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**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION OF
PALESTINIAN WOMEN: 1990-2003**



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Preface

This study was prepared for the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) by Ms. Eileen Kuttab. The author acknowledges the invaluable assistance of Ms. R. Abu Dahu at the Institute of Women's Studies (IWS), Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND EXPLANATORY NOTES

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
DCI	Defence for Children International
DGPD	Directorate of Gender Planning and Development
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GIE	Gaza Industrial Estate
GNP	gross national product
GUPW	General Union of Palestinian Women
HDIP	Health Development Information and Policy Institute
IMR	infant mortality rate
IWS	Institute of Women's Studies
MMR	maternal mortality rates
NGO	non-governmental organization
NIS	New Israeli Shekels
NPEC	National Poverty Eradication Commission
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
PNC	Palestinian National Council
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SME	small and medium-sized enterprise
TFR	total fertility rate
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
WATC	Women's Affairs Technical Committee
WBGS	West Bank and Gaza Strip
WCLAC	Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling
WSC	Women's Studies Center

References to the dollar symbol (\$) indicate American dollars.

Executive summary

A situation analysis on Palestinian women is incomplete without due reference to the harsh living conditions of Palestinian civilians caused by the ongoing occupation of their territory by the Government of Israel. While in other territories and countries, comparable situation analyses consist of investigating gender equality in such prominent areas as health, education and labour, these are relegated to second rank in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip given the severe socio-economic repercussions of the conflict on the population. In the first three years of the second intifada, until 30 September 2003, more than 2,700 Palestinians have lost their lives, some 27,000 have been injured, approximately 7,000 have been detained, countless homes have been demolished, and the entire Arab population has suffered and continues to face constant danger, harassment and humiliation. Moreover, the mobility of Palestinian civilians, which was already severely restricted by closures and checkpoints, has been further hindered by the construction of a separation wall. This barrier of high concrete walls, fences, buffer zones, trenches and security watchtowers contravenes international law as underscored by General Assembly resolution ES-10/13 of 21 October 2003.

While the Government of Israel has persistently violated international laws since its occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, this current phase in the conflict is having the most devastating impact on the civilian population due to the growing acts of forced evictions, seizures, and demolition and closure of Palestinian structures, including public infrastructure and institutions. Within that context, the economic and social consequences of the conflict play a vital role in shaping the opportunities, or lack of them, available to the Arab population, including women.

Consequently, the future is precarious and socio-economic development cannot be accurately predicted. While some form of statehood for Palestine is on the agenda, the territory, population and powers for such a country are still deeply contested. Positing strategies for gender equity and development must therefore take into account both the current political context and the opportunities and challenges in the wake of future changes.

The timing for this situation analysis on Palestinian women is therefore apt, given that the transitional period mandated under the Oslo Accords has ended without any progress on the political front. Despite this serious obstacle, there have been some political successes, particularly in terms of institutionalizing the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the concomitant initiatives by different local organizations, including women's organizations, legislative councils and civil society aimed at promoting development and democracy in Palestine. However, the re-invasion of the Palestinian territories has severely influenced the daily life of the population and the operating capacities of local institutions, and has hindered and even shifted the priorities from developmental to emergency and welfare.

At a developmental level, Palestinian women inhabit a seemingly contradictory set of circumstances. While there have been noteworthy improvements in female literacy and rises in enrolments of girls and women in primary, secondary and tertiary education, these gains have been mitigated by persistently high fertility rates and comparatively low participation of women in the areas of labour and politics. Moreover, there is a general tendency of rationalizing this modest participation with religious or traditionalist justifications. This is partly attributed to deep patriarchal traditions and values in society, which favour boys and men. However, this disparity equally stems from the highly insecure financial situation in most Palestinian households and the belief that sons are better able to provide for their families in volatile times. This gender disparity in the household translates into similar restrictions in the labour force whereby the participation of women in the market is hampered to a greater extent by the challenges of a male-oriented labour market than through religious proscriptions against women's work outside the home.

Introduction

Given a comparatively poor natural resource base and the political and economic constraints caused by the continuing conflict, human capital plays a particularly pivotal role in Palestine. However, while Palestinian society has attempted to set a course for human development in the wake of the Oslo Accords, most initiatives and strategies aimed at promoting socio-economic development were halted as the political conditions deteriorated.¹ Chapter I provides an overview of the historical background to the conflict and investigates the negative impacts on the socio-political situation in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGS).

Demographic surveys provide invaluable statistics and indicators on the characteristics of a society in terms of population and households, which can be used to examine gender issues. Chapter II presents and underscores the gender gaps in Palestinian society through such indicators as size and distribution of the population, fertility and mortality rates, and size, types and marriage patterns of households.

Gender issues in WBGS are further probed in chapter III, which establishes and strengthens the strategic link between rights-based approaches to gender issues, including legal reform and human rights, and such issues of development as poverty alleviation and employment creation. This link, which has not been fully integrated in Palestine, consists of investigating a number of key issues and opportunities in six key areas, namely, political participation, labour and economy, poverty, education, legal and human rights, and health.

¹ The Oslo Accords is the common term for the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, which was signed by the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Washington, 13 September 1993).

I. THE POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The current situation of Palestinian women in the Occupied Territories arises from the social structure of society in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which are essentially two separate fragments of a larger Palestinian social structure that was dismembered in 1948 following the creation of Israel.

1. 1948-1967

Between 1948 and 1967, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were sealed off from each other and administered by Jordan and Egypt, respectively. Both regions witnessed a substantial migration of labour during that period as the civilian population sought economic opportunities in various countries, particularly the Gulf States. While women from the middle classes or with higher education were part of this migration, poorer women, especially from refugee camps and rural communities, remained largely in situ and tended to their households and farms. Given that the male members of these poorer families equally participated in this migration, the resulting social structure placed a special and contradictory burden on women. More specifically, while material loss, labour migration and dispersal presented these women with new roles and responsibilities, the shock and insecurity felt by Palestinian society tended to impose on them the symbolic role of representing continuity with the past, thereby reinforcing the traditional role of women as providers and scions of society.²

2. 1967-1987

This stress on the Palestinian social structure was magnified and significantly compounded in 1967 following the occupation of WBGS by Israel. The economic integration of WBGS into Israel has had far-reaching implications for the development of Palestinian society. While access to wage labour in Israel improved the situation for a number of Palestinian families, particularly among the rural and refugee populations, concomitant restrictions by Israel on capital formation in the WBGS limited the growth of the middle classes. This resulted in a degree of social and economic levelling of the Arab population. Moreover, the selective access to wage labour in Israel, which largely excluded women, had adverse effects on the structure of Palestinian households. Generations of young males were able to earn a living that was independent of familial and patriarchal authority, thereby undermining to some extent the patriarchal authority. With regard to women, this shift in traditional

² This analysis is drawn on various research conducted by IWS since its founding in 1994, particularly the gender profile by Abu-Nahleh, L. et al. "Towards gender equality in the Palestinian Territories: a profile of gender relations" (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), August 1999).

authority was manifested by a shift from the broader familial structures within society to spouses within the confines of the nuclear family.

