



Women and loss: the experience of psychosocial support for survivors of traumatic grief due to the Israeli occupation of Palestine

Women and loss: the experience of psychosocial support for survivors of traumatic grief due to the Israeli occupation of Palestine

Pamela Urrutia Arestizábal

Escola de Cultura de Pau – Associació Hèlia

April 2024

Acknowledgments: Thanks to the participants of the Nablus Bereaved Women Support Group, who generously shared their painful experiences, to the team at the Women's Studies Centre (WSC) for their extraordinary work and warmth, and to Mala' Seddeq Barakat for her indispensable collaboration as translator and interpreter.

Cover photo: Salam Almaslamani

The photo is part of the 2024 edition of the project '[Correspondences](#)', a photographic exchange between women experiencing gender-based violence in Palestine and Catalonia.

Design: Lucas Wainer Mattosso



The total or partial reproduction, distribution and public communication of this report are permitted, provided that they are not for commercial purposes and the authorship of the original work is acknowledged. The creation of derivative works is not permitted.

This publication was prepared by Escola de Cultura de Pau as part of the project 'Integral protection, from a gender perspective, for women exposed to multiple forms of violence (West Bank, Palestine)', ACCD 145/21/000026, led by Associació Hèlia and funded by the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation (ACCD). The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of Escola de Cultura de Pau and Associació Hèlia and does not reflect the opinion of the ACCD. This report is part of a series of publications on gender and Palestine that are available on the website [Tasharuk.cat](#) and in the websites of [Associació Hèlia](#) and [Escola de Cultura de Pau](#).

With the support of:



**Agència Catalana
de Cooperació
al Desenvolupament**



**Generalitat
de Catalunya**

ecp escola de
cultura de pau

UAB
Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona

 **HÈLIA**

Women and loss: the experience of psychosocial support for survivors of traumatic grief due to the Israeli occupation of Palestine

Executive summary

The many different forms of violence associated with the Israeli occupation are having an extraordinary impact on the Palestinian population, exposing them to situations that produce lasting, repetitive and transgenerational individual and collective traumas. In this context, this report focuses on a topic that deals with the interrelationship of human rights, gender and health issues, especially mental health: the situation of women grieving as a result of the Israeli occupation in Palestine. Specifically, it investigates the experience of a programme run since 2002 by the Palestinian feminist organisation Women's Studies Centre (WSC), which has focused on the traumatic grief experienced by Palestinian women due to a variety of losses: the deaths of sons, daughters, husbands, brothers and sisters; absences imposed by prison sentences; the demolition of or constant threats to their homes; the destruction of their livelihoods; and the long-term effects on their health and that of their families. WSC has developed a programme that has helped hundreds of women to cope with these losses for over two decades through an approach that interconnects individual and group support whilst engaging in community-level awareness-raising.

To properly depict the programme, its journey and its impact, this report analyses its origins during the First Intifada and the decision to focus on the experiences and stories of Palestinian women. It also addresses the reasons for taking an approach that connects grieving women in mutual support spaces (*bereaved-to-bereaved*, B2B) and investigates the dialogues they have established and the issues they have brought to light. These issues are not only linked to the impacts of the Israeli occupation, but also to problems arising from the social norms and gender stereotypes that shape their lives, including during the grieving period. The report also explores the evolution and some key developments of the programme, which, among other things, have led to its geographical and thematic expansion and networking with other organisations to promote grieving women's rights and political demands. The report concludes by identifying the programme's achievements and challenges, paying special attention to the testimonies of many of the women involved. Finally, it calls for much-needed reflection on trauma and grief in Palestine during the ongoing genocide.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	Introduction
6	Trauma, grief, coping and social support: some basic concepts
7	1. Origin: action-oriented research and a focus on <i>herstory</i>
9	2. The 'B2B' approach
10	3. Dialogues and support among grieving women: multiple losses
10	Women, death and martyrdom
12	Grief without bodies, frozen grief
13	Prison: the lesser evil?
14	Destroyed or threatened homes
14	Wounded women and the burden of caregiving
14	4. Evolution and key developments
15	Geographical and thematic expansion
15	Structure and networking
16	Visibility, reporting and dissemination
17	5. Achievements and challenges: some notes
20	Epilogue: loss and grief in times of genocide

Introduction

'Violence is incompatible with health. And repression and occupation have damaged the health of Palestinians in so many ways, especially their mental health'. As psychiatrist Samah Jabr explains,¹ the Palestinian experience has forced to revisit the concept of trauma and its consequences and to reflect on the limits of the terms proposed in Western literature. In the Palestinian case, diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder do not seem appropriate 'because we are never in the "post" phase: trauma is lasting, repetitive, collective, historical, transgenerational (...). For Palestinians, the threat is very real. It looms in their real lives, and not just in their minds, so of course there are immense traumatic consequences'.² The Palestinian population lives in a state of constant anticipation of catastrophe. The perception of permanent control and threat hanging over their lives produces an atmosphere dominated by feelings of anxiety, fear, tension, depression, confusion, an inability to predict, the constant anticipation of new traumas and a lack of control.³ Therefore, Palestinians experience trauma linked to their collective experience—trauma with a small *t*—and also trauma in the form of concrete and specific episodes that directly affect them and their families—traumatic events with a capital *T*.⁴

This conceptualisation of trauma in Palestine has also led to reflection on the need for projects that transcend individual approaches and address the trauma that affects the sense of community and national identity. As Jabr puts it, 'We need projects that are collective and that take the reconstruction of our identity and sense of community into account'.⁵ In the face of violence, human rights violations and the traumatic experiences they entail, it is necessary therefore to address both individual trauma (the wounds and particular harm caused to someone who experiences an act of violence that marks a turning point in their lives) and social trauma, meaning the impact that these collective events can have on a specific group or community. As Carlos Martín Beristain says, 'Psychosocial trauma refers to the dialectical relationship between the personal and the social, in which the trauma has been socially produced, but is fuelled by the relationship between the individual and society (...). This psychosocial dimension helps

us to understand the effects more comprehensively. Therefore, the consequences of human rights violations can only be understood within their context'.⁶ The introduction of this psychosocial perspective also makes it possible to highlight the cumulative effects of traumatic events (see Box 1). Added to this is an additional consideration: the health of Palestinian women in general, and their mental health in particular, is affected not only by the context of violence and occupation, but also by the weight of traditional gender roles, which, among other things, assign them the responsibility of ensuring domestic and family stability.⁷ Considering the context and these reflections relevant to Palestine, this report focuses on a topic that deals with the interrelationship of human rights, gender and health issues, especially mental health: the situation of women grieving as a result of practices of the Israeli occupation in Palestine. Specifically, it investigates the experience of a programme run since 2002 by the Palestinian feminist organisation Women's Studies Centre (WSC),⁸ which has focused on the multiple experiences of grief suffered by Palestinian women due to various losses linked to the Israeli occupation of Palestine: the deaths of sons, daughters, husbands, brothers, and sisters; absences imposed by prison sentences; the demolition of or constant threats to their homes; the destruction of their livelihoods; and the long-term effects on their health and that of their families. From a holistic feminist perspective explicitly committed to defending human rights, WSC has developed a programme that has sought to help hundreds of women to cope with these losses for over two decades through an approach that includes individual and group support, as well as community-level awareness-raising.

To properly depict this programme and its impacts, this report is structured into six sections. The first addresses the origins of the programme, which emerged in the context of the First Intifada, and the inception of an approach that stresses action-oriented research and highlights Palestinian women's stories and experiences. The second delves into the reasons for implementing the B2B (*bereaved-to-bereaved*) approach, which connects grieving women in spaces of mutual

1. A psychiatrist, a psychotherapist and the head of the West Bank mental health system, Samah Jabr is the author of many articles on the Israeli occupation's impacts on the Palestinian population and the book *Sumud: Resisting the oppression* (2021). Samah Jabr also starts in the documentary *Beyond the Frontlines: Resistance and Resilience in Palestine* (2017).

2. Interview with Samah Jabr, led by Juan Duarte (16 November 2023). *Quieren que los palestinos pierdan su subjetividad como seres humanos. La Izquierda Diario*.

3. Espanioli, H., and Aweidah, S. (September 2007). *The Experience of Bereaved Women in Mutual Psychological Support*, Women, Armed Conflict and Loss. Phase 2. Women's Studies Centre, p. 19.

4. Interview with health experts on psychological and psychosocial care at Women's Studies Centre, February 2024.

5. Interview with Samah Jabr, led by Juan Duarte, *op. cit.*

6. Martín Beristain, C. (2010). *Manual sobre perspectiva psicosocial en la investigación de derechos humanos*. Hegoa, p.13.

7. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2004). 'Conceptualizing Voices of the Oppressed in Conflict Areas' in Abu-Baker, K. *et al.*, *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss: The Mental Health of Palestinian Women in Occupied Territories* (p. 10). Women's Studies Centre.

8. Created in Jerusalem in 1989, Women's Studies Centre (WSC) defines itself as a non-governmental, secular, feminist and human rights organisation that works to develop and promote a feminist discourse based on values of social justice, gender equality and respect for human rights in accordance with international conventions and standards. For further information, see <https://www.wsc-pal.org/index-en.html>

support—grieving women helping and accompanying other grieving women. This key and distinctive element of the programme has been complemented by community-level awareness-raising campaigns. The third section examines the experience of conversations between women grieving due to practices of the Israeli occupation in an attempt to illustrate the nature of the many different losses faced by Palestinian women and the healing dynamics that these conversations have fostered. These conversations have brought to light not only the impacts of occupation policies, but also the problems resulting from social pressure based on customs, practices and gender stereotypes that particularly affect the experience of grieving

Palestinian women. The fourth section describes some key developments in the programme since its initial pilot phases, focusing on the geographic and thematic expansion of its scope, the search for sustainability through new structures and extensive networking with other organisations and the commitment to raising awareness of work involving grieving women to support further defence of their rights and political recognition of their demands. The fifth section identifies some achievements and challenges, with special emphasis placed on the testimonies of the main people involved in the programme. Finally, the epilogue calls for much-needed reflection on trauma and grief in Palestine in a time of genocide.

