



General Assembly

Distr.: General
19 March 2024

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-fifth session

26 February–5 April 2024

Agenda item 7

Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories

Written statement* submitted by Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[6 February 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Sexual Violence against Palestinian Women

The year 2023 stands out as one of the most tumultuous periods in Palestinian history. Even before October 7th, the toll of Palestinian casualties had surged to 224 individuals in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By the close of 2023, this distressing figure had escalated to 21,000 Palestinians, underscoring the severity and magnitude of the violence experienced by Palestinians.

In the West Bank, the year 2023 witnessed an unprecedented surge in home invasions, night raids and settler terrorist attacks. The cities of Jenin and Nablus, in particular, experienced a disturbing and continuous occurrence of home invasions. The perpetual presence of Israeli Occupation Forces in the West Bank and Occupied East Jerusalem creates an environment where the occurrence of sexual violence becomes more likely. This heightened risk is exacerbated by daily confrontations, frequent home invasions, and the alarming trend of arresting over 90 Palestinian women from the West Bank, Occupied East Jerusalem, and land 1948. the exact number of arrests from the Gaza Strip remains unknown.

In Gaza, the relentless genocide has resulted in a devastating toll, with the death count reaching 26,000, over 70% of the victims being women and children. Given the ongoing military operations, there has been a notable scarcity of documentation on sexual violence in Gaza.

Documenting Instances of Sexual Violence in Occupied Palestinian Territory

One of the main obstacles that faces Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling's (WCLAC) field's researchers when it comes to documenting sexual violence in the State of Palestine is the Societal Norms and Power Dynamic. These norms contribute to a culture where victims fear stigma, retaliation, or disbelief if they report incidents of sexual violence. Making it nearly impossible for Human Rights Organizations -including Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC)- to document such incidents.

Three women of Ajlouni family in Hebron for example were coerced by an Israeli soldier with a large dog to fully undress and walk nude in front of their children.

Despite the incident gaining widespread attention in the media, when contacted by Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling's field researcher for further documentation, the women from that family declined to speak, citing concerns about the associated stigma. Furthermore, Hijazi Al Tamimi, one of the tribes' leader from Hebron expressed on a radio channel that these women should not have been exposed in such a manner, stating, "Sedition is dormant; may Allah curse whoever awakens it." Saying that the Human Rights Organization B'tselem was the one to instigate the whole thing for reporting it and publishing the matter, indicating that the whole ordeal is a scandal.

However, Manal Al-Jabari, associated with B'tselem and involved in documenting the Ajlouni family incident, revealed that she has documented 20 similar incidents in Hebron. She pointed out a rising trend in such occurrences. Al-Jabari further noted that women consistently refrain from discussing these incidents, driven by a fear of societal stigma.

Additionally, a feminist blog reported to Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC) that after releasing information from Freed Prisoner Areen Qawasmi from Hebron, providing her account of undergoing a full nude search, family members contacted this blog requesting the deletion of the information and issuing threats.

In this regard, a research study conducted on the situation of Palestinian female prisoners has uncovered alarming statistics post-release. The study found that 67% of the female prisoners within the sample experienced social exclusion, which manifested as their community avoiding social interaction or direct engagement with them. These women reported that their social relationships were never fully restored to their pre-detention status. One of the primary reasons, as highlighted by the researcher, is the stigma associated with the potential exposure of female prisoners to sexual assaults within the Israeli occupation prisons. One of the female prisoners even disclosed that her husband divorced her following her detention.

In addition to that, one of the challenges related to documenting such incidents, are the direct threats made to Palestinian women by Israeli Occupation officers. All the women Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC) interviewed following their release from prisons reported receiving threatening phone calls from Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) officers who identified themselves as "Captain Diyab, Captain Hakam, and Captain Nimer." The calls contained direct threats, warning the women that they would be returned to prison or that harm would be inflicted upon their incarcerated family members if they disclosed their experiences. Such intimidation left many of them distressed and in a mental state that compelled one of them to refrain from talking to others leaving her home. This intimidation tactic effectively deterred many of these women from disclosing the violations they had endured.

This introductory data holds significant importance for comprehending the current landscape of documenting sexual violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). It also underscores the exploitation by the IOF of an already existing system that deters sexual violence victims from seeking justice, allowing them to evade accountability for such violations.

Documentations in the West Bank, Occupied East Jerusalem and Gaza

- Testimonies of Female Prisoners'

Many female prisoners testified that following October 7th, appalling incidents of torture and sexual violence within Israeli prisons have increased. These including threats of rape and sexual assault, degrading strip searches of the prisoners, collective naked searches, verbal sexual harassment, and the use of menstruation as a means of physical and psychological pressure on the prisoners. This is achieved by depriving them of sanitary pads, hygiene items and necessary clothing for changing, restricting bathroom usage, violating privacy, forced unveiling of Hijabi women, capturing and circulating their images on personal phones of soldiers and investigators, violating religious beliefs by forcibly removing the hijab, insulting and cursing, depriving female prisoners of their basic needs, lack of personal hygiene items, and overcrowding in rooms.

Also one child prisoner had her first period in prison. She was treated with ridicule and humiliation.

- According to A. Abbadi, a prisoners' lawyer stated that "No female prisoner was spared from the strip search. It was a group strip search, during which shameful and humiliating practices were carried out, such as ordering them to turn around, open their legs, sit down, and sit while y were naked."
- Journalist and writer Lama Khater testified that following her arrest she was threatened with rape and sexual assault: Hanadi Halwani also said the same thing.

Documentation in Occupied East Jerusalem

Nevertheless, we managed to document a case for 25 years old L. S testified that while heading for her job at a daycare, she was questioned by a female soldier for "wearing green", L.S answered the soldier "that's none of your business" L.S was then taken to a police station, she was physically assaulted and interrogated about any affiliation with Hamas. The interrogation lasted over four hours, during which she was forcibly fully-undressed and subjected to severe beatings targeting on her genitals. She mentioned that cameras were filming the entire ordeal and she felt violated. However, she expressed fear of mentioning her name due to concerns about potential prosecution and detention.

In addition to that, videos have emerged –link in reference- to Israeli Officers bodily searching and harassing school girls in their way to school. Footage from Shufat Refugee camp in Jerusalem.

Documentation of Sexual Violence in the Gaza Strip

In the midst of the ongoing genocide and relentless bombings, compounded by the desperate struggle for basic necessities such as food and shelter, our field researchers have encountered significant challenges in documenting human rights violations against women in Gaza. The pervasive lack of telecommunications further complicates these efforts. The researchers have been limited to conducting interviews with women in shelters, where they now reside with their families.

Nevertheless, footage and videos have surfaced on various media outlets featuring women testifying that they underwent full-nude searches, received rape threats, and one of them was subjected to beatings on her stomach once they saw she was pregnant.

Additionally, Women Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC) interviewed had testified that women from Gaza were brought into detention in Damon prison but they were not allowed to interact with them. There are more than 30 Palestinian women detainees from Gaza in Damon Prison, enduring harsh conditions. The detainees from Gaza are prohibited from communicating or mingling with other female prisoners in different sections of the prison.

A notable void in information exists regarding the conditions, numbers, and identities of the detainees from Gaza. Their families are left uninformed and uncertain about whether they are alive or deceased. This absence of data creates a disconcerting gap in understanding the potential hardships they may have endured.

Recommendations:

- We strongly urge the HRC and member states to publicly and firmly call for immediate cease-fire, put an end to Israel's bombardment of Gaza, and address the mass displacement of Palestinians.
 - We call upon you to emphasize the need for adequate access to humanitarian aid in all of the Gaza Strip including the north.
 - We call towards exerting pressure on Israeli to act upon its obligations as an occupying state and protect & ensure the safety of the population under its occupation.
 - We request that you persist in urging Israeli authorities to collaborate with the Commission of Inquiry.
-