the families who live in neighbourhoods that are regularly bombarded have also been immense. Their lives have been thrown into uncertainty; they are forced to sit in darkness from sundown till morning as shells land on their homes, mothers

are often trapped alone in their houses with their children because husbands cannot return home from work, telephone lines are disrupted and women cannot communicate with the outside world, children can no longer study or concentrate and often develop sleeping disorders, and families generally live in constant fear for their lives. This also creates a situation where a much larger portion of the society ends up feeling fearful for their lives and their well being, because even if it does not happen to you at one point, the regularity of this occurrence establishes a key psychological fact: the knowledge that it can at anytime happen to you.

Many of the women we have interviewed say that they feel as though the shells landing on their homes each night have penetrated to the core of their very existence, smashing everything that is dear to them, and destroying the meaning in their lives.

Palestinian women, whose role in the majority of families is purely domestic, have been the most adversely affected victims of the shelling of homes. They have been forced to leave the house at night to take shelter with relatives, only to return by day to assess the damage, clean up, cook for the day, and wash clothes. Sometimes, returning in the morning is to discover the house blown up or bulldozed, with the entire family's possessions destroyed. Family photos, schoolbooks, toys, plants, gifts – all of these sustain our memories and identity, connecting us to the past, giving us confidence and faith in ourselves. In a single night and by the push of a button, a Palestinian family can see it all go up in smoke.

With the breakdown of society's coping systems, people have only their relationships upon which to depend. However, in a context of organised violence, even trust and confidence in loved ones is made difficult. As always, it is the women who are expected to provide support to their children's fears and to re-establish trust and love. But in the process of addressing their children's needs, women are often compelled to ignore their own.⁶ Forced into silent suffering, many Palestinian women are trapped in a world of solitary despair.

Such feelings have been revealed in many of the women WCLAC has interviewed. Take, for example, the words of Iman Ghreyib, whose home in Beit Sahour was shelled for five straight days at the beginning of October 2000, eventually forcing her to abandon it and move in with relatives:

The tension has taken over my life – I no longer have the patience or stamina to help my children with their homework, and I am overly sensitive about the most trivial things, sometimes punishing my children for no reason. What happened has taken a piece of my heart and has severely altered my state of mind. Nothing can make me feel happy. Neither my brother's wedding nor my children's excellent grades at school have managed to lift my spirits. The cruelty of the shelling, and the terrible fear for our lives have robbed me of my ability to be happy.

Feelings of loneliness, loss, isolation and helplessness become overwhelming and the meaningful everyday lives of people are destroyed. Life becomes imbued with negative feelings, as power over one's own existence is removed from one's control, and simple happiness remains beyond reach.

Uprooting history

Another Israeli tactic to destroy meaning has been the uprooting of trees and olive groves. Between 28 September and 26 July, Israel uprooted 25,000 olive and fruit trees, and bulldozed 42,000 dunums (around 10,000 acres) of Palestinian land, 78 percent of which was agricultural. For most Palestinians, human life is inextricably intertwined with nature and the environment (62% of W.B. and 20% of Gaza population is rural. 63% of Gaza population is refugee, descendants of villagers who were forced out of their lands when the state of Israel was established.)⁷. Indeed, for generations, Palestinian villagers and farmers have relied upon the land for their sustenance, guarding it as a treasure and working it faithfully. Many of the olive trees are referred to as ‘Roman’ trees because they are believed to date back to Roman times, having been passed down from one generation to the next.

Women traditionally take care of the trees, watch over the ploughing of the land, and pick and squeeze the olives. For them, the land is more than their life – it is a connection to history and tradition greater than themselves. In addition to destroying a very important source of income for farmers and their families, the uprooting of trees and razing of groves is an attempt to erase human, social and political identities, and to undermine the sense of belonging. The aim is to ensure that everything dear to these people is systematically destroyed, and to demonstrate that the fate of thousands of families rests in the hands of the power-holder.

Infiltration and collaboration

A major part of Israel’s strategy to create mistrust and insecurity amongst Palestinians has been its infiltration of Palestinian society through spies and informants. This type of psychological terror has been seen throughout history in times of conflict, notably during Germany’s occupation of France in the Second World War. Oppressive regimes around the world use such techniques to keep a watchful eye over the people they govern, instil a feeling of constant surveillance and sustain the threat of reprisal. Through 34 years of Israeli occupation more than one generation of Palestinians have been affected by this phenomenon leading to the development of a chronic situation of mistrust within the society.

Perhaps the most socially destructive Israeli practice in this regard has been the recruitment of Palestinian collaborators. Israel preys on the desperation and helplessness it has forced upon the people it occupies, by bribing or blackmailing Palestinians into providing critical information to Israeli secret service agents, often used to plan the carrying out of extra-judicial assassinations of prominent Palestinian leaders and activists. Since the outbreak of the Intifada, at least 40 Palestinian activists and leaders have been assassinated by Israel, in violation of international law.