Trauma, grief, coping and social support: some basic concepts

In his *Manual sobre perspectiva psicosocial en la investigación de derechos humanos* ('Manual on a psychosocial perspective in human rights research'), Carlos Martín Beristain stresses that there is no single explanatory model for assessing the impact of experiences of violence that characterise human rights violations. Different models or perspectives can be used in a complementary manner, and three approaches are generally and often used around the ideas of trauma, crisis and grief. 'As traumatic experiences, these violations can be viewed as the impact of a wound or trauma that creates a fracture in people's lives. As stressful and extreme experiences, they can be analysed as extreme situations that strain all our personal and collective resources to try to cope with them. But the impact of violations can also be viewed as a grieving process, meaning how people cope with the loss of loved ones and significant ties'.⁹ Beristain points out that traumatic experiences often involve 'a profound questioning of the meaning of life and often become indescribable. Victims find themselves at a loss for words to express them or feel that what has happened to them and the magnitude of its impact on their lives will never be fully understood (...). Victims of traumatic events will want to both forget and remember'.¹⁰ The impacts are not uniform and depend on many different variables, including the individual's characteristics and age, as well as the type of event and the circumstances. Generally, however, the effects are considered to be greater when the events are sudden, prolonged, massive and intentional. The existence of previous traumatic events and personal resources, along with the level of support available to cope with the events, are relevant factors that influence the degree of the impact.¹¹ Approaches that revolve around ideas of

loss and grief focus on the human, material and social losses caused by human rights violations, how people deal with them and how to help in these processes.¹²

People often develop ways of dealing with traumatic experiences (coping mechanisms). One of the concepts often mentioned in this vein is resilience, understood as 'the human capacity to overcome difficulties, face challenges or traumatic events and learn from mistakes at the same time', Beristain explains, adding that 'we can also speak of collective resistance when groups or communities develop ways of dealing with events by strengthening cohesion, maintaining good communication or carrying out collective projects'. In Palestine, reference is made to the idea of *sumud*, a term similar to resilience but with different connotations. As Samah Jabr explains, 'Palestinians have used it for over 100 years, since the British Mandate. Palestinian literature and poetry speak of *sumud*, and if we conceptually analyse the different meanings and contexts in which it was written, we understand that it is about individual and collective resilience, which includes defying oppression and standing firm and persevering. It is not just a state of mind, but also action-oriented. It is a prosocial behaviour in very difficult times. All these meanings are included in the word *sumud*'.¹³ Finally, Beristain asserts that social support is crucial for coping with traumatic events and highlights that sharing experiences helps to validate, recognise, understand and give meaning to events. He asserts that 'social support is not so much about having an objective network of social relationships or people, but rather about that network being functional and perceived by the victim as a source of support and understanding'.¹⁴

9. Martín Beristain, C. (2010). *op. cit.*, p. 11.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

13. Interview with Samah Jabr, led by Juan Duarte (2023), *op. cit.*

14. Martín Beristain, C. (2010). *op. cit.*, p. 31.

The report is the result of research based on qualitative methods, combining desk research with interviews in Nablus (Palestine) and Barcelona (Spain) with the WSC team and participants in its women and grief programme. Special mention should be made of the members of the Nablus bereaved women's group interviewed in October 2022, who generously shared their stories despite the profound pain they endured. Also worthy of special mention are all the women who have agreed to give their testimony over the last two decades and whose diverse range of voices was collected in the publications and materials that have attempted to document the successive phases of the programme. Their words are undoubtedly the main foundation of this work.

1. Origin: action-oriented research and a focus on *herstory*

The programme about grieving women originated in the context of the Second Intifada (2000-2005/2008),¹⁵ immediately following the battle or massacre of Jenin in April 2002. As part of Operation Defensive Shield, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had launched an unprecedented attack on the Jenin refugee camp,¹⁶ which included airstrikes with helicopters and F-16s. The operation claimed the lives of 59 Palestinians, half of them civilians, devastated a large part of the camp (completely destroying 400 homes and damaging hundreds more) and forcibly displaced over 2,000 people. A total of 23 Israeli soldiers died in the fighting, which went on for twelve days.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, as international human rights organisations raised concerns about the IDF's excessive and indiscriminate use of force and evidence of war crimes in Jenin,¹⁸ the director of WSC, Sama Aweidah, and psychiatrist and academic Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian had the opportunity to visit the camp. Both women were able to join an international delegation that included representatives from the United States, Italy, France and Scotland, organised from Jerusalem by the Union of Palestinian

Medical Relief Committees (UPMRC). Upon arriving in Jenin, they witnessed the destruction, the ruins left by the attacks and the activity of Israeli bulldozers and the search for bodies and belongings among the rubble. They spoke with children who told them how they had seen corpses and dismembered bodies. They talked with a girl who confessed that when she grew up she wanted to be a suicide bomber. They conversed with women who were still watching over the remains of what had been their home or who had received no news about their brothers or husbands who had disappeared or been detained by Israeli forces. They also spoke with a doctor who condemned the attack on the hospital, the destruction of ambulances and the IDF's prevention of the arrival of wounded people. They visited a boy whose hand had been amputated and who died shortly thereafter, before he could be transferred to another hospital.¹⁹ Their visit exacted a heavy toll on Aweidah and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, who found the women in the camp traumatised, bewildered and on the verge of an anxiety attack.

“ I'll never forget that day. Seeing people crying, searching for their relatives, screaming because they couldn't find them. The children were crying, and we were trying to comfort them. One of the women called out to us and said, 'What are you waiting for? Come help me to look for my son's body!' It was one of the hardest days of my life. When we left the camp, Nadera and I started talking and thinking about what we could do. We decided we had to do something and agreed to launch a programme to help people dealing with these losses, to offer them psychosocial support. (Sama Aweidah).²⁰

The dramatic experience in the Jenin refugee camp prompted WSC to reflect on its role as an organisation defending women's rights and on the need to act through new approaches. They did not want their work to be limited to documenting and analysing victims' suffering. They wanted to work with women affected

15. The Second Intifada, or Al-Aqsa Intifada, erupted in September 2000 following a provocative visit by Likud leader and then-candidate Ariel Sharon to Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount) in Jerusalem. This was marked by the worsening situation of the Palestinian population following the Oslo process, the fading prospects for the creation of a Palestinian state and intense rivalry between the PLO and Hamas. The Second Intifada had been described as the worst upsurge in violence since 1967, and between 2000 and 2008 it left an estimated 6,600 dead, including 1,100 Israelis and 5,500 Palestinians. (There is no consensus on the end date of the Second Intifada, which is usually situated in February 2005, when a truce was declared by Sharon and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, or in later years.) Rashid Khalidi, *Palestina: Cien años de colonialismo y resistencia*, Madrid: Capitán Swing, p. 326-328.

16. The Jenin refugee camp mainly houses families from the Haifa and Carmel regions who arrived in the area after the 1948 Nakba. It was established in 1953 after a snowstorm destroyed the previous site and was partially rebuilt after the events of 2002. It covers an area of less than half a square kilometre and the total registered population in the camp exceeded 23,000 as of 2022. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Jenin has the highest unemployment and poverty rates of the 19 Palestinian refugee camps established in the West Bank. For more information, see UNRWA, *Jenin camp*.

17. For more information on the battle of Jenin and its impact, see Human Rights Watch, *Israel/Occupied Territories: Jenin War Crimes Investigation Needed*, 2 May 2002; UNRWA, *Rebuilding Jenin*, UNRWA report, 1 October 2003; Qassam Muaddi, *Jenin refugee camp: The battle that never ended*, *The New Arab*, 20 April 2022.

18. Human Rights Watch. (2022), *op. cit.*

19. Sama Aweidah offers a detailed, first-person account of the visit to the Jenin refugee camp in the following chapter: Aweidah, S. (2004). 'A Glimpse into Women's Stories' in Abu-Baker, K. *et al.*, *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss: The Mental Health of Palestinian Women in Occupied Territories* (pp. 99-111). Women's Studies Centre.

20. Interview with Sama Aweidah, October 2022.

by traumatic experiences and help them to alleviate their pain and regain a relative degree of normalcy in their lives. Realising that purely theoretical research was not enough to move them towards achieving their objectives, they decided to conduct action-oriented research to take action to bring about change.²¹ Thus began the first phase of the programme on Palestinian women and trauma, 'Women, Armed Conflict and Loss', with support from the Swedish organisation Kvinna till Kvinna (Woman to Woman). During this pilot phase (2002–2004), the work focused on Jenin, Nablus and Bethlehem, three areas particularly affected by violence at the time. Starting from a perspective that combined an interest in addressing human rights violations and mental health, they decided to collect more data and listen more closely to women's experiences, as well as to review concepts related to victimisation/survival, trauma and recovery.