Equally, familial authority was further challenged in the 1970s and 1980s following the rise of the national movement in the Occupied Territories, which was largely instigated by the younger generations. In addition to providing new opportunities for social mobility, this national movement encouraged young women to renegotiate aspects of gender roles within Palestinian society. Consequently, this movement empowered younger generations through modern party structures that bypassed and even marginalized the older clan structure of political authority; and that paved the way for the active participation of women in the national resistance. The symbolic role of women as bearers of tradition was therefore redefined to incorporate a new role that was independent of familial authority and that promoted the image of women as self-motivated and autonomous members of society. Within that context, the rise of subsidized institutions of higher education further encouraged this change in perception by providing vital space for the younger generations of men and women to share experiences and shape new identities that were separate from the family; and to gain access to knowledge and new tools of social capital. However, despite these significant gains, higher education did not necessarily translate into access to the market, particularly for women. This was partly attributed to the larger constraints on the labour market caused by the occupation of WBGS and its adverse repercussions on the local economy.

B. THE FIRST INTIFADA

The Palestinian uprising of 1987, commonly referred to as the first intifada, generated a range of formal and informal political structures that represented alternative ways of organizing the family and traditional hierarchies across all sectors of the society. Much of the early leadership came from the generation that had benefited from higher education. Consequently, the early phase of the first intifada was imbued with many of the values of democracy, self-help and empowerment that had been part of that learning experience. For women, this early phase was an opportunity both to extend and widen the new gender roles and identities that had emerged during the 1970s.

However, by 1990, these positive trends had been radically reversed due to the political repression of the uprising by Israel, and to the substantial economic and physical costs of sustaining the mass rebellion. Subsequently, a number of factors contributed to the retrenchment of the population from public participation, including mass arrests and detentions, long-term closure of schools, the breakdown of internal political authority and the growing militarization on both sides of the conflict. Moreover, Israel initiated severe mobility restrictions and closure policies that significantly reduced the number of workers allowed to work in Israel, which led to a rise in both relative and absolute poverty and further compounded the suffering of the Palestinian population.

This retrenchment increased the burden on women since it reaffirmed their traditional roles as caretakers for the well-being of family members. Equally, this shift towards traditional gender roles was strengthened by the rise of Islamist movements, which in turn presented a challenge to the Palestinian national movement and to the role of women within it and within society as a whole. While these socio-economic and political realities affected gender roles, norms and identities across WBGS, the societal shifts and the degree of change were largely a function of region, class, religion and sub-group identity.

C. THE SECOND INTIFADA

Since the beginning of the second intifada on 29 September 2000, the Palestinian community has been faced with devastation and subjected to severe violations of human rights.³ While these violations by the Government of Israel have been continuous since the occupation of WBGS in 1967 and were occurring even during the peace process in the wake of the Oslo Accords, the second intifada has been characterized by a persistent use of excessive force, including, inter alia, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, demolition of houses, seizures of land and destruction of infrastructure and crops. Moreover, the present conflict has led to the serious deterioration of the political, social and economic life of the Palestinian population and has exposed the three million Arabs living in WBGS to grave and constant danger, harassment and humiliation. While some women have been at the forefront of this struggle as active resisters to the occupation, resulting in their own death, injury or detention, most women have suffered as innocent civilians to the indiscriminate violence directed at the population or through the loss of a family member.

1. *Collective punishment of the civilian population*

(a) *Loss of life*

A total of 2,793 people perished from 29 September 2000 to 30 September 2003 as a direct result of the conflict. Of these, 497 were children, 182 were women, and 195 were extrajudicial assassinations. In the majority of cases, death involving women and children “were not carried out against individuals directly participating in clashes with Israeli soldiers”.⁴ Rather, and more poignantly, most women lost their lives while travelling to or from work, after being denied access to ambulances or emergency medical services, or as innocent bystanders caught in crossfire. Moreover, a sizable number of women and children have been killed in or near their homes.

³ The second intifada is equally known as the Al Aqsa Intifadah in reference to the incendiary visit by the current Prime Minister of Israel, A. Sharon, to Al Aqsa Mosque on 29 September 2000.

⁴ Women’s Center for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) and the Women’s Studies Center (WSC), “Report on the situation of women’s human rights during ‘Al-Aqsa Intifadah’”, which was presented to the United Nations Human Rights Commission during its fact-finding mission of 16 February 2001.

Additionally, the lives of women have been greatly affected both morally and financially by the unanticipated death of family members, particularly of the primary breadwinners and children. The death of a primary breadwinner has compelled women to overcome the extreme mental trauma that arises from the loss of a cherished member of the family in order to seek alternative means of providing for the household.⁵

(b) *The injured*

From 29 September 2000 to 30 September 2003, a total of 27,084 Palestinians were injured as a result of the conflict. Many women and children were injured far from any clashes or demonstrations, and typically near or inside their homes or in attempting to cross checkpoints. While these injuries have had a severely negative impact on the lives of all those affected, pregnant women have been particularly vulnerable to the conflict. The number of stillbirths during the fourth quarter of 2000, which corresponds with the first four months of the second intifada, increased by 58 per cent over the fourth quarter of 1999. Moreover, many pregnant women have been exposed to noxious gases, and mental and physical harm resulting from shelling and other forms of violence, which adversely affected the welfare of both the mothers and the developing foetuses.

Furthermore, given their traditional role as caregivers in Palestinian society, women tend to assume the greatest burden with regard to providing ministrations for injured members of family. The time spent providing this care and assistance impinges on such activities as work and education, particularly in the cases of long-term or permanent injuries.

(c) *House demolitions and land seizures*

House demolitions have rendered entire families homeless. With little or no means to rebuild their homes, evicted families have been compelled to seek accommodation and shelter with friends, neighbours and extended families. Moreover, these demolitions have generally been undertaken without prior notice and without pausing to allow time to collect personal belongings. Consequently, these families have been dispossessed of their homes, clothes, food, furniture and other personal property.

Given that women play a major role in agriculture, land seizures cause the loss of a vital source of income and lower the status of women as income-generators for

⁵ In the course of the second intifada, Israel has levelled a particularly obnoxious charge against Palestinian women claiming that young children are sent out to die by their parents for monetary compensation. A study by the Defence for Children International (DCI) uncovered this outrageous claim to be a ploy by the Government of Israel to justify its use of excessive force on civilians in WBGS, especially on children. DCI, *A Generation Denied* (DCI, 2001).

the household. This has significantly increased the burden on women to provide for their families, while negatively affecting their status within the household and society.

(d) *Detentions*

By September 2003, the overall number of Palestinian detainees held by Israel grew to approximately 7,000. Of these, 1,022 were students of schools, colleges and universities, along with 121 teachers. Since the beginning of the second intifada, five Palestinian women have been imprisoned, bringing the total number of female detainees to ten, including two minors under the age of 18 years.

However, considerably more women have been arrested for political reasons and have been subjected to various abuses and brutal conditions in contravention to major international declarations, agreements and principles. These abuses include torture, solitary confinement, verbal and sexual abuses and threats, forcing pregnant detainees to give birth in their prison cells, and detention with Israeli criminal prisoners.⁶ Most detainees are single and carry prison sentences of 5-12 years. The condition of these detainees has worsened since the beginning of the intifada, and there are reports that they suffer habitually raids and attacks by the prison guards.⁷

2. *Restricting mobility*

In addition to the increasing toll of dead and injured, this crisis has resulted in severe mobility restrictions between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and between the Occupied Territories as a whole and Israel and the rest of the world, referred to as internal and external closures, respectively. The policy of closures was initiated by Israel in 1987 during the first intifada and was intensified during the Gulf War of 1991. Access to international border crossings, including the borders of Egypt and Jordan, in addition to entry into Israel to travel via Ben Gurion Airport have been greatly curtailed or completely severed.⁸

These closures apply to the movement of persons, vehicles and goods travelling between the West Bank and Gaza Strip and prevent Palestinians living in these areas from entering Jerusalem or areas inside Israel without special permits that are notoriously difficult to obtain. Under the Oslo Accords, a number of boundaries were established within WBGS ostensibly to enable Israel to provide protection to the settlements while withdrawing from areas that are densely populated by Palestinians.