In order to obtain the necessary information to locate wanted Palestinians, or those targeted for assassination, Israeli agents seek to recruit people who are close to the targeted individual, often from within his immediate family. Exploiting issues of ‘honour’ and virginity, Israeli agents have also tried to blackmail Palestinian women into collaborating with them. As a result, these women face near certain death, either being discovered as a collaborator (considered the worst type of criminal in Palestinian society) or for the exposed

‘honour’ crimes, which warrant killing by one’s own kin. This has contributed to the withdrawal of an increasing number of females from public interaction, leading to earlier marriages and increased conservatism.⁸

Thus, the widespread recruitment of collaborators has left Palestinian society replete with paranoia and suspicion, and where not even one’s closest family can be trusted. The impact is socially disastrous, as families are deeply penetrated by the mistrust that is bred between them, and which is manifested in an utter inability to feel secure.

Perilous conditions

The unemployment and poverty created by the destruction of agricultural land, property and restrictions on movement impact heavily on women, increasing their sense of isolation and pushing them further into despair. They continue to bear the burden of providing food and support to the family, while required to assume new roles as well.

With tighter restrictions on the movement of men, many women are forced out of their protected domestic cocoons to seek employment to sustain their families, while their unemployed husbands stay at home. This sudden and involuntary reversal of gender roles disturbs the stability of intra-family relationships, and puts women in a perilous position.⁹ Many men resort to violent means to assert their control over the family, feeling insecure about their status in the family, and frustrated by feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.

Not surprisingly, male frustration and insecurity have a consequent adverse impact on women, who become victims of increased rates of domestic violence. In addition to the disruption of family life, the reversal of gender roles and the rise in domestic violence, women forced into the workforce also face exposure to exploitation by employers.¹⁰ Often unaware of their rights and unable to seek redress, these women are, once again, victimised.

Women’s lives and safety are not only exposed to hazardous conditions in the private sphere, but also in the public. The roads between towns and villages have been rendered unsafe for travel due to frequent settler attacks, while sexual harassment by machine-gun-toting teenage soldiers has become a regular, daily experience for Palestinian girls and women at military checkpoints.

Several women have been killed on their way to work, and many female students have had to drop out of high school and college due to the difficulties of travelling between towns and villages.¹¹ The disruption of road travel has also hindered socialising and family visits, which, traditionally, have played the important and meaningful role of providing a source of emotional and financial support, particularly to women and children. Many women have been entirely cut off from their families who reside in other towns [upon marriage, Palestinian women typically move to live in the town of their husband’s family], while many college and university students have not seen their families since the Intifada began, in September 2000.

All of this – the severing of communities, the fracturing of families, the erosion of trust and support, the uprooting of means of survival, the erasure of history – contribute to the systematic breakdown of social interaction, leaving a void in which instability, uncertainty and vulnerability to abuse and suffering appear to be all that remain.

5. LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE BREAKDOWN OF MEANING

Violence against women

The effect of a deliberate destruction of society's moral and social foundations by an overbearing, oppressive ruler/occupier can be crippling. Respect for laws and norms change, crime and destructive acts increase, and the general level of violence and hostility between people intensifies. This is a lethal formula for an increase in crimes against women. The Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch recently noted that in a number of conflict areas around world, there exists an alarming connection between political violence and the violation of women's rights.¹² In the Palestinian context, we traced this pattern during the first Intifada, when the level of violence against women directly correlated to the level of violence against the Palestinian people by Israeli forces.

In terms of the breakdown of legal systems, traditional structures of authority, such as the tribal system, are revived and further empowered, to the detriment of women. Palestine has been prevented by Israeli occupation from developing independent, stable legal and political systems and institutions. Those that emerged over the past eight years have largely failed due to the ongoing denial of Palestinian sovereignty and the complications arising out of a complex patchwork of legal systems and jurisdictions. In the wake of this confusion and, at times, lawlessness, the tribal system has re-emerged, serving to provide stability and order. The problem for women, however, is that tribal systems are undemocratic and resistant to change, and as such, re-enforce patriarchal values and norms, while further disempowering Palestinian women. WCLAC case files indicate that, in most cases, when women's private and public conflicts are mediated by these traditional systems, more weight is given to the interests of the male party to the conflict.

Clinical experience shows that the rate of victimisation of women in both the public and private spheres increases during times of escalated political conflict. However, due to travel restrictions, many women are not able to access support facilities and services (either professional institutions and/or extended family). Our concern is that victims of violence require immediate treatment as well as long-term counselling. Leaving victims untreated until the situation subsides will compound their suffering and create long-term social problems. Moreover, living in an environment of organised violence actually demands greater efforts to support and counsel affected communities, specifically, women in need, as traditional support structures disintegrate. In the best of times, abused women in Palestine have few options to receive support and counselling; in the worst of times, this need is even greater.