As detailed by Shalhoub-Kevorkian, the head of research in the first phase of the programme (2002–2004) along with Sama Aweidah and the anthropologist and sociologist Khawla Abu-Baker, the objective was to address women's experiences to begin to construct the Palestinian experience according to their stories—*herstory* rather than *history*, according to a play on words in English—in an attempt to challenge the historical tendency that has denied women a voice in times of war and political conflict. With this approach in mind, the work focused on identifying and analysing women's reactions to the Israeli military incursions in Jenin, Nablus and Bethlehem during the Second Intifada; attempting to heal some of the collective wounds through work with groups of women survivors; developing and implementing new therapeutic and intervention strategies; and documenting and reporting crimes against women based on their own perceptions and narratives.²² Even then, the approach explicitly recognised the programme's connection to feminist and decolonial theories and methodologies. This involved highlighting the matrix of forms of oppression in the colonial context and placing the experiences of oppressed women at the centre.

Through individual interviews with women survivors and focus groups, the programme explored the effects

of trauma and political violence from the women's perspective (at the individual, family and collective levels), appropriate methods for helping other survivors, the main psychological and social symptoms of trauma and coping strategies. A total of 301 women (100 in each of the work areas) participated in a statistical study that determined that virtually all (99%) had directly suffered some material or emotional harm during the Second Intifada and that most (80%) considered the harm caused to their families to be severe. Nearly all the women interviewed (93%) had experienced events that had caused fear or terror; more than one tenth (12%) had been directly beaten by the occupying forces and three out of five (61%) had been humiliated or ridiculed by Israeli soldiers.²³

Additionally, the therapeutic support groups that were later established provided especially important spaces for bringing silenced feelings to light.²⁴ Between

15 and 18 women aged 19 to 68 met in each of the three initial groups. They had all experienced some kind of loss and suffered from physical, social and psychological consequences. During a dozen sessions, with the help of two facilitators specialised in social work, they shared their experiences and released their pain in a trusting environment, as one of the participants in this first phase acknowledged: 'I look forward to Tuesdays. I feel like a weight has been lifted from my chest when I come to the group'.²⁵ In her evaluation of the experience, Khawla Abu-Baker admits that at the beginning of the programme, it was difficult to convince the women that psychological support was no less important than financial support. However, 'as time went on, and after building a state of mutual trust, the participants began to discuss the psychological changes that were occurring in their lives and the improvement in their family atmosphere. By encouraging them to speak honestly and openly, they were able to give voice to many buried feelings, particularly those that caused them shame. For the first time in their lives, they found understanding and support, free from social blame, criticism or accusations'.²⁶

This support group for listening to other women's stories made the women more sensitive to different types of loss, helped them to understand its meaning

The dramatic experience in the Jenin refugee camp prompted WSC to reflect on its role as an organisation defending women's rights and on the need to act through new approaches

21. Aweidah, S. (2004). 'Palestinian Women and Trauma Project', in Abu-Baker, K. *et al.*, *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss: The Mental Health of Palestinian Women in Occupied Territories* (p. 3). Women's Studies Centre.

22. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2004). 'Conceptualizing Voices of the Oppressed in Conflict Areas' in Abu-Baker, K. *et al.*, *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss: The Mental Health of Palestinian Women in Occupied Territories* (p. 7). Women's Studies Centre.

23. Dabit, E. (2004). 'Analysis of Data' in Abu-Baker, K. *et al.*, *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss: The Mental Health of Palestinian Women in Occupied Territories* (p. 58). Women's Studies Centre.

24. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2004), pp.12–13.

25. Abu-Baker, K. (2004). 'Analysis of Support Groups: Participation of Palestinian Widows and Mourners in Support Groups to Relieve the Psychological and Social Pressures Resulting from Loss' in Abu-Baker, K. *et al.*, *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss: The Mental Health of Palestinian Women in Occupied Territories* (p. 97). Women's Studies Centre.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

and impact and provided them with tools to cope with grief. The facilitators also guided them in assessing the psychological state of their family members who had also experienced loss and offered them strategies to try to alleviate it. Thus, as Khawla Abu-Baker asserts, the women gained tools to leave behind a state of dependency, passivity and victimisation and become capable of dealing with loss and grief within their own families, thereby empowering many women. Even in this first phase, attention was paid to professional and activist women in charge of working directly with grieving women in the three selected locations. They received specialised counselling and therapeutic assistance, given the impact the sessions had on them personally and the harsh nature of many of the shared experiences.

2. The 'B2B' approach

Whilst the goal of the first phase of the programme was to identify and develop strategies that would address and help to respond to the situation of women grieving as a result of Israeli practices, whether due to the loss of a loved one, their home, their health, their livelihood or something else, in the second phase (2004–2007) WSC tried to develop an approach that would connect grieving Palestinian women with each other. Known as the *bereaved-to-bereaved (B2B) approach*, this involved continuing to work with some of the women survivors who had already participated in the first phase. In this second phase, which was also considered a pilot phase, these women took on the task of supporting other (new) women experiencing traumatic grief after receiving training in mental health and support skills. They were selected based on the type of loss they had experienced, their ability to move around relatively freely, their willingness to engage in the programme and their personalities and leadership qualities within the community. A total of 10 grieving women from each region participated in the training. Led by Khawla Abu-Baker, it focused on individual intervention strategies and group support strategies, exploring a deeper understanding of the concept of loss and other aspects. In the end, six women from each area became involved in the support group. With the ongoing support of the WSC technical team, they began meeting and presenting their experiences to women who had recently been struck by grief.²⁷

The support group for listening to other women's stories made the women more sensitive to different types of loss, helped them to understand its meaning and impact and provided them with tools to cope with grief

Why did they take this B2B approach? WSC decided to pursue an approach that they considered sensitive to gender and sociocultural characteristics, including religious ones, and in which they identified several benefits. For women recently struck by grief due to the policies of the Israeli occupation, it meant learning firsthand about the experiences of other women like themselves, who offered a concrete and personal model that gave them hope about the possibilities of overcoming grief. The approach centred women's voices and their capacity for empathy, for understanding the suffering of others and for avoiding denying their own feelings in the grieving process. It was also a non-hierarchical model in which feelings of equality and reciprocity took precedence. The women who offered support were both facilitators and part of the group.²⁸ As one of the grieving women in the support group said, 'No one will tell me "you haven't been there" or "you can't feel the same way I do", because I've been through the same suffering, and I'm talking to someone who's just like me'.²⁹

WSC's analysis found that this type of programme filled a gap in Palestinian society by allowing the needs and sadness of grieving women to be heard, given the lack of such services and a social context where a lack of awareness about the importance of mental health prevailed and even stigmatised it. In fact, the B2B approach offered a path with greater legitimacy at the community level. WSC noted that 'many do not accept psychological therapy for fear of rumours or being stigmatised. It is easier to accept this psychological support from ordinary people'.³⁰ Sama Aweidah gives two other reasons for taking a B2B approach: 'There's a new grieving woman every day, and we couldn't work with them all. That's why we had to organise our efforts so that the grieving women could get well and help each other. Another reason is that we realised this empowered them and helped them in their healing process'. Previously identified in the first phase, empowerment was thereby strengthened in the second phase through the greater involvement of the grieving women themselves in the support and mutual aid processes.

In this second phase, a third pillar of the programme was also established, focused on awareness-raising and community outreach. This offered the women guidance on how to cope with loss and on how those close to them

27. For more detailed information on the process of this phase, see Espanioly, H., and Aweidah, S. (September 2007). *The Experience of Bereaved Women in Mutual Psychological Support*, Women, Armed Conflict and Loss. Phase 2, Women's Studies Centre, pp.10-15.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-62.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

could support them and their families as they grieved. This was also conceived as a way to address and respond proactively to certain behaviours, stereotypes and social practices that particularly affect women during times of loss and even exacerbate their pain. As Sama Aweidah points out, they had already identified in the first phase that 'one of the problems these women faced was the community's reaction. For example, if a woman lost her child, the child would be taken away and buried before she had a chance to say goodbye'.

3. Conversations and support among grieving women: multiple losses

Forums for dialogue between women, both in individual and group sessions, confirm the importance of safe and non-mixed spaces for telling and validating their stories. As Espanioly and Aweidah argue, these types of groups, particularly for women, allow them to temporarily abandon their daily work and break the isolation imposed on them, helping them to discover common problems and feelings. They also allow them to understand that their problem is not theirs alone, but has social and political roots, thereby connecting with the feminist premise that the personal is political. It also appeals to Virginia Woolf's concept of the importance of finding spaces within patriarchal society to liberate women's voices.³¹ In these forums, women connect with each other, share their experiences, learn from them and feel less alone in their grief. The dynamic helps to ease tension and alleviate the feeling of isolation. In the initial sessions, grieving women bring a state of mind and mood characterised by feelings of sadness, despair and anger, as well as a pessimistic outlook on life. Some feel disoriented or face tensions with their husbands, families or loved ones. During the sessions, the women begin to express their feelings and talk about what has happened to them and about the grief they endure due to their loss or multiple losses: the death of children, husbands, parents and/or siblings; the absence of family members because they were arrested or held in prolonged detention; the degradation of their health due to the impact of violence on themselves or on family members they must care for; the destruction of or threats to their homes; and the loss of agricultural land and other means of livelihood. In these conversations, women don't just talk about their losses and their impact. They also dare to name the problems resulting from societal pressures based on customs, gender stereotypes and practices

Women don't just talk about their losses and their impact. They also dare to name the problems resulting from societal pressures based on customs, gender stereotypes and practices linked to religious issues

linked to religious issues. Indeed, the vast majority of WSC programme beneficiaries are Muslim, in line with the religious makeup of Palestinian society (1% of the population is Christian). Some acknowledge feeling watched and judged and admit the additional burden this places on them as they grieve.

The range of cases of loss is vast and each experience requires specific attention. However, some topics are particularly significant and illustrative of the experiences of grieving women in Palestine.