⁶ According to a study conducted by Addameer, a human rights organization in Ramallah, the West Bank, 12 Palestinian women who are political prisoners are being held in the same section as Israeli criminal prisoners and live under difficult conditions. Addameer, "Palestinian and Arab women political prisoners" (Addameer, March 2002).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The only Palestinian airport in the Occupied Territories, namely, Gaza International Airport, has been closed since February 2001.

These closures formally fragment the Occupied Territories into 220 separate enclaves, which cumulatively comprise a mere 23 per cent of historic Palestine.⁹ Moreover, these enclaves are maintained by 120 permanent checkpoints and roadblocks that compound the suffering and humiliation of the Palestinian population and that add to the sense of living in a state of siege.¹⁰

While Israel has attempted to justify its closures policy as a necessary security measure, the arbitrary and whimsical nature of this control whereby civilians are sometimes denied and sometimes allowed to pass a checkpoint suggests that the policy is essentially aimed at perpetuating another form of collective punishment on the Palestinian population. This was underscored by Human Rights Watch in April 2002, which reported that the restrictions imposed by Israel “are so extensive and protracted, and so injurious to the basic health and welfare of civilians that they amount to a form of widespread collective punishment, in clear violation of international human rights and humanitarian law”.¹¹

In addition to the physical barriers, which have been erected to obstruct traffic into and out of nearly every Palestinian town and village, Israel has imposed curfews to confine civilians to their houses for substantial periods of time, amounting to a regime similar to house arrest. These mobility restrictions have had a profoundly negative economic impact on the productive activities in manufacturing, construction and commerce, which have had “serious consequences for the livelihood of most of the population” and have dramatically increased the incidence of poverty.¹² Moreover, they have seriously disrupted the internal circulation of goods, medical supplies and such basic necessities and services as food, water and gas. Public access to medical care has been severely hampered by the denial of access to doctors and hospitals and by the routine interference of ambulances at checkpoints.

3. *Economic repercussions on Palestinian households*

In a survey conducted in January-February 2002, the average monthly income of Palestinian households was found to have dropped from 2,500 New Israeli Shekels

⁹ This denotes the surface area of Palestine before the founding of the State of Israel. DCI, *A Generation Denied* (DCI, 2001).

¹⁰ Health Development Information and Policy Institute (HDIP), *Fact Sheet: Palestinian Intifada* (Sep 28th 2000 – Nov 27th) (HDIP, 2001). Updates available at: www.hdip.org/Fact%20sheets/Intifada_factsheet.htm.

¹¹ Oral Statement by Human Rights Watch at the fifty-eighth session of the Commission on Human Rights, “Item: 8 Question of the violation of human rights in the occupied Arab territories, including Palestine” (2 April 2002).

¹² Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights at the fifty-seventh session, “Question of the violation of human rights in the occupied Arab territories, including Palestine” (United Nations, 29 August 2002), para. 11

(NIS) before the intifada to an average of 1,200 NIS in February 2002.¹³ Moreover, while 56.5 per cent of households lost more than half their income, 20.3 per cent of households reported that they had lost all their sources of usual income during the intifada (see table 1). This has dramatically increased the incidence of poverty. According to the survey, two-thirds of the population in WBGS were found to be living below the poverty line.¹⁴ Given these high poverty rates, the PNA has been compelled to increase spending on social assistance at a time when its revenue base is being eroded. Consequently, the PNA through its Ministry of Social Affairs and other governmental institutions was able to provide humanitarian aid to a modest 8 per cent of households, compared to the 55.2 per cent aided by United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

TABLE 1. INDICATORS OF LIVING STANDARDS
AND HUMANITARIAN AID IN WBGS
(Percentage)

Indicators	March 2001	May-June 2001	July-August 2001	January-February 2002
Economic repercussions on households				
Households below the poverty line	64.2	64.9	60.8	66.5
Households that have lost more than half their income during the past six months	49.2	47.4	52.3	56.5
Financial assistance				
Households that indicated a need for financial assistance	..	79.1	73.4	81.2
Households that received less than \$25 in financial assistance	59.1	67.1	67.7	10.2
Households that received less than \$50 in financial assistance	84.9	76.8	72.7	22.4
Households that received less than \$100 in financial assistance	87.7	86.4	80.2	42.8
Households that received \$100 or more in financial assistance	12.3	13.6	19.8	57.2
Humanitarian aid				
Aid provided by UNRWA	60.4	63.6	49.8	55.2
Aid provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs	4.6	1.5	1.6	2.8
Aid provided by other governmental institutions	17.8	6.8	3.3	5.2
Aid provided by charity committees	6.2	3.5	2.2	4.9

¹³ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), "Impact of the Israeli measures on the economic conditions of Palestinian households on the eve of Israeli incursion" (PCBS, April 2002).

¹⁴ The poverty level indicator used was \$2 per day. Ibid.

TABLE 1 (*continued*)

Indicators	March 2001	May-June 2001	July-August 2001	January-February 2002
Humanitarian aid				
Aid provided by political parties	3.8	3.6	1.4	2.5
Aid provided by charity institutions	5.3	4.1	3.1	3.6
Direct aid provided by Arab countries	..	1.4	0.6	2.0
Aid provided by relatives, friends and neighbours	..	6.8	14.5	5.6
Type of assistance and primary concerns of households				
Food assistance as a percentage of overall assistance	78.7	73.7	53.4	72.5
Financial assistance as a percentage of overall assistance	20.5	15.4	20.4	11.6
Households that indicated food as a primary concern	30.9	11.1	9.4	11.7
Households that indicated money as a primary concern	32.6	36.8	36.2	31.0
Households that indicated employment as a primary concern	14.9	20.1	18.0	23.5
Households that indicated medicine as a primary concern	5.4	2.9	2.6	1.5
Households that indicated property as a primary concern	5.3	6.4	5.7	6.8

Source: PCBS, "Impact of the Israeli measures on the economic conditions of Palestinian households on the eve of Israeli incursion" (PCBS, April 2002).

Note: Two dots (..) indicate that data are not available.

While already severely compromised by the closures, access to adequate medical care was further compounded by the loss of income and the concomitant rise in poverty. An estimated 58.7 per cent of Palestinian households faced problems attaining medical treatment due to an inability to pay for treatment costs. Moreover, while 81.2 per cent of households in WBGS reported that they needed some form of social assistance or humanitarian aid, only 29.6 per cent had received such assistance. Out of the total assistance and aid, 72.5 per cent was provided in the form of food supplies and 11.6 per cent was in the form of monetary donations, despite the greater need for money as expressed by 31 per cent of households, compared to 11.7 per cent who indicated that food was their first priority.¹⁵

¹⁵ Of those households that received monetary assistance, 10.2 per cent reported that the total amount of assistance received was less than \$25, and 57.2 per cent reported that the total was \$100 or more. Ibid.