'Forced disintegration of the family'

Coupled with the probable increase in domestic violence is a phenomenon psychologists have termed the 'forced disintegration of the family'. This arises within the context of organised violence and oppression as a result of widespread disappearances, arrests and deaths. The Palestinians have been contending with this for decades, with scores of men having been imprisoned indefinitely, tortured, assassinated, disappeared or killed in clashes.

For women and children, the consequences of this are particularly acute. Children develop a sense of defencelessness, seeing that their parents are unable to protect them, and they are thus forced out of the protective shield of childhood at a young age. This causes premature cynicism and a general mistrust of adults and other children alike. For women, who, in the Palestinian context already suffer under oppressive cultural burdens and social systems, the inability to maintain relationships of trust and support can plunge them into depression and despair.¹³

6. CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES

Like women living in an abusive relationship, people living under conditions of organised violence and the disintegration of bases of social support learn to be suspicious and doubting, avoiding having to depend on anyone, and keeping silent about their life stories. This is a mechanism of self-preservation when all hope and confidence in others has been smashed.

In dealing with this situation of perpetual political conflict, Palestinian civil society and, specifically, the women's movement must have a clear understanding of the short and long-term implications. Local, grassroots plans of action must be devised to help communities endure the immediate period. Additionally, we must also mobilise politically at the local and the international levels, to work to bring about a just and sustainable resolution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The women's movement

The task for us, as professionals working in a context of organised violence, is to work to rebuild confidence and trust between people, and to break their sense of isolation. This can be achieved by opening up the lines of communication between individuals, which have been forced closed by means of psychological warfare and fear. Everyone who has suffered trauma has a story to tell, and we must facilitate the exchange of such stories in an open, supportive environment. Indeed, breaking the barrier of silence is the first step in bringing people out of forced isolation and back into a healthy social arena.

What is needed for victims of organised violence, as with victims of rape and domestic violence, is a re-confirmation of meaning in the world – the rebuilding of what has been systematically destroyed. The re-construction of healthy human relationships through social interaction is the best therapy for those who have lost hope and confidence, and if coupled with counselling for those who need it, we can at least hope to confront the challenges posed.

An ideal setting for such activities is to work in small groups, where people of similar experiences can tell their stories and hear those of others. Ideally, these groups should be formed along the lines of core societal groups, such as students, women, children, and so on. In doing so, we can help to transform the victims' trauma from individual suffering into a collective experience, helping them to overcome their feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. We need to create forums in which trust can be rebuilt between people, their identity and place in the world reconfirmed, and their emotions shared. We need to re-shift the blame off the shoulders of the victimised and find outlets for dealing with their anger,

frustrations and pain vis-à-vis their victimisers. Providing ways for women to voice their feelings and cope with their fears is part of giving legitimacy to their fears, a necessary component of rehabilitation.

Such confidence building activities can be instrumental in empowering people who have lost the means to control their lives. Such activities provide a place in which people can learn again to act on their own destiny, to take decisions and to influence their life. WCLAC has been involved in such initiatives during the current Intifada, such as our child-to-child leadership- training project, based at Aida refugee camp Girls' School in Bethlehem. We worked with a number of girls of various ages. The idea was to train the older girls in how to counsel and support the younger girls through the use of various coping mechanisms. This served two functions: on the one hand, the older girls felt empowered and responsible, having been put in charge of helping their young peers, while for the younger girls, it was a possibility to express themselves in non-traditional ways and to develop new relationships of trust and sharing.

Civil Society

At another level, social interaction and self-empowerment can be achieved through civil society activism. During the first Intifada, Palestinian civil society was awakened, and saw the widespread proliferation of non-governmental activity. This was a natural outgrowth of the Intifada itself, which was a popular expression of frustration toward the conditions of life under Israeli occupation. Thus, resistance and opposition were expressed simultaneously in the streets, through stone throwing and flag-waving, and indoors through community mobilisation challenging Israeli policies and practices.

Institutions arose in all spheres of work, and addressing a multitude of issues, from health rights to legal rights to education and clean water. Indeed, the Intifada brought with it a "do it yourself" mentality, as Palestinians took charge of their own lives, having been previously dependent on others to try to solve their problems. Largely through grassroots community activism, Palestinian society collectively asserted authority for itself in determining its own future. This was an important step in breaking the chains of oppression, and freeing large sectors of the society from the prison of powerlessness.

Following the end of the first Intifada, the Oslo accords were signed. However, because they were not implemented in accordance with accepted legal frameworks and under the auspices of neutral third parties, 'the peace process' was quickly seen to be entrenching the systems of organised violence, colonialism and oppression rather than reversing them. Palestinian leaders involved in the process came to be perceived by much of the public as agents of the occupying regime because they remained in a process of negotiation that appeared to be cementing a permanent denial of fundamental Palestinian rights. The forces of social disintegration returned, and civil society suffered from fragmentation and disorientation.

However, with the current Intifada, the Palestinian population at-large is making a declaration to Palestinian leaders, to the Israelis and to the world: that the Palestinian people refuse to accept occupation, colonialism or apartheid, and that any peace agreement or peace process that impinge upon fundamental Palestinian rights will not last.

This Intifada is an opportunity for civil society to mobilise once again, as Palestinian society did during the first Intifada. It is time for people of similar interests to come together and do something for their community. Only by working together and interacting socially can we break the forces of isolation and powerlessness. Indeed, through community activism, people have the opportunity to take on responsibility and to carry out actions that will help serve the needs of others. This is an important process because it re-establishes human relationships of trust and support, while helping to avoid the complete breakdown of society's internal structures and meaning.

Ultimately, however, it is freedom, justice and democracy that create the necessary conditions in which to build a healthy and supportive society. Although Palestinian society may feel powerless to overthrow the Israeli occupation, individuals can strive towards these values even from now. By integrating principles of democracy and social justice in the home, school or workplace, one can establish the base upon which our future society will be constructed.

Negotiation and the political process

It is also important to remember the principles of democracy, social justice and the rule of law in resolving the political conflict. In terms of the negotiation process, it is crucial, from the Palestinian side, that all sectors of Palestinian society are consulted and included in the resolution of the conflict. Only with vast popular support and consultation can the Palestinian leadership take decisions that will affect the entire nation. This, too, is part of the healing process, for it is important for people to feel that they are heard amongst their leaders, and that they are, in how ever small way, contributing to forging the future of their nation.

Further, in regard to women, there must be a concerted and honest effort to consult Palestinian women and include them in the negotiation process. On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1044, recognising that women and children are the principal victims of armed conflict, though they have been typically excluded from processes of conflict resolution. As such, the UN resolution calls for the equal participation of women in all processes of peace negotiation and urges political actors when negotiating and implementing a peace agreement to adopt a gender perspective, particularly in taking account of the special needs of women and children, and ensuring the protection of their fundamental human rights.

Finally, it is important to avoid direct, bilateral negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel. Such a relationship reinforces the existing power imbalance and will undoubtedly result in a biased, unjust and coerced resolution. Thus, in the interests of justice and fairness, which would eventually lead to sustainable peace, we believe in the involvement of a third party to facilitate and mediate the negotiation process. The third party, however, must be fair and impartial and work according to internationally recognized frameworks and guidelines.

We know that the path ahead will not be easy. But as long as the Israeli occupation persists, we, as professionals in the social service sector, can only continue to work to offset the negative psychological and social implications of our nation's ongoing struggle against occupation, colonialism and oppression.

Notes

¹ This paper relies heavily on Nora Sveaass, “The Organized Destruction of Meaning,” in *Pain and Survival: Human Rights Violations and Mental Health*, N. Lavik, M. Nygard, N. Sveaass and E. Fannemel, eds. (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994).

² Intifada statistics are taken from the database compiled by the Health, Development Information and Policy Institute (www.hdip.org). Updated regularly.

³ *Al-Quds* (Jerusalem), 14 June 2001. Sharon to his officers: “The principal security problem with the Palestinians is now along the roads. Palestinians should never feel secure travelling on these roads. The army will follow a strategy of quick and sudden disruptions so that the population is always confronted with unpredictability.”

⁴ Vivian Khamis, *Political Violence and the Palestinian Family: Implications for Mental Health and Well-Being* (Oxford: The Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press, 2000), at 66-78.

⁵ Please see WCLAC’s online *Eyewitness* documentation project, at www.wclac.org

⁶ Khamis, *supra*, at 54.

⁷ Marianne Heiberg and Geir Ovansen, “Palestinian Society in Gaza, West Bank and Arab Jerusalem: A survey of Living Conditions,” FAFO- report 151, (FAFO 1993, 1994), at 23.

⁸ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Crimes of War, Culture and Children’s Rights: The case of female Palestinian detainees under Israeli military occupation,” in *Children’s Rights and Traditional Values*, G. Douglas and L. Sebba, eds. (England: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1998), at 237-41.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ R. Qatamesh, *Palestinian Working Women’s Affairs: An Analytical Study* (Ramallah: Palestinian Working Women’s Society, 2001), at 130.

¹¹ Information gathered from WCLAC case files.

¹² *World Report 2001: Events of 2000* (New York: Human Rights Watch-Women’s Rights Division, 2001), at 7.

¹³ Khamis, *supra*, at 54.