Women, death and martyrdom

The violent death of a child, husband, parent or sibling is often a universally painful and heartbreaking experience. In Palestine, this traumatic situation is directly linked to common practices of the Israeli occupation, including the abduction of corpses (which impedes the grieving process) and the demolition of homes as way to punish the families of those who have attacked Israelis. Additional factors include the way in which the loss is recognised, as many women learn about the events through media reports, as well as the customs and habits linked to social norms and religious beliefs that determine how grief is experienced. Furthermore, practices associated with ideas of martyrdom influence the Palestinian national struggle. Given the occupation and apartheid imposed by Israel, which severely restricts Palestinians' lives, the Palestinian community glorifies those who die resisting or fighting them. This is why both religious and secular people use the term 'martyr' (*shaheed* in Arabic) to draw attention to the circumstances of someone's death.³²

As a result, in the first phase of traumatic grief, many of these women are in a state of shock and unable to leave their homes for various reasons, some of which are related to social norms and traditions that impose a certain way of expressing grief and coping with loss. During the mourning period, which can be very long, women are expected to dress entirely in black and not wear any adornments (for more than a year in the case of widows), to have no contact with men other than family members and to remain in their homes for days or weeks. There are some exceptions: Muslim women who have lost their husbands are expected not to leave their homes for four months and 10 days. They are also expected not to visit or participate in any special events, such as weddings, as a sign of respect for the memory of their deceased husband.

31. Espanioly and Aweidah, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

32. Jabr, S. (25 February 2016). *Frozen in Their Grief: On the Bereavement of Palestinian Families*. *The Palestine Chronicle*.

These mechanisms of social control, which aim to regulate and influence women's behaviour during the mourning period, are especially significant for women who become mothers or widows of 'martyrs', as they must behave according to social norms, in part to preserve the status of the deceased. Thus, for example, these women are urged not to cry or express sadness, but to sing and howl upon learning of the death or during the funeral of their relatives, as a sign of glorification and pride in their actions. This is despite the fact that these practices often increase women's suffering. Specifically, regarding the mothers of 'martyrs', as Shalhoub-Kevorkian points out, there is a paradox: on the one hand, they are considered national icons of the Palestinian national movement, but at the same time, 'they are denied the simple gesture of saying goodbye to their dead children, or are prohibited from mourning, participating in their funerals, visiting their graves or participating in events related to their death, among other gender-related restrictions'.³³ Some participants in the group sessions noted that the 'martyrs' had practically been abducted and that many mothers were not allowed to touch them, hug them or express their grief. In some cases, they were even given sedatives. In response, the professionals and grieving women in the support groups have tried to challenge some interpretations, even by appealing to excerpts from the Quran and popular proverbs to facilitate communication with the grieving women, to avoid repressing their expressions of grief and encourage changes in attitude.³⁴

Considering these conditions during the mourning period, the psychosocial support team usually first make contact with other grieving women through home visits. The grieving women in the support groups try to ensure that those dealing with recent grief due to Israeli practices do not repeat the same mistakes as they did and seek to avoid isolation and loneliness, which are often very painful, as Fatima's testimony attests:³⁵

“ I'm a widow and live alone. My son was killed; he had 85 bullets in his body. I have another son in prison and my daughter is married. I'm usually at home, alone, and I surround myself with their photographs and talk to them as if they were alive, as if they were with me. Sometimes I think I'm going crazy. I feel so alone; there's no one to

comfort me. My husband is no longer here. He's not here to make me feel supported. Sometimes I get very emotional, or I feel very angry, and I don't know why I feel that way. And then I feel bad about the grief or the harm I may have caused to people around me, like my daughter, for example, who is very supportive. My son, who is in prison, encourages me to go out, to go to events, to connect with other people. But my daughter is worried. She doesn't want me to attend events associated with martyrs or other funerals that would make me relive the situation. I didn't leave the house for eight months. I declined every invitation. I didn't go to any 'happy' places (...). After losing my son, a WSC professional began visiting me. They knew I was going through a difficult time and that I was depressed. At first, we met alone at my house. I began to feel better, more secure, and interact more with people. I started going to my daughter's house. Then they told me about the programme and I began attending group meetings. I felt good. It comforted me to realise I didn't have to stay sad. I wasn't the only one who had lost a son, a husband or a father. I tried my best and found support in the group. At first, I was afraid to share my story because my family was still being investigated, but then I felt confident.³⁶

The sessions among grieving women have also revealed cases of women who indulged in excessive glorification of their dead children, creating an extraordinary image of them, often to the detriment of caring for and nurturing their other children, some of whom also expressed a desire to become 'martyrs' to receive the same kind of love and attention. The conversations also confirmed that parents fear the idea of martyrdom and 'prefer' that their children be arrested or wounded as a lesser evil. In cases involving minors—both in cases of death and arrest—there are even situations in which the mothers are blamed, according to traditional patriarchal assumptions dominant in Palestinian society, which places responsibility for their children, their family and their home on them. 'My

husband blames me for sending him to school. Ibrahim didn't want to go, but I insisted that he go to school. He went to school and was martyred. That's why my husband and daughter blame me now'.

The mechanisms of social control, which aim to regulate and influence women's behaviour during the mourning period, are especially significant for women who become mothers or widows of 'martyrs'

33. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

34. Taking an approach sensitive to culture, language and communication, WSC and the women's support groups for traumatic grieving women have incorporated the use of popular sayings like 'when you see calamity in others, your own seems lighter', 'the living exist more than the dead', 'prison does not close forever for those inside it', 'the Prophet wept for his son Ibrahim' (used especially to legitimise displays of grief and refute the belief that tears 'torture' the dead), 'satisfying people is an impossible goal' and others. Espanioly and Aweidah (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 84.

35. Fictitious name to preserve the identity of the grieving woman. Group interview at WSC with participants in the Nablus support group, October 2022.

36. Testimony adapted from Samira's account during the interview.

From the very beginning, WSC's research and reflections on the women and grieving programme have also drawn attention to the effects on the widows of 'martyrs', noting the many problems they face. Some have serious financial difficulties supporting their children. Others have problems with their husbands' families, who sometimes don't allow them to leave the house or want to force them to marry one of their brothers-in-law 'for the sake of their children' or to allow them to continue living in the family home.³⁷ Khawla Abu-Baker explains that some social norms legitimise the social oppression of widows by their husbands' families and that in some cases, one of the key issues of dispute is control over the material compensation provided by the Palestinian authorities to the families of the 'martyrs'.³⁸ Many problems also spring from the social expectations about how they should behave and the criticism they face if they decide to leave home before a certain time has elapsed, if they communicate with men outside their immediate family or even if they are heard laughing. Therefore, spreading rumours becomes a dangerous means of exercising social control over widows. If they resume their relatively normal lives, it can be interpreted as a lack of respect for their deceased husband.

The absence of a body creates uncertainties and unknowns that make the grieving process and acceptance of loss difficult

features. One of them has to do with Islamic religious considerations, since, as Espanioly and Aweidah point out, the dead must be buried immediately to protect their honour and failure to do so creates deep unease within families. Some of the testimonies from grieving women participating in support groups illustrate this pain: 'I feel deep sorrow when I see other people visiting the graves of their children and families, whilst my son is gone'. 'Four years have passed and I still haven't received my son's body. Where can I visit him?' another asked.⁴⁰

The absence of a body also creates uncertainties and unknowns that make the grieving process and acceptance of loss difficult. This can lead to what is known as 'frozen grief', when a traumatic experience and loss have not been processed, prolonging psychological pain.⁴¹ In Palestine, the missing bodies may also literally be frozen, as the Israeli forces sometimes bury the bodies in military cemeteries and occasionally keep them in cold storage in morgues. In the 1960s, Israel may have kept the bodies of murdered Palestinians in secret cemeteries and it may have resumed this policy, this time using cold storage, starting in 2015.⁴² Between 2016 and 2021, the bodies of around 300 Palestinians who lost their lives in violent incidents had been kept in morgues. Human rights organisations such as Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center (JLAC) and B'Tselem condemned this practice as cruel and vengeful and a form of collective punishment in violation of international law.⁴³ This is especially true given that Israeli forces have documented use of this practice as a means of pressuring families. For example, in exchange for returning the body, they have demanded that the funeral be held at night with a limited number of people to avoid triggering anti-occupation demonstrations.⁴⁴ As Suhad Daher-Nashif argues, Israel's necropolitical practices include 'managing the mourning of the colonised population and decisions about how, when, where and with whom the colonised should die'.⁴⁵

Grief without bodies, frozen grief

Over the years, work with grieving Palestinian women has also called attention to the extremely harsh experience of those who do not receive—or may even take years to receive—the relatives' bodies due to Israel's decision to keep them. This continues to particularly affect women living in conflict zones and violent environments around the world, such as those whose family members disappeared during the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina in the late 1970s and the tens of thousands of women's loved ones who disappeared during the armed conflict in Syria, to give just two examples.³⁹ In Palestine, this situation also has some distinctive

37. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

38. Abu-Baker, K., *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81. There are funds linked to the PLO and the PA that are intended to financially compensate the families of 'martyrs' and people detained by Israel. When someone is killed, their families receive basic support, to which an extra amount is added if the deceased leaves behind a spouse or children. The children of people killed by Israel receive assistance until they turn 18, find work or finish their studies. For many families, this is their primary source of income. Israel has attempted to discredit and block the funding, arguing that it incites violence and glorifies 'terrorism'. Palestinian authorities and others, however, defend the funding as key to socially protecting families facing extraordinary hardship to survive under the oppressive conditions imposed by the Israeli occupation. For more information, see the following article: Telhami, S. (7 December 2020). *Why the discourse about Palestinian payments to prisoners' families is distorted and misleading*. *Brookings*.

39. OHCHR (29 June 2023). *UN Syria Commission of Inquiry lauds long-awaited international institution to clarify fate and whereabouts of tens of thousands missing and disappeared*. *OHCHR Press Release*.

40. Testimonies in Espanioly and Aweidah (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 27.

41. Cepeda, C., Arbizu, J., and Kantt, M. (2020). *Duelo sin cuerpo. Experiencias con familiares de desaparecidos en el mar*. Fourth International Congress of Psychology and Seventh National Congress of Psychology 'Science and Profession'. Faculty of Psychology, National University of Córdoba, p. 2; Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, IIDH (2007). *Atención integral a víctimas de tortura en procesos de litigio. Aportes psicosociales*, p. 256.

42. Daher-Nashif, S. (2021). *Colonial management of death: To be or no to be dead in Palestine*. *Current Sociology*, 69(7), p. 945.

43. Mas, J. (27 August 2021). *Los cuerpos de palestinos muertos y retenidos por Israel, una herida abierta*. *Swissinfo.ch*.

44. Swiss Info (24 January 2016). *El conflicto entre israelíes y palestinos trasciende la muerte*. *Swissinfo.ch*; Jabr, S. (2016), *op. cit.*

45. Daher-Nashif, S. (2021), *op. cit.*, p. 945.

This (necro)policy is even applied to the bodies of minors, as illustrated by the case of Samira, one of the participants in the Nablus bereaved women's group who lives in a state of pain, anguish and uncertainty, having received no news of the whereabouts of her 15-year-old son.⁴⁶

“ I heard about it on the news, but I haven't received any specific information. Nobody has officially notified us of his death. At first, we were told he was wounded in the shoulder and he isn't dead in a video circulating on social media. I'm not sure if my son is dead or not. I only know that he's being held by the Israelis, either detained or dead. Hundreds of families are in the same situation. One family of a 14-year-old boy was given the wrong body. I think it was an accident, because my son wasn't someone who would confront the Israelis. I'm sure he didn't get involved in fighting with them. Our entire family has been investigated and interrogated. We've tried to get information from the Israeli forces and from lawyers. We've contacted various institutions, human rights organisations and hospitals, but nobody has told us anything. The occupation refuses to give us any information. We've been told his file is secret. There are people who doubt whether he's dead or not.⁴⁷

Dilemmas and psychological impacts also affect women who are forced to supervise their children under house arrest, such as happens in Jerusalem

on other consequences and dilemmas. For example, some mothers inform the Israeli forces of their son's whereabouts because they would rather that their sons be captured than possibly killed. As Khawla Abu-Baker indicates, when parents choose this 'lesser evil', it gives rise to mental and emotional dissonance and internal, family and social conflicts, as the decision can be interpreted as a form of collaboration with the occupation, a betrayal of the national cause or even a threat to the family's safety.⁴⁸

In the first phase of the programme, a woman who had endured this experience, and who suffered psychological distress and insecurity about her fitness as a mother and her role as the protector of her children as a result, could share her experience with the group: 'I was afraid he would be shot when he escaped. That's why I told the soldier where my son was. I told myself it was better for him to get arrested than shot. I love my son so much, not like other mothers who tell them to run away, and when they do, the soldiers kill them. I would die without him. He's almost finished his sentence', she said.⁴⁹ Other grieving women have provided similar testimonies in later years: 'When they came to arrest him, he tried to escape. But his brothers and I begged him to stay with us and insisted that it didn't matter how long he spent in prison, because if he ran away and the soldiers shot him, we would lose him, and it would be a catastrophe'. Another said: 'The last time my son was arrested, I opened the door whilst he was asleep. I refused to wake him up so he couldn't run away. I was afraid for him'.⁵⁰

Along these same lines, dilemmas and psychological impacts also affect women who are forced to supervise their children under house arrest, such as happens in Jerusalem.⁵¹ The Israeli occupation forces restrict Palestinians' movement in the city, including this practice, which forces minors to stay in their homes or the homes of relatives, far from their place of residence. Family members are responsible for ensuring that they

Prison: the lesser evil?

WSC's work also focused on the experiences of women with detained family members and the suffering involved when waiting days, months and even years to visit them. The impacts are exacerbated by lengthy periods of separation, harsh prison conditions, the obstacles that must be overcome when visits are finally allowed and certain restrictions, such as the prevention of physical contact with family members during their visits. Conversations between grieving women about their detained loved ones have also touched

46. Samira is a fictitious name to preserve the identity of the grieving woman. Group interview with participants in the Nablus support group, October 2022.

47. Testimony adapted from Samira's account during the interview.

48. Abu-Baker, K. (2004), *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

50. Testimonies in Espanioly and Aweidah (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 26.

51. Since occupying East Jerusalem after the 1967 war, Israel has de facto annexed the city and declared that it is its sole and indivisible capital in 1980. However, this declaration is not internationally recognised and the annexation of Jerusalem is considered illegal under international law. Despite being born and living in the city, most Palestinians living in East Jerusalem have the status of 'permanent residents'. Their Israeli identification card is what authorises them to live in their homes. Israel only grants them certain rights and not all those enjoyed by Israeli citizens. In addition, successive Israeli governments have implemented various policies to try to reduce the Palestinian population in East Jerusalem by imposing harsh restrictions on construction and family reunification policies and minimal investment in infrastructure and services in the area. Since the late 1990s, Israel has pursued another policy requiring Palestinians to prove that Jerusalem is the 'centre of their lives'. Otherwise, they lose their residency permits permanently. For more information, see: Ben-Hillel, Y. (December 2013). *The Legal Status of East Jerusalem*. Norwegian Refugee Council; Stein, Y. (April 1997). *The Quiet Deportation. Revocation Of Residency Of East Jerusalem Palestinians*, joint report by BT'selem and Hamoked; Jefferis, D. (2012). *The "Center of Life" Policy: Institutionalizing Statelessness in East Jerusalem*. *Jerusalem Quarterly Issue 50*. Institute for Palestine Studies.

do not leave the home during court proceedings or after they are sentenced, so in practice they become their guardians.⁵² As indicated by the NGO Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), the Israeli authorities especially apply this policy against children under 14, because Israeli law does not allow minors under that age to serve prison sentences.⁵³ This policy has been active since 2014. It compromises children's rights (such as the right to go to school and to receive medical treatment) and creates great tension between children and their families, especially their mothers. 'It's a major problem for the relationship between mother and child because the children come to see her as the responsible party, the police, the one who won't let them leave the house. They don't understand that it's not their mother's decision and that she has to prevent them from leaving to protect them, because if they do go outside, they'll be imprisoned', Sama Aweidah explains.⁵⁴

Many women deal with tense or stressful family situations due to the special needs of family members wounded in acts of violence

to evacuate their homes during continuous search operations and witnessed humiliation and degrading treatment. They also discussed the impact of specific practices, such as the use of dogs in search operations (animals considered impure by some Muslims, including Palestinians, and not allowed inside their homes). The grieving mothers also suffer from and fear their children's deprivation of the most basic rights they should enjoy and their own problems coping with loss and grief within their families.

Wounded women and the burden of caregiving

Many women deal with tense or stressful family situations due to the special needs of family members wounded in acts of violence. Most caregiving duties fall on women. Their concerns include who will take over these caregiving duties when they are gone, as Salma expressed:⁵⁶

Destroyed or threatened homes

In later phases of the programme, many women spoke of the psychological impact of the demolition of their home and the consequences for Palestinian women who suffer the constant threat of their homes being destroyed. 'My children and I were mentally devastated. They destroyed all the hope we had. After my husband recovered—the soldiers had severely beaten him, leaving him with hemiplegia—the army demolished our house again', acknowledged one of the grieving women who had suffered the destruction of her home twice. In the support groups, some admitted seemingly paradoxical feelings: 'When they demolished my house, I felt relieved, since now at least they wouldn't be banging on our door and terrorising us every night'. The constant fear of being a target of further Israeli military operations produces feelings of a lack of control, fear and anxiety. 'One woman can't relax and sleeps fully dressed. We have no stability at all', one of them said.⁵⁵ Some of the women also expressed concern about the impact of these situations on the mental health of their underage children, who were forced

“My son lived abroad, but he came to visit me and we were both shot whilst we were on the balcony of our house. The ambulance didn't arrive until several hours later and my son was presumed dead, but he ultimately spent 18 months in a coma and now he is in a wheelchair. I fell into a depression because of my son's situation. He is now 42 years old and my job is to try to find him a wife to take care of him in the future.”⁵⁷

4. Evolution and key developments

Since the programme's inception, WSC's work on women and traumatic grief has benefited hundreds of women and their families. The programme continued to receive financial support from Kvinna till Kvinna until late 2020. Since then, it has continued as part of new projects in collaboration with the Catalan feminist NGO Associació Hèlia, funded by the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation (ACCD), Barcelona City Council and the Official College of Psychology of Catalonia.⁵⁸ The main lines of the programme continue

52. Testimonios in Espaniol and Aweidah (2007), *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

53. According to the Jerusalem Prisoners' Families Committee, the Israeli occupation authorities issued nearly 2,200 house arrest orders between January 2018 and March 2022, 114 of them for children under the age of 12. MIFTAH notes that the number of such orders fell in 2021 and 2022, following the enactment of new regulations allowing the detention of children under 14 and imposing harsher punishments for those accused of practices such as stone-throwing.

54. Interview with Sama Aweidah, Ramallah, October 2022.

55. Testimonios in Espaniol and Aweidah (2007), *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

56. Fictitious name to protect the grieving woman's identity. Group interview with participants in the Nablus support group, October 2022.

57. Testimony adapted from Salma's account during the interview.

58. The programme began with support from Kvinna till Kvinna under the name 'Women, Armed Conflict and Loss'. In recent years, it has been run as part of the project 'Women, War and the Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Palestinian State'. More recently, WSC's work on traumatic grief has been a part of the following projects led by Associació Hèlia: 'Comprehensive protection of women exposed to multiple forms of violence from a gender perspective' (West Bank, Palestine)' (2022-2023) and 'Comprehensive health of women exposed to multiple forms of violence from a gender perspective' (West Bank, Palestine)' (2023).

to be individual work with grieving women, work in support groups and awareness-raising actions at the community level. Throughout the work and reflection on this approach over the course of more than two decades, there have also been developments to consolidate and enrich it. These include the geographical and occasionally thematic expansion of the scope of action, the pursuit of continuity and sustainability through greater institutionalisation and work with other organisations and actors and efforts aimed at highlighting the programme and grieving women's experiences as a way to further defend Palestinian women's rights and gain political recognition for their demands. A brief analysis of these developments confirms the ongoing commitment to a holistic and feminist approach, which has been adapted to the evolving needs of rights holders to the extent possible.

Geographical and thematic expansion

The programme focusing on grieving Palestinian women initially encompassed Jenin, Nablus and Bethlehem, then later expanded to other communities in the West Bank, including Halhul, Hebron, Jerusalem, Tubas and Qalqilya.⁵⁹ WSC has had to address the specific aspects and impacts of the occupation in each of these locations, but Jerusalem deserves special mention. Efforts in Jerusalem proved especially complex due to the political sensitivity of working with grieving women, which involved problems in spreading information and overcoming reluctance from collaborating organisations, some of which feared that the Israeli authorities would shut them down if they addressed the issue. The occupation's use of a distinct and unique form of violence in Jerusalem also highlighted the need to broaden the work thematically to address a specific issue mentioned above: the house arrest of Palestinian minors. WSC began working with mothers of these children but realised that the children's trauma had to be addressed as well. According to MIFTAH data, 85% of children in occupied Jerusalem suffered from some form of mental disorder after being detained or placed under house arrest. 'We started working with the mothers at first, after considering them as part of the bereaved women's group. But then we decided we couldn't work with them without working with the children. That's how we opened the door to working with volunteers from universities studying psychology, social work and sociology so that, after doing some WSC training, they could visit these

children in their homes and talk with them. Some began to draw and write'.⁶⁰ In 2020, WSC received the Welfare Association award for Jerusalem-based organisations and dedicated its resources to the B2B programme and to working with mothers, families and children under house arrest. These efforts also led to the publication of an illustrated book featuring some of the children's stories.⁶¹

Structure and networking

In pursuit of continuity and sustainability in the work with grieving women, successive phases of the programme have sought to strengthen the B2B approach and establish mechanisms to make it easier to address the various needs of the women identified in individual and group sessions. For example, from the outset, WSC networked with other feminist organisations or organisations working to defend the human rights of the Palestinian population. In the first phase, collaboration was proposed with organisations such as the Family Defense Society (FDS), the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), which expressed their willingness to address any needs of the grieving women participating in the programme and offer specialised assistance. In later stages, work continued to identify the various local institutions that provide services to women and their families in the areas of activity (initially in Nablus, Jenin and Bethlehem) and partnerships were established to facilitate collaboration and involvement in the programme. It was also decided to establish programme advisory committees in the various locations, comprised of women and men representing various organisations and institutions. This would make it easier to identify useful services for grieving women, mechanisms for action, support for their children and opportunities to raise awareness about grief and its impact on physical and mental health. For example, in the fourth phase of the programme (2011-2013), the advisory committee in Nablus was made up of representatives from ministries (during the course of the programme, relations were established primarily with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs)⁶², academia (An-Najah National University and Al-Quds Open University), civil society (the Working Women Centre for Development of Community Resources and the Community Rehabilitation Center) and the media (Isdaa Press Center and An-Najah Radio Station).⁶³

The programme focusing on grieving Palestinian women initially encompassed Jenin, Nablus and Bethlehem, then later expanded to other communities in the West Bank, including Halhul, Hebron, Jerusalem, Tubas and Qalqilya

59. At the time of publication of this report, the most recent phase of the programme was being implemented in Hebron, Jenin, Nablus and Tubas. .

60. Interview with Sama Aweidah, October 2022.

61. Entitled *Back home stories (Historias de regreso a casa)*, the illustrated book is available in Arabic on the WSC website.

62. The Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees' Affairs was established in 1998 within the framework of the Oslo Accords. In 2014, it was replaced by the Commission for Detainees and Ex-Detainees' Affairs, which reports to the PLO.

63. Hassnain, S. (January 2014). *Women, War and Political Conflicts: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territory. The Fourth Phase 2011-2013, Report Evaluation*, p. 45.

Many organisations have contributed to the WSC programme over the past 20 years and networking has become a distinctive feature, facilitating grieving women's access to information about their rights, support and opportunities.⁶⁴ In its most recent phases, WSC's work with grieving women has been carried out in partnership with organisations such as Health Work Committees (HWC), Médecins Sans Frontières, the UNRWA-affiliated Mental Health Clinic and the Ministry of Health, to which cases of grieving women requiring follow-up and specialised psychological care are referred. Work has also been done with the Palestinian Prisoners' Club and efforts continue with the Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs.

Work about and with grieving women has also been influenced in recent years by the involvement of WSC in Palestinian feminist networks, especially Al Muntada, a Palestinian NGO forum to cope with violence against women, which promotes changes in discriminatory Palestinian laws, and Fada, a coalition that challenges fragmentation and brings together organisations of Palestinian women from 1948 (with Israeli citizenship)⁶⁵ in Gaza, the West Bank and the diaspora. Although WSC's participation in both networks has no direct relationship with the programme's activities, in practice it also helps to address multidimensional violence facing Palestinian women.⁶⁶

At the same time, one of the most significant developments in terms of structure and institutionalisation has been the establishment of associations made up of grieving women themselves. After 11 years of work, WSC and women who had participated in the programme decided to institutionalise their efforts and create the first such association in Nablus, with the idea that it could assume the work of advocating for the needs of grieving women at the local, national and regional levels. The Eternal Women Society of Nablus was registered in early 2013, following a training phase for its members in topics such as management, leadership, planning, women's rights advocacy and gender.⁶⁷ In 2020, similar associations or branches of grieving women were established in Jenin, Hebron and Jerusalem, following

training to enable them to operate independently. In the final year of the programme, supported by Kvinna till Kvinna, WSC supported the three new associations and jointly implemented the programme at the individual and group levels, whilst also conducting community-level outreach. The Jerusalem Association of Bereaved Women was also involved in implementing the project for minors under house arrest.

One of the most significant developments in terms of structure and institutionalisation has been the establishment of associations made up of grieving women themselves

The Eternal Women Society (which is sometimes also called the Eternal Women Association due to the English translation of its name from the Arabic) describes itself as a feminist, non-profit civil society organisation dedicated to helping women to overcome the impact of loss and empowering them to have a positive impact on society. 'Women who have gone through the entire process have become colleagues', notes one of WSC's technical professionals.

In the 2023-2024 phase of the programme, WSC was working with the Eternal Women Society branch in Jenin after the organisation contacted them and requested support to provide psychological help to women in the city and the Jenin refugee camp amid deteriorating security conditions and the intensification of Israeli military operations in the area, such as those carried out by the IDF in June and July 2023.

Visibility, reporting and dissemination

Added to these developments is the growing awareness over the years of the need for and importance of providing visibility to the programme and to the experiences of grieving women. Some of the cases were referred to local and international human rights organisations and some stories were professionally documented to facilitate their circulation. Several of the grieving women's experiences were therefore forwarded to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and some agreed to testify at international forums. Meetings between WSC and grieving women with MPs in Sweden and Germany were also important for raising awareness of the issue internationally. This was particularly the case in Sweden, where financial support for the programme was extended for several

64. For example, in 2018 the advisory committees in the different locations where the programme was implemented were composed of the following organisations: the Mental Health Institute, the Hebron Directorate's Office, the Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture, the Prisoners' Club, the Prisoners' Rehabilitation Center, UNRWA, WCLAC, the Union of Psychological and Social Specialists, the Women's and Children's Unit, TIPH and the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees in Hebron; the Jerusalem Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, the Union of Health Work Committees, WCLAC and Al-Thori Women's Club in Jerusalem; and the Women's Unit / District Jenin, the Ministry of Education, PMRC, YMCA, Al Najdah, Girls' Care Centre, Al-Haq and Association of Women Action in Jenin.

65. The Palestinians 'of 1948' remained in the territory where Israel was proclaimed that year. They were granted Israeli citizenship (in Israel they are called 'Arab-Israelis'), but this citizenship is part of a nation-state that declares itself Jewish. Until 1966, they were subjected to martial law and their daily lives were shaped by their status as second-class citizens and by the different forms of systematic discrimination they suffered. For further information, see the following chapter: Domínguez de Olazábal, I. (2022). 'Los palestinos de 1948' in *Palestina. Ocupación, colonización, segregación*. Los Libros de la Catarata.

66. Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Studies Centre. (31 January 2021). *Women, War and the Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the OPT, phase-out*, Narrative annual report (2020), p. 6.

67. *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

years after their stories were heard.⁶⁸ The testimonies and documented cases of grieving women have thereby enabled lobbying and reporting on the effects of the occupation on Palestinian women, which has boosted political recognition of their demands. The testimonies and documented cases of grieving women have thereby enabled lobbying and reporting on the effects of the occupation on Palestinian women, which has boosted political recognition of their demands.

At the same time, reflection over the years has revealed the importance of sharing the experiences of grieving women and the B2B approach beyond Palestine. A national conference organised as part of the programme during the 2017-2019 implementation period, in which various stakeholders participated, also recommended transferring the knowledge accumulated over the years of working with grieving women to other areas, and particularly to conflict zones. In 2017, members of the WSC team participated in an exchange of experiences with other organisations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at a meeting organised by Kvinna till Kvinna in Sweden. During this trip, members of the technical team and grieving women from the Jerusalem and Hebron support groups also gave their testimonies at a conference to reflect on the 50 years of occupation from a feminist perspective.⁶⁹ WSC has also been in contact with Syrian women who wanted to work with grieving women who were refugees abroad and provided them with training in Türkiye. However, attempts to directly transfer the experience to Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon failed at the time due to several obstacles, including difficulties in obtaining Lebanese government approval for such activities.⁷⁰

Along these same lines, the communications work has boosted the visibility and political and social legitimacy of the experience and has included the production of a documentary about grieving women's associations. This was conceived as a useful tool for presenting the new organisations to the general public, government institutions and potential donors.⁷¹

Achievements and challenges: some notes⁷²

In more than two decades of work on women and grief, successive evaluations of WSC's programme have confirmed its positive impact. Over the years, it has helped many Palestinian women and their families to cope with painful situations of bereavement, enabling women who share similar experiences to come together to listen, empathise with and support each other. It has helped grieving women to regain self-confidence and the ability to make decisions about their lives and their families' lives, whilst assisting some to achieve greater independence, visibility and prominence in speaking out about the difficult paths they have had to navigate due to the impacts of violence and the challenges they have faced when demanding recognition of their rights and questioning some social norms that have negatively affected them after their losses. Surveys conducted during the most recent phases of the programme to assess psychological and behavioural changes indicated that 85% of the participants felt they had become better able and more willing

to integrate socially and expressed a desire to participate in community activities. They also reported feeling calmer and having improved their ability to understand others. Some expressed a desire to help others and guide them in easing the burden of their grief. The surveys also confirmed that the community work had had positive effects. After participating in information and awareness-raising activities, most participants reported being more aware of mental health concepts associated with loss and the need to support grieving women. These activities have also helped to raise awareness about how to react during potential arrests or confrontations with the Israeli military or settlers,⁷³ as well as how to access institutions that provide support. They have also been increasingly used to raise awareness about women's rights, women's roles in public and private spaces, and violence against women suffering from traumatic grief due to the occupation and against women in general, among other issues.

The testimonies of the women involved in the programme have been key to illustrating the positive consequences

The testimonies and documented cases of grieving women have thereby enabled lobbying and reporting on the effects of the occupation on Palestinian women, which has boosted political recognition of their demands

68. Interview with Sama Aweidah, October 2022.

69. Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Studies Centre. (1 February 2018). *Women, War and Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Palestinian State*, Narrative final report (2017-2019 period), pp. 9-11.

70. Interview with Sama Aweidah, October 2022.

71. The video is available on the [WSC Facebook page](#) with English subtitles.

72. This report does not purport to provide a comprehensive or independent professional evaluation of the implementation of projects associated with the 'Women, Armed Conflict and Loss' programme, or of the fulfilment of verification indicators or theory of change models related to it. However, by reconstructing the experience, it is possible to identify and highlight some positive aspects and problems or challenges observed over the years that the programme has been implemented.

73. Residents of settlements built by Israel on occupied territory and considered illegal under international law. Violence carried out by Israeli settlers against Palestinians and their property has increased significantly in recent years. In 2023 (before the events of 7 October), three incidents were counted each day, according to data collected by the United Nations. UN News. (1 November 2023). [Rise in intimidation, settler violence in the West Bank, warns OCHA](#).

and change set in motion throughout its successive phases.

The women's participation in the group's listening and mutual support sessions was found to provide the following positive effects:

- 'I feel like we're like sisters. We've become close friends. I've finally found people I can talk to about my worries. I didn't have anyone to do that with before'.⁷⁴
- 'The group is where I feel most comfortable. I'm able to express myself freely there. I can go to a session feeling depressed and leave feeling totally different. Thank God, this is the place that comforts me'.⁷⁵
- 'I didn't want to go to the sessions after my husband died. I longed for death because we were so young and the grief was too great. I wasn't convinced that the sessions would change my way of seeing things. Over time, I realised the importance and impact of the sessions in changing many negative thoughts and feelings that I couldn't share with anyone else. That's why I've committed to the sessions and I look forward to each one'.⁷⁶

Participants also spoke about the importance of sharing experiences and the impact of other grieving women's testimonies:

- 'When we hear other people's stories, our own stories seem easier to deal with. What happened to us is serious, but when you hear what others have gone through, your problems seem smaller'.⁷⁷
- 'Honestly, I used to think I was the only person with worries and problems, like I was the only one with a child in prison. I thought it was the end of the world, but believe me when I say that I felt ashamed listening to the experiences of other grieving women, especially those who have supported us. When I think about their journey of personal transformation, I think about myself and wish I could be like them'.⁷⁸

Some had this to say about transformation and empowerment processes after participating in the programme:

- 'I used to see a psychiatrist, but he couldn't help me. I was devastated and desperate. I had no energy to do anything. I couldn't make even the simplest decisions in my life; I had lost control of my home, and the community and my surroundings had taken the initiative and decided my life for me. After the sessions, which I would call truly magical, I began to feel so much better. I started sleeping better. I became a new person. My main concern became how to provide for my children without paying attention to the people around me who had had a negative impact on my life. Most importantly, I stopped taking tranquilisers. I don't need them. Today I have self-confidence. I support others and I love this work. I've recovered myself. I am present and my presence is important. I love myself and the people around me. I would like to help more and give more support (...). I started taking care of myself and caring about how I look. Even the colour of my clothes changed. I stopped dressing in all black'.⁷⁹
- The day 5 November 2014 left deep scars on my heart. It was the day I received the news of my husband's death. My reaction was cold and resigned, as if I had lost control over my emotions, as if I had lost the will to live (...). I was totally lost. I didn't know how or where to continue my journey. Fear and sadness overwhelmed me, whilst my children played around me. I decided to be strong (...) and contacted the Women's Studies Centre, because I knew they cared about grieving women and their psychological state. I joined a group and met other women who had lost their children, their husbands and their homes here and who remained patient, resolute and tough. There, my weakness transformed into power, my grief into hope, and I was able to stand up. I enrolled in university and completed my studies. I began to provide help. I grew stronger and became capable of taking on other people's sadness and giving them hope. I was able to realise my potential and pave the way for my children. I faced many problems. People in my rural community talked behind my back, criticising me for leaving home. According to them, a widow should stay home with her children. I rejected that idea and remained defiant.⁸⁰
- 'My life has changed so much. I felt like I was dead after my son's death and that life wasn't worth

74. Testimony in Abu-Baker (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 97.

75. Testimony in Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Studies Centre. (31 January 2021). *Women, War and the Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the OPT, phase-out*, Narrative annual report (2020), p. 7.

76. Testimony collected by WSC social workers as part of the project 'Comprehensive protection of women exposed to multiple forms of violence from a gender perspective (West Bank, Palestine)' (01/01/2022 – 30/09/2023), led by Associació Hèlia and funded by the ACCD.

77. Testimony in Abu-Baker (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 97.

78. Testimony in Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Studies Centre. (31 January 2021). *Women, War and the Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the OPT, phase-out*, Narrative annual report (2020), p. 8.

79. Testimony in Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Studies Centre. (31 January 2021). *Women, War and the Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the OPT, phase-out*, Narrative annual report (2020), p. 9.

80. Testimony in Kvinna till Kvinna y Women's Studies Centre. (31 January 2021). *Women, War and the Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the OPT, phase-out*, Narrative annual report (2020), p. 12.

living. I isolated myself from everyone. Today, thanks to the group, I realise how important it is to think about and care for my family. I feel alive again and I know I must take care of my health and my life'.⁸¹

Participants also explained their views on raising awareness of the needs of grieving women:

- 'Thanks to the programme, we are more aware of how to deal with the mothers of martyrs, particularly when they receive the news and in their subsequent trauma. We know how we can protect them from being injected with sedatives that leave them in a state of denial their entire lives'.⁸²
- 'I would like to make an important point. We should not force the mother of a martyr to sing and ululate when she is at the depth of her loss and grief. In fact, mothers rarely realise what is happening around them because they are in a state of shock. When they begin to recover from the shock, they feel a sense of guilt for their entire lives. They keep saying, 'How could I sing on the day of your death, my beloved son?' I have heard this from several grieving women and it breaks my heart'.⁸³

Over the more than 20 years since the programme was launched, many obstacles and challenges have also been identified, some of which continue to hinder its implementation and the change it strives to bring about in the lives of Palestinian women. Some of the most significant problems faced are worth detailing, without being exhaustive.

The first and most obvious challenge is the persistent impact of Israeli colonisation, occupation and militarisation policies that have caused multiple losses and impacts on Palestinian women. Over the past two decades, the fragmentation, dispossession and structural discrimination affecting the Palestinian population has intensified to the point that in recent years, many international bodies, including leading human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have described Israel as operating an apartheid regime, as Palestinian activists and organisations have long argued. Far from ceasing, the violence has only intensified. The sample of grieving

women who have participated or are participating in the most recent phases of the programme is very similar to that of its initial stages: mothers, wives and daughters of prisoners; mothers dealing simultaneously with the death and detention of several children; women who have lost their husbands; daughters who have lost their fathers; sisters who have lost their brothers; women who have been injured or who must care for children with severe disabilities caused by violence; women who have lost their homes or who live in fear of being evicted by the occupying forces or who suffer constant attacks by settlers; and women who constantly fear the demolition of their homes or the confiscation of the farmland that constitutes their means of survival. 'As long as there are women grieving every day, we cannot stop this programme', Sama Aweidah says.⁸⁴ The obstacles imposed by the occupation also provoke reluctance in some individuals, who do not wish to be subjected to further action or reprisals by Israeli forces. They also cause ongoing practical difficulties for the full implementation of the programme's activities. For example, grieving women have problems attending group meetings due to checkpoints, curfews, closed roads and fears about the security situation. Professionals have problems travelling to or accessing certain locations and implementation schedules are affected, in addition to other hindrances.

The second ongoing challenge noted over the years is the need to address the material needs of women facing grief and loss. Many of them are in seriously vulnerable situations and require support and opportunities. 'Sometimes women and their families need financial assistance and we don't have those resources. When a mother has lost her home, she not only needs to talk about her grief, but she also needs to figure out how to go on living under these circumstances',⁸⁵ explains the WSC director. Aware of the situation, the programme has attempted to address these needs by working with other Palestinian organisations. For example, Family Defense Society provides vocational training for women and some grieving women or their daughters have participated. Since their inception, grieving women's associations have also been aware of the importance of tackling the issue of economic empowerment⁸⁶ and have launched initiatives to ensure access to basic food packages for some grieving women. Participation

The first and most obvious challenge is the persistent impact of Israeli colonisation, occupation and militarisation policies that have caused multiple losses and impacts on Palestinian women

81. Testimony collected by WSC social workers as part of the project 'Comprehensive protection of women exposed to multiple forms of violence from a gender perspective (West Bank, Palestine)' (01/01/2022 – 30/09/2023), led by Associació Hèlia and funded by the ACCD.

82. Testimony in Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Studies Centre. (31 January 2021). *Women, War and the Political Conflict: Palestinian Women in the OPT, phase-out*, Narrative annual report (2020), p. 8.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Interview with Sama Aweidah, October 2022.

85. Interview with Sama Aweidah, October 2022.

86. For further information on this topic, see Urrutia, P. (March 2023). *Economic empowerment of women in Palestine: reflections from a feminist perspective*. Escola de Cultura de Pau and Associació Hèlia.

in the programme has also prompted some of them to jointly launch small-scale economic projects.⁸⁷ Grieving women's demands for greater economic opportunities have also motivated their involvement in economic empowerment projects, including one launched in early 2024. Such projects include training to undertake small-scale economic initiatives.

The third challenge that needs to be addressed is rooted in the misgivings and reluctance expressed by some parts of Palestinian society. With regard to this programme specifically, WSC believes that the community respects and values its work.⁸⁸ However, conservative and traditional political and social groups have criticised and questioned WSC, especially since 2022, due its involvement in defending women's rights, its role in promoting international frameworks that promote equality and non-discrimination, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its cooperation with other Palestinian feminist organisations to pass legislation such as the Palestinian Family Protection Law.⁸⁹ These groups claim to defend the social and religious values of Palestinian society and accuse WSC of promoting deviation from its customs and traditions and of encouraging discourses and practices contrary to Islamic law. This situation, which has even resulted in threats against and defamation of the WSC director, has also affected the programme's operations and particularly the implementation of some community-scale awareness-raising activities. In some locations, several women have declined to participate in activities for fear that doing so could damage their reputation or prompt accusations by groups critical of WSC.

An additional challenge identified by people who have recently helped to implement the programme has to do with maintaining contact with some of the grieving women who have participated in it. This is especially the case with some women who received initial psychosocial support sessions but ultimately decided not to attend support groups for various reasons that should be detailed. Along similar lines, another challenge is to be able to provide psychosocial support that is more tailored to each woman's specific needs.

The fifth challenge listed here is related to the need to give more visibility to the programme to contribute

to the greater political and social promotion and legitimacy of the claims of grieving women. This is also necessary because it has become a 'good practice' that can be replicable and useful in other contexts. Although steps have been taken in this regard, additional efforts are needed to explain and spread information about the programme and in its relationship with some international frameworks that could help to give it greater external protection, including the international Women, Peace and Security agenda.⁹⁰

Epilogue: loss and grief in times of genocide

As it has been tried to portray in the previous section, despite the persisting obstacles and challenges, work on grieving women has opened the way for positive transformations in the lives of hundreds of them as they cope with multiple losses. However, this does nothing to deny that a programme of this kind should not have to exist in the first place. Reflecting on the importance of the programme, WSC director Sama Aweidah acknowledged that they should continue with this work 'because every day there is a grieving woman in Palestine'. Unfortunately, her words take on a new dimension amid countless people condemning the genocide currently being committed by Israel against the Palestinian population. In the words of Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territory Occupied since 1967, the genocide is an integral part of the ideology and practices of settler colonialism and cannot be disconnected from ethnic cleansing policies against the Palestinian population observed in the past.⁹¹ As Albanese says, it will inflict 'an incalculable collective trauma that will be experienced by generations' of the Palestinian population.

Arguments to justify the accusations for crimes of genocide against Israel have presented a huge body of evidence on the impacts of the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip since October 2023. By the time this report was finalised (April 2024), more than 33,000 people had been killed (over 70% of them women and minors) and it was calculated that another 7,000 people remained buried under the rubble. The number

87. Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Studies Centre (2021), *op. cit.*, pp. 4 and 7.

88. Interview with Sama Aweidah, October 2022.

89. For further information, see: Urrutia, P. (April 2022). *Challenges of feminist struggles in Palestine in a post-pandemic context*. Escola de Cultura de Pau and Associació Hèlia.

90. For further information, see: Urrutia, P. (October 2019). *Women, peace and security: implementation, challenges and limits in Palestine*. Escola de Cultura de Pau and Associació Hèlia.

91. Francesca Albanese points out that 'historical patterns of genocide demonstrate that persecution, discrimination and other preliminary stages prepare the ground for annihilation in the stage of genocide. In Palestine, displacing and erasing the indigenous Arab presence has been an inevitable part of the forming of Israel as a "Jewish state"'. UN OHCHR. (25 March 2024). *Anatomy of a Genocide, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967*, Francesca Albanese, A/HRC/55/73, paragraph 10, p. 3.

of wounded had reached 75,000. Nearly 80% of the population of Gaza had been displaced and over one million people were facing famine. The evidence also focuses on the consequences for the victims' mental health, insofar as it substantiates the commission of one of the typical acts of genocide, which is 'to cause serious physical and mental harm' to a certain group. Information about this type of impact was included in the lawsuit filed by South Africa in late December 2023 before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which in January 2024 resulted in a ruling by the UN's highest court requiring Israel to adopt a series of measures in light of what it recognised as a credible risk of 'irreparable harm' against the Palestinian population and which in its preliminary assessment identified as 'plausible acts' of genocide.⁹² The data provided to the ICJ by South Africa account for the severe levels of trauma suffered by the children of Gaza before the latest escalation of violence, which have only worsened, as corroborated by a recent study released by Save the Children.⁹³ South Africa's lawsuit also describes the consequences for those who have lost their mothers or fathers or who are the sole survivors of whole families, as well as the impact of the campaign of dehumanisation and cruel and degrading treatment carried out by Israeli forces.

In her report, which focuses solely on Gaza, Francesca Albanese concludes that due to its actions and omissions, Israel has committed at least three of the five forbidden acts laid out in the Convention against Genocide⁹⁴ and specifically indicates mental harm: 'The survivors will carry an indelible trauma, having witnessed so much death, and experienced destruction, homelessness, emotional and material loss, endless humiliation and fear. Such experiences include fleeing amidst the chaos of war without telecommunications or electricity; witnessing the systematic destruction of

entire neighbourhoods, homes, universities, religious and cultural landmarks; digging through the rubble, often with bare hands, searching for loved ones; seeing bodies desecrated; being rounded up, stripped naked, blindfolded and subjected to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and, ultimately, being starved, adults and children alike (...). Considering the significance of children to the future development of a society, inflicting serious bodily or mental harm to them can reasonably be interpreted as a means to destroy the group in whole or in part'.⁹⁵

In just four months the state of Israel had killed more minors in the Gaza Strip (over 13,000) than had been killed in all armed conflicts in the world in four years.⁹⁶

The magnitude of recent events prompts to anticipate huge future needs in terms of mental health support to deal with such an extraordinary scale of loss, especially in Gaza, but also in the West Bank, where the occupation's violence and repression have intensified

knowing if they can protect or feed their children.⁹⁷ Some Palestinian female activists and academics also recognise their deep concern about Israeli actions that seek to intentionally destroy the Palestinian past, present and future. They admit the challenge of analysing and putting the horror of current circumstances into words and they wonder how they can face this collective experience of pain and trauma in the future. They also ask if it is really possible to 'survive' a genocide. Once the genocide is over, they hope to be able to articulate and intellectualise it, but they also recognise that they will surely need a new language to do so.

This report was completed in April 2024.

92. For further information, see Escola de Cultura de Pau. (April 2024). *Risk scenarios and opportunities for peace*.

93. Save the Children. (March 2024). *Trapped and Scarred: The Compounding Mental Harm Inflicted on Palestinian Children in Gaza*.

94. For further information, see: UN. (11 January 2024). *Explainer: What is the Genocide Convention?*.

95. UN OHCHR. (2024). *op. cit.*, p. 8.

96. Euronews. (15 March 2024). *UNRWA head says ongoing conflict in Gaza is a 'war against children'*.

97. For more information on gender impacts, see WILPF España's interview with Pamela Urrutia, 8 March 2024.