Furthermore, the change in the nutritional patterns of the population during the second intifada provides another key indication of the detrimental impact of the ongoing occupation. Both the quantity and quality of food have dropped in Palestinian households by 44.4 per cent and 61.9 per cent, respectively (see table 2).

TABLE 2. CHANGE IN NUTRITIONAL PATTERNS IN WBGS
DURING THE SECOND INTIFADA
(Percentage)

Indicators	Decreased	No change	Increased
Quantity of food	44.4	54.8	0.8
Quality of food	61.9	38	0.1
Monthly consumption of meat	75.5	24.3	0.2
Monthly consumption of fruit	74	25.7	0.4
Monthly consumption of milk and dairy products	58	40.2	1.7

Source: PCBS, "Impact of the Israeli measures on the economic conditions of Palestinian households on the eve of Israeli incursion" (PCBS, April 2002).

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the extent of the economic crisis in Palestine. Given their central role in the household, women are particularly vulnerable to the suffering and loss that has sadly become the norm in Palestinian society.

II. POPULATION DYNAMICS

Population statistics and household patterns play vital roles in describing and highlighting gender issues. This chapter provides an overview of the gender gaps in Palestinian society through the following indicators: (a) the size, age and distribution of the population, including gender ratios; (b) fertility and mortality rates; and (c) the size, types and status of Palestinian households, including marriage and divorce patterns.

A. SIZE, AGE AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION

The population factor in WBGS is considered a genuine national resource, particularly given the lack of natural resources. However, the PNA faces a critical challenge in the area of population development given the ongoing occupation and its repercussions on unemployment, poverty and a clear domination of those natural resources that are available. Moreover, human development is being significantly hampered by the high growth rate of the population in WBGS, which is among the highest in the world with an estimated 3.7 per cent per annum for 1995-2000. This high rate is manifested by the comparatively high number of young. In the last official census of the Occupied Territories, conducted during the period 10-24 December 1997, children in the 0-14 age bracket represented 47 per cent of the total population, and 3.5 per cent of the population was aged over 65 years and over, see table 3.¹⁶

TABLE 3. SIZE, AGE STRUCTURE AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION IN WBGS IN 1997

West Bank ^{a/}	Size (thousands)	Men	Women	Total	Gender ratio ^{b/}
		814	786	1 600	103.6
	Age structure (thousands)	Men	Women	Total	Gender ratio ^{b/}
		370	350	720	105.6
	0-14 years	416	401	817	103.7
	15-64 years	28	34	62	82.5
	65 years and over				
Gaza Strip	Distribution (percentage)	Urban	Rural	Refugee camps	Population of camps ^{c/}
		46.6	47.0	6.4	26.5
	Size (thousands)	Men	Women	Total	Gender ratio ^{b/}
		508	494	1 002	102.8
	Age structure (thousands)	Men	Women	Total	Gender ratio ^{b/}
		257	246	503	104.5
	0-14 years	238	231	469	103.0
	15-64 years	12	16	28	75.0
	65 years and over				

¹⁶ In mid-2000, the percentage of children aged under 5 years was estimated at 18.5 per cent of the total population in WBGS. PCBS, *Population in the Palestinian Territory, 1997-2025* (PCBS, September 1999).

TABLE 3 (*continued*)

Gaza Strip	Distribution (percentage)	Urban	Rural	Refugee camps	Population of camps ^{c/}	
		63.5	5.4	31.1	65.1	
Total WBGS ^{a/}	Size (thousands)	Men	Women	Total	Gender ratio ^{b/}	
		1 332	1 280	2 602	104.1	
	Age structure (thousands)	Men	Women	Total	Gender ratio ^{b/}	
		0-14 years	627	596	1 223	105.2
		15-64 years	654	632	1 286	103.5
		65 years and over	40	50	90	80.0
	Distribution (percentage)	Urban	Rural	Refugee camps	Population of camps	
		53.1	31.0	15.9	41.4	

Source: PCBS, *Population, Housing and Establishment Census – 1997 Statistical Brief* (PCBS, 10 December 1998).

^{a/} The data for the West Bank and total WBGS do not include those parts of Jerusalem that were annexed by Israel in 1967.

^{b/} The gender ratio is calculated as the number of men to every 100 women.

^{c/} The population of the refugee camps is in thousands.

1. Population projections

Using the census of 1997 as a starting point and taking into account such factors as fertility and mortality trends and a return of 500,000 Palestinian refugees to WBGS, the population is projected to grow to approximately 5 million in 2010 and almost 7.5 million by 2025 (see table 4). At current rates, the population is expected to double in 16 years in the Gaza Strip, 21 years in the West Bank and, cumulatively, in 19 years in WBGS.¹⁷ Given that the population density in the Gaza Strip, which is currently at some 2,816 persons per square kilometre, is already among the highest in the world, such projected increases in population can only compound the shortage of living space.

TABLE 4. POPULATION PROJECTIONS FOR 2000-2025
(Thousands)

Year	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Total WBGS
2000	2 012	1 138	3 150
2005	2 514	1 472	3 986
2010	3 067	1 871	4 938

¹⁷ Mathematically, a population that grows annually by x per cent doubles in size every n years, where $(1+x)^n = 2$.

TABLE 4 (*continued*)

Year	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Total WBGS
2015	3 517	2 241	5 758
2020	3 962	2 618	6 580
2025	4 409	2 993	7 402

Source: PCBS, *Population in the Palestinian Territory, 1997-2025* (PCBS, September 1999)

These population projections predict a drop in the relative percentage of the young in WBGS over the next 25 years with a median age rising from 16.4 years in 2000, to 17.8 years in 2010, to 22.9 years by 2025. This is expected to accompany similar drops by 2010 in the number of children in the 0-5 and 0-14 age brackets to 16.2 per cent and 43.5 per cent of the total population, respectively. These averages for WBGS mask regional variations between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which are attributed to comparatively higher fertility rates in the latter region.

2. *Dependency ratio*

Table 3 reveals that the size of the population aged 15-64 years, which represents the working age, constitutes approximately half the total population in WBGS, and that the dependency ratio is currently 102.1.¹⁸ While that theoretical ratio already indicates a higher number of dependents to workers, the actual economic dependency ratio is higher given that a substantial number of the population in the 15-64 age bracket are unemployed. Moreover, a more accurate ratio needs to take into account various factors, including the low participation rate of women in the labour force; the comparatively high percentage of pregnant women; and significant school and university enrolment rates.

However, the dependency ratio in WBGS is projected to drop from its current high level to 86.1 in 2010 as a result of decreases in total fertility and crude birth rates. Over the same period, this drop is expected to occur more rapidly in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip with drops from the current 95.7 and 113.2, to 80.4 and 96.3, respectively.

B. FERTILITY AND MORTALITY RATES

1. *Fertility*

Fertility levels in WBGS are among the highest in the world. This can be attributed to the following: the traditional practice of marrying at an early age; the

¹⁸ The dependency ratio is a measure of the portion of a population that is composed of dependents who are too young or too old to work. This ratio is equal to the number of individuals aged 0-14 years and 65 years and over divided by the number of individuals aged 15-64 years.

sense of security that marriage provides, particularly in times of conflict and political turmoil; the desirability of producing male offspring that is prevalent in Palestinian society; and the comparatively high percentage of women of reproduction age.¹⁹

However, there is some evidence to suggest that fertility rates have already begun to decrease in recent years. The total fertility rate (TFR) in WBGS decreased from 6.4 births per woman in 1985-1989 to 6.1 births in 1995 and 6.0 births in 1997.²⁰ This decrease can largely be attributed to an increase in education, particularly among women, and a rise in the number of women in the labour force. There are regional differences whereby TFR in the Gaza Strip is currently 6.9 births per woman compared to the recorded level of 5.6 births per woman in the West Bank.²¹

Equally, the crude birth rate, which had begun to decrease in the mid-1970s, rose sharply after the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987 and reached a high of 46.7 and 54.7 per 1,000 in 1990 in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, respectively. The crude birth rate began to decrease after the establishment of the PNA in 1994 and, by 1997, was estimated at 41.2 and 45.4 per 1,000 in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, respectively, amounting to 42.7 per 1,000 in WBGS.²²

Furthermore, improvements in health conditions, particularly reproductive health, coupled with an increase in the use of family planning techniques are playing a role in decreasing fertility levels. In 1996, the percentage of women in WBGS who used any type of contraceptive was 65.7 per cent among married women and 45.2 per cent among all women.²³ However, despite these advances in fertility rates, the young are expected to remain the highest percentage of the Palestinian population in WBGS for the next three decades.

2. Mortality

In general, the mortality rate in the Occupied Territories is considered low compared to other Arab regions and developing countries. In 1997, the crude mortality rate in WBGS was approximately 4.8 per 1,000 and is projected to drop to 3.55 in 2010 and to 3.26 by 2025.²⁴

¹⁹ In 1997, women aged 15-49 years represented 43.4 per cent of total women in WBGS. PCBS, *Population, Housing and Establishment Census – 1997 Statistical Brief* (PCBS, 10 December 1998).

²⁰ The total fertility rate measures the average number of children born during the reproductive life of a woman.

²¹ PCBS, *Palestinian maternal and child health: a qualitative national survey* (PCBS, July 2000).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ PCBS, *Population in the Palestinian Territory, 1997-2025* (PCBS, September 1999).

The drop in infant mortality rate (IMR) has been even more notable, dropping from a high of 35.2 deaths per 1,000 in 1985-1989 to 27.3 per 1,000 in 1990-1994.²⁵ Similarly, maternal mortality rates (MMR) in WBGS, which represents the third leading cause of death among women of reproductive age, decreased to 60-80 per 100,000 live births in 1997, with the rate in the West Bank, excluding Jerusalem, slightly higher than the Gaza Strip.²⁶ Mortality levels, particularly IMR, are expected to decrease gradually in the next decades, thereby raising life expectancy for both sexes. By 2025, life expectancy at birth in WBGS is projected to reach 73.8 years for men and 76.7 years for women, up from the current levels of 69.9 and 73.0 years, respectively.

C. PALESTINIAN HOUSEHOLDS

1. *Types, sizes and heads of household*

Social and kinship bonds relate most Palestinian household members to one another. While 74.0 per cent of Palestinian households were nuclear households in 1997, up from 69.4 per cent in 1995, the remaining 26 per cent consisted of extended family households and, to a lesser degree, composite or one-person households. However, despite this increase in the number of nuclear households and a gradual decline in the size of households, which dropped to 6.4 members in 1997, down from 7.0 in 1995, the average household size remained significantly large due to high fertility rates.²⁷

Women headed 9.5 per cent and 8.0 per cent of private households in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, respectively, averaging at 9.0 per cent of households in WBGS. This regional difference was attributed to differences in household structure and to the marginally higher life expectancy of women in the West Bank compared to their counterparts in the Gaza Strip. With an average size of 4.1 members, such households were typically smaller than households headed by men, which averaged at 6.6 in 1997.²⁸ Moreover, households headed by women tended to result from the death or migration of the male head or, to a lesser extent, as a consequence of divorce.

²⁵ While IMR is found to be marginally higher for male newborns at 30.3 per 1,000 compared to 24.0 per 1,000 for females, the situation is reversed in terms of post neo-natal mortality (1-11 month bracket) with rates of 10 male and 12 female deaths per 1,000. This gender gap could be attributed to differential care in favour of baby boys. PCBS, *Palestinian maternal and child health: a qualitative national survey* (PCBS, July 2000).

²⁶ MMR is greater in the 15-19 age bracket with 104 cases per 100,000, which underscores the link between maternal mortality and early pregnancy through early marriage. Barghouti, M. and Lennox, J. "Health in Palestine: potential and challenges" (the World Bank, March 1997).

²⁷ During that period, household size dropped from 6.6 to 6.1 in the West Bank and from 7.8 to 6.9 in the Gaza Strip. PCBS, *Population, Housing and Establishment Census – 1997 Statistical Brief* (PCBS, 10 December 1998).

²⁸ Ibid.

2. Marriage and divorce

In 1997, the average singulate age at marriage in WBGS was 25.4 years for men and 21.5 years for women, see table 5.²⁹ The census of 1997 highlighted a link between the level of education and age at first marriage. The average age at first marriage for individuals who had completed tertiary education was found to be 27 years for men and 24 years for women, compared to the national averages of 23 years and 18 years, respectively. These comparatively low national averages, particularly with regard to the age of women, underscore the early marriage phenomenon that is prevalent in WBGS. Of the total married female population in WBGS, half of them were aged 18 years or younger. In terms of total women, 29 per cent were married before they turned 18, of which 4 per cent were aged 15 years or younger. By stark contrast, a modest 1 per cent of men in the under-18 age group were married.³⁰

In 1999, the crude marriage rate was 8.4 per 1,000 in the Occupied Territories; and the crude divorce rate amounted to 1.2 per 1,000.³¹

TABLE 5. AVERAGE AGE AND AVERAGE SINGULATE AGE
AT MARRIAGE IN 1997
(Years)

	Average age at first marriage	Men	Women
		24	18
West Bank	Average singulate age at marriage	Men	Women
		25.9	22.0
Gaza Strip	Average age at first marriage	Men	Women
		22	18
	Average singulate age at marriage	Men	Women
		24.5	20.8
Total WBGS	Average age at first marriage	Men	Women
		23	18
	Average singulate age at marriage	Men	Women
		25.4	21.5

Source: PCBS, *Population, Housing and Establishment Census – 1997 Statistical Brief* (PCBS, 10 December 1998).

²⁹ The prefix “singulate” refers to the computational method of arriving at the mean age at marriage.

³⁰ This early marriage phenomenon is stronger in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank where 25 per cent and 17 per cent of women, respectively, were married before they turned 18. Ibid.

³¹ Approximately two-thirds of divorces were filed after less than a year of marriage.

III. SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS

This chapter reviews the situation of Palestinian women within the context of socio-economic development in the following areas: (a) political participation; (b) labour and economy; (c) poverty; (d) education; (e) legal and human rights; and (f) health.³²

A. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

1. *Background*

Like their counterparts engaged in nationalist struggles in other regions of the world, Palestinian women entered public life through their roles in national resistance, ranging from such forms of political protest as street demonstrations, sit-ins and petitions, to more organized participation in various political parties and political decision-making. However, a genuine debate with regard to the political participation of women arises with the culmination of a true and just peace process and the concomitant shift from resistance movement to nation building. Specifically, there is a need to ensure that women enter the formal political institutions and take a greater role in the decision-making process of the eventual State of Palestine.

Historically, the end of wars or national revolutions tends to mark the end of active political participation by women who are again barred from the public sphere and expected to return to such domestic chores as raising children and housekeeping.

For Palestinian women, the struggle for liberation has been inextricably linked with the national struggle for self-determination. On the practical side, nationalism has provided a legitimate base for Palestinian women to shed such traditional roles and undertake activities outside the home. Strategically, Palestinian women gained a very rich political experience through their participation in informal politics during the national struggle. This participation was driven by an awareness that such experience could prove invaluable and could empower them in future social and political arenas. Consequently, until 1997, approximately 23 per cent of the administrative personnel of charitable organizations in WBGS were women, and the largest and most effective mass-based organizations were committees run by women.

Since the Peace Conference on the Middle East (Madrid, 30 October 1991), commonly referred to as the Madrid Peace Conference, Palestinian women have been active in preparing themselves for leadership and decision-making roles and for building the infrastructure of a future State. This preparation involved acquiring and mastering new skills to complement those gained through the experience of the first intifada.

³² While most of the analysis presented in this chapter pre-dates the first intifada, some of the analysis is drawn from the study by Abu-Nahleh, L. et al. "Towards gender equality in the Palestinian Territories: a profile of gender relations" (SIDA, August 1999).

However, the PNA has generally been averse to promoting a participatory approach to nation building. Indeed, the nature of the Oslo Accords, with its strong focus on the issue of security, has often translated as control of citizens, rather than on public participation. Moreover, such official exclusion is compounded by the undefined nature of citizenship and of the legal rights of citizens.

This exclusion, which comes at a critical juncture in the nation-building process, poses a serious challenge to efforts aimed at implementing and fostering genuine democracy in WBGS. In 1991, for example, the technical committees on the infrastructure, which were established by the PLO, comprised merely 6 women out of a total of 300 appointees.³³ Additionally, when the PNA was established and assumed control of WBGS, only two women were granted senior positions, namely, a minister and an under-secretary; and there were only 30 women out of the 240 general directors in 15 ministries. The issue of gender inequality in the highest positions was raised by the Palestinian women's movement during the national debate on the electoral law. Within that context, two proposals were presented to the Palestinian Legislative Council as follows: to implement a fixed quota of women, thereby safeguarding women participation; and to formulate an electoral system whereby elected members of either sex could not number less than one-third of total membership. These proposals were subsequently rejected by the PNA on the grounds that they ran counter to a genuine democratic system.

2. Gender gaps in political participation

Civil society in WBGS evolved in a pluralistic and progressive direction as the population sought democratic alternatives to counter the repressive regime of the occupation. This repression, particularly during the first intifada, encouraged Palestinian society to seek democratic alternatives and a participatory model of government that differed from the largely centralist and bureaucratic models that are prevalent in the Arab region. Within that context, the Palestinian women's movement played a key role in promoting programmes of gender equality and public empowerment by focusing on skills, leadership and democracy through campaigns and workshops throughout WBGS. While these new forms of participation and representation benefited both individuals and the capacity of the women's movement, these efforts were severely hampered by problems of centralism and nepotism.

The major gender gaps in the area of political participation include the following:

(a) Gender inequality in the political arena was rife before the accession of the PNA. By the end of 1996, women comprised a modest 7.5 per cent of the 744 members of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the representative body of the

³³ These numbers grew subsequently to 66 women out of 366 members following the establishment of the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC).

PLO. Within the PLO itself, only 3 of the 100 members of the Central Council are women, and there are no women among the 16 members of the Executive Committee;

(b) Similarly, the participation of women in the leadership of political parties is extremely limited and amounts to the following: 11.6 per cent of the Central Committee of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and two women in the Political Bureau of that party; 19 per cent of the Central Committee of Fida, the Palestinian Democratic Union; 19.5 per cent of the Central Committee of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine; and 5 per cent of the Central Committee of Fatah, which is by far the largest and most influential of the political factions and is the main political party in power. After the Oslo Accords, 22 new members were added to the Revolutionary Council of Fatah, only one of whom was a woman;

(c) While several women played important roles during the Madrid Peace Conference and subsequent public negotiations, women have been largely excluded from the crucial peace process negotiations and their outcomes;

(d) During the elections of the Palestinian Legislative Council held in January 1996, only 35 of the 672 candidates were women, five of whom were elected, and two became ministers at different periods;³⁴

(e) Given the comparatively recent establishment of governmental institutions and the uneven and gradual process of formulating new policies, integrating gender issues into policy is very much at an initial stage.

3. Initiatives and opportunities

Building a new State of Palestine offers the prospects for increasing public participation in the executive, legislative and judicial structures. Moreover, a fledgling nation provides a rare opportunity to promote and link democratic and gender agendas, thereby ensuring active citizenship through democratic, participatory and accountable governance. This vital link can be raised by various players, including women inside political parties, the Palestinian women's movement, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other unions and associations concerned with human rights and issues of socio-economic development.

However, the lessons of the transitional period under the Oslo Accords warn that moves to activate citizenship naturally involves empowering women in political parties and requires developing clear agendas that reconcile the participation and

³⁴ Only 19 per cent of the staff and personnel in the different ministries of the PNA are women of which 52 per cent work in the cleaning sector and reception and secretarial services, thereby reflecting the low status of most women employed in the ministries.

rights of women with the basic developmental and economic needs of Palestinian society.

Elections for municipalities and local authorities, which were postponed during the transitional phase, could provide the ideal opportunity for women candidates to raise the needs of the local community and link these needs to gender issues. Within that context, the Palestinian women's movement has lobbied for a quota of 30 per cent for these elections.

(a) *The Palestinian women's movement*

The Palestinian women's movement drew up the Women's Charter in 1993, which essentially delineated gender equivalence and provided a secular vision of women's rights in terms of justice, democracy, equality and development. Within that context, the charter adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),³⁵ and called for the following: (a) full protection of equal rights in the areas of education, work, ownership of property and political participation, including the decision-making process; (b) an end to discriminatory legislation against women; (c) legal protection against family violence and restrictions on the freedom of movement of women; and (d) the right to transfer citizenship to a foreign husband and children.

The Palestinian women's movement, which routinely suffers from the oppressive practices of the occupation, is currently facing organizational and structural crises. Consequently, there is a justified concern that the movement could be weakened to the extent of being unable to influence formal policies that bear on gender needs and strategic development. This weakness could in turn have an adverse impact on the rights and aspirations of Palestinian women.

(b) *The Directorate of Gender Planning and Development*

In order to respond to the need for gender equality at a national level, the Directorate of Gender Planning and Development (DGPD) was established in 1996 within the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. The two principal objectives of this Directorate are to train women employed in ministries, and to establish women's departments in the various ministries of the PNA. However, despite the latter objective, women's issues tend to fall under the aegis of the Ministry for Women Affairs, whose minister is the acting head of DGPD. Restricting gender issues to a separate ministry could isolate and further marginalize women.

³⁵ CEDAW, which was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, consists of 30 articles that define what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.

B. LABOUR AND ECONOMY

1. *Background*

The economy of WBGS has been profoundly shaped by the economic policies of Israel that, during the period 1967-1992, allowed relatively free movement of labour and goods between Israel and WBGS while restricting Palestinian trade with the rest of the world. Moreover, in order to bolster Israeli products, major restrictions were placed on Palestinian agricultural, manufacturing and industrial products. These policies were compounded by minimal development in the public sector of WBGS and resulted in substantial trade imbalances with Israel, a dramatic decline in the agricultural sector, and limited growth in the manufacturing and industrial sectors. During that period, more than 40 per cent of the Palestinian labour force worked in Israel, which accounted for more than 30 per cent of the gross national product (GNP) of WBGS.

This situation significantly worsened following the implementation of the closures policy by Israel, which was initiated in 1987 during the first intifada and was intensified during the Gulf War of 1991. Given the almost constant closure of WBGS and the resulting restrictions on labour and goods moving to Israel, the monthly flow of labour to Israel dropped from 120,000 in 1992 to less than 25,000 in 1996, which caused the GNP to drop by 35 per cent, and unemployment rates to soar to 39 per cent and 24 per cent in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, respectively. The continuing macroeconomic grip by Israel of the Palestinian economy has hampered the creation of viable alternatives to the Israeli labour market. Alternative employment has been largely limited to employment in the public sector, particularly the security apparatus and civil service.³⁶ Additionally, a number of development strategies have been formulated by the PNA in a bid to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), including the establishment of industrial parks on the borders between WBGS and Israel. However, these strategies have been severely hampered both by the unfavourable security policies of Israel and by the absence of a sound regulatory environment to encourage potential investors.

Furthermore, the current and long-term demographic trends in WBGS are expected to place an additional and substantial burden on the Palestinian economy. Given the high fertility rates and that 47 per cent of the population is aged under 15 years, the labour force is currently growing at an annual rate of approximately 6 per cent, which translates into an estimated 4,600 job seekers entering the work force every month. Consequently, half a million new jobs need to be created simply to keep employment at current levels.

³⁶ Employment in the public sector currently represents approximately 18 per cent of the labour force.

2. Gender gaps in labour and economy

While in other regions there is an awareness that investments in female employment has a profound and positive impact on the economic and human development of society, this link is still largely misunderstood by policymakers in WBGS, who perceive the issue of female employment in terms of rights rather than as an essential component to sound economic planning.

(a) Unemployment

There are major structural obstacles to women's entry into the formal labour force, whose participation has not risen above 12 per cent of the total labour force since 1995.³⁷ In 2001, this rate decreased further to 10.4 per cent, which can be largely attributed to the repercussions of the second intifada. Moreover, while data indicate that more women are willing to work than the labour market can absorb, women typically spend four times as long as their male counterparts in search of work.

In 2002, female unemployment rates averaged approximately 17 per cent of the female labour force, compared to the 33.5 per cent unemployment rate of their male counterparts. This disparity belies the limited size of the female labour force.

(b) Employment by sector

An estimated 27 per cent of working women are employed in the education sector, which ranks as the most female-dominated area among the formal sectors in WBGS. However, women in this sector are concentrated at the lower levels of education and are generally confined to the lower occupational rungs. In addition to prevalent gender-based wage disparities that favour male staff, teachers generally earn less than workers in other professions with lower qualification and skill requirements.

Approximately 15 per cent of female workers are employed in the textile industry, which represents the only area of industrial production with female participation. This industry is becoming increasingly home-based and informal.

While women make up a large part of the agricultural labour force and represent 29 per cent of working women, the majority work as unpaid family labour. Despite their legal rights to inherit land, few women actually claim these rights. In addition, women continue to have little access to agricultural training or extension, agricultural cooperatives and marketing schemes.

A total of 5 per cent of working women are employed in the public sector compared to 12 per cent of men. This disparity is predominantly due to the fact that the biggest growth area of the PNA has been in the security services and police, which have created more employment opportunities for men.

³⁷ This rate was lowest in the Gaza Strip at approximately 8 per cent.

A further 8 per cent work in the health sector, and the remaining are self-employed, representing 14 per cent and 8 per cent of employed women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, respectively.³⁸

(c) *Employment status*

In 2001, the salaries of women in WBGS were typically 75 per cent of those of their male counterparts. Moreover, 31 per cent of employed women in the West Bank worked as unwaged family labourers, predominantly in agriculture, in stark contrast to the 7 per cent of men employed under similar conditions. This rate was considerably lower in the Gaza Strip, amounting to 6 per cent of employed women, which can be attributed to a significantly smaller agricultural sector.

3. *Initiatives and opportunities*

While the structural context of policies and programmes aimed at creating jobs for women is restricted, major opportunities do exist in the current situation. Foremost among these are a comparatively open and positive attitude at a societal level with regard to women working outside the home; and a basic desire by women to find work opportunities. Consequently, there is a vital need to establish job creation schemes for women, particularly in the target group of new graduates of community colleges and universities. Within that context, such large-scale job creation projects as the Gaza Industrial Estate (GIE) need to be analysed and incorporated into training and job placement programmes for women.

While a number of credit and training programmes exist for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), women tend to represent a small proportion of borrowers and are typically offered smaller loans. There is therefore a need to redress this imbalance and promote female entrepreneurs in the local environment, thereby encouraging married women with children and lower education to generate income and contribute to the national economy. Such participation has paradoxically been facilitated by the downturn in the standards of living since many conservative families and spouses have been compelled to accept the notion of working women.

C. POVERTY

1. *Background*

In 1997, 23 per cent of Palestinian households were under the poverty line and 14 per cent of households lived in abject poverty.³⁹ The incidence of poverty was more than twice as strong in the Gaza Strip with 38 per cent compared to 16 per cent in the

³⁸ Approximately 99 per cent of businesses owned by women are single-person enterprises.

³⁹ National Poverty Eradication Commission (NPEC), *National Poverty Report, 1998* (Ministry for Planning and International Cooperation, 1998).

West Bank. Moreover, there were significant differences within the regions with the highest poverty rates recorded in Southern Gaza at a devastating 51 per cent, and 24 per cent and 28 per cent in Hebron and Jenin, respectively, in the West Bank. In the survey conducted by PCBS in January-February 2002, 66.5 per cent of Palestinian households were found to be below the poverty line of \$2 per day.⁴⁰

The overarching factors for poverty in Palestine are easily identified, including the legacies of military occupation and dispossession, political instability and conflict, highly restricted labour markets, and a distorted and dependent Palestinian economy. However, less evident are the effects of chronic poverty on labour supply and demand, prices, commodities and services, the presence and absence of public subsidies and goods, and the political environment. These factors have a direct impact on the human capabilities of the population, and influence the composition and formation of families, including the status, roles and responsibilities of men and women.

Principally, there are two formal social assistance programmes, namely, the Ministry of Social Affairs that serves the population of WBGS, excluding Jerusalem; and UNRWA that serves the refugee population. While these programmes target the poorest members of the population and strive to offer some emergency relief, they do not provide enough assistance to allow an exit from deep poverty.⁴¹ Moreover, while family networks are mainstays of social support for Palestinian households, particularly given the historic insecurity of Palestinian society and the absence or inadequacy of public provisions, the evidence suggests that such support is irregular at best and gendered to favour male recipients.

The deteriorating economic situation in WBGS since the Oslo Accords, particularly the economic shocks caused by the closures, has placed the crisis of male unemployment at the centre of the PNA agenda, thereby marginalizing poor women in the process. While the Palestinian Development Plan (PDP) of 1998 instructs the authorities to “provide, as best it can, a societal safety net for the poor and disadvantaged”, the Plan gives scant attention to the multifaceted nature of poverty, to vulnerable social groups and to gender issues.⁴²

2. Gender gaps in poverty

Gender gaps and poverty are linked in a cyclical fashion whereby gender inequities contribute to poverty and poverty contributes to gender inequities.

⁴⁰ PCBS, “Impact of the Israeli measures on the economic conditions of Palestinian households on the eve of Israeli incursion” (PCBS, April 2002).

⁴¹ An individual receives a maximum of NIS 96 per month, or some \$23, whereas the poverty line is NIS 418 and NIS 343 for deep poverty. Hilal, J. and el-Malki, M. “A study of the role of non-government institutions in providing for the needy” (in Arabic) (Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) Study Paper No. 14-0020, September 1997).

⁴² *Palestinian Development Plan 1998-2000* (PNA, 1998).

Consequently, there is an urgent need to adopt policies that take a gender rights-based approach to alleviating poverty and specifically address poor women. This is particularly essential given that women tend to have limited access to resources and assets, which makes them more financially disadvantaged than men.⁴³

Moreover, while households headed by women constituted 8 per cent of total Palestinian households in 1997, these constituted a substantial 25.6 per cent of poor households. Of these households, 60 per cent were widows, 15 per cent were divorced, and 13 per cent were separated. The highest incidence of poverty was found in those households with more than ten members, at 32 per cent, and in those households containing one member, at 28 per cent.

3. Initiatives and opportunities

The PNA and the donor community have begun to address poverty in a more serious and systematic fashion. Employment generation, social security and social safety net programmes must address the needs, circumstances and interest of men and women in their various settings. There are opportunities to develop multifaceted and gender-sensitive approaches and programmes, particularly in the light of the integration of gender issues at a global level.

D. EDUCATION

While gender equality and gender integration have been taken more seriously by the Ministry of Education than in other ministries, resulting in comparatively smaller gender gaps than in other sectors, these gains in the educational level of women have not translated into improvements for women in the labour force and the public life. The education sector faces a major challenge in moving gender equality issues from quantitative to qualitative levels if it is to contribute to effecting real changes in gender roles and responsibilities.

Gender gaps in education

The overall literacy rates for men and women are estimated at 91.5 per cent and 77 per cent, respectively. There is no discernible gender gap in the enrolment rates of girls and boys in the 6-11 and 12-14 age brackets with rates of 90.7 per cent for boys and 91.6 per cent for girls, and 89.2 per cent for boys and 90.9 for girls, in the respective brackets. Gender gaps appear in the older classes. In the 15-17 age bracket, 63.7 per cent of girls are enrolled in education compared to 67.4 per cent of boys, and 5 per cent of girls and 6.7 per cent of boys aged 18 years and over are enrolled in education.

⁴³ Less than 10 per cent of women own property while almost half of them possess some sellable jewelry as their main asset.

This gender gap is most acute in vocational education at the secondary level where girls form a modest 13 per cent of total enrolment and tend to opt for studies in the areas of nursing and commerce. Young women in community colleges form 60.7 per cent of total enrolment and 42.5 per cent of total enrolment in the eight universities of WBGS. While these rates are encouraging, gender differences by region and fields of specialization are less encouraging. Given the policy of streaming students into academic and vocational or industrial tracks, educational opportunities have been severely limited, particularly for girls who have largely been encouraged to choose arts courses, thereby limiting their opportunity in the labour force.⁴⁴

Similarly, gender gaps in the dropout rates tend to increase with the level of education, starting with parity for boys and girls at some 2.4 per cent in the primary cycle, and rising to 8 per cent for girls and 6.1 per cent for boys at the secondary level.⁴⁵ This gender disparity arises out of the different motives for leaving education. While boys typically drop out of school to seek work and provide an income for the household during financial difficulties, girls usually withdraw from education to enter early marriage.

E. LEGAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The Palestinian women's movement has emerged from the transitional period with a strong awareness and growing expertise in addressing legal issues from the standpoint of gender equality. Within the context of legal reform, a gender agenda has been developed and ratified through the model parliament process. However, there is a need to formulate and implement an overall strategy with regard to legislation covering personal status.

Initiatives for gender equality in the law can only succeed by strengthening the Palestinian legal system and the capacity of an independent judiciary, and by promoting the rule of law and human rights. The Palestinian Declaration of Independence of 15 November 1988 affirms equality between women and men in its provisions. Moreover, the basic law of WBGS prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender;⁴⁶ establishes that either parent can transfer citizenship to their offspring; and sets the legal age of marriage at 15 years for women and 16 years for men.⁴⁷ Within that context, 4 per cent of total women were married when they were aged 15 years or

⁴⁴ A modest 5.7 per cent of engineering graduates were women.

⁴⁵ The highest dropout rates were found in Jenin, estimated at 12 per cent for girls and 11.6 per cent for boys, and in East Jerusalem with the respective rates of 12 per cent and 11 per cent.

⁴⁶ The basic law, which draws on sharia as a principal source of legislation, equally prohibits discrimination based on religion, disability, political opinion, ethnicity and race.

⁴⁷ These are the legal ages for marriage in the West Bank. In Gaza, the minimum age for marriage with the consent of a judge is legally set at puberty, with the age of legal majority set at 17 for women and 18 for men.

younger;⁴⁸ and polygamy is sanctioned with no proviso to notify the existing or intended wife.⁴⁹

Palestinian human rights organizations have struggled to formulate new strategies aimed at promoting human rights and the rule of law in a complex backdrop of political tensions. These organizations have sought to draw attention to abuses by the PNA and its numerous security and police forces while seized on the continuing Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights, particularly torture and mistreatment of detainees, arbitrary arrest, illegal land confiscation, and restrictions on freedom of movement and on rights of residency in Jerusalem. Consequently, these organizations have rarely tackled gender issues and women's rights. Similarly, while NGOs concerned with gender issues have addressed violations of human rights by Israel, they have rarely grappled with the thorny issues of human rights and the rule of law under the PNA.

The issues of citizenship and the rights of citizens become increasingly urgent with the progressive consolidation of a new State of Palestine. In WBGS, rather than being a birthright, citizenship is often negotiated in daily transactions whereby claims and entitlements are accompanied by a practice of patronage that is generally detrimental to women, the poor and the marginalized. Within that context, the status of Palestinian refugees, particularly in Lebanon, represents an especially critical challenge. Placing women and the majority of Palestinian society at the centre of the struggle for equitable citizenship is the major obstacle of the next period.

1. Gender gaps in legal and human rights

While a husband may unilaterally divorce his wife, the most common form of divorce is by mutual consent whereby women typically relinquish their financial rights in order to obtain a divorce from their husbands. Legal reform initiatives have focused both on abolishing unilateral divorce and on strengthening women's claims, child custody and support.

Under current inheritance legislation, a daughter is entitled to inherit one-half the share of a son. However, many women renounce this right in order to maintain the social support of family and relations. While the National Strategy advocates guaranteeing "women's legal rights for social security and inheritance rights", this area has not yet been addressed by systematic campaigns.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ PCBS, *Population, Housing and Establishment Census – 1997 Statistical Brief* (PCBS, 10 December 1998).

⁴⁹ The proportion of polygamous marriages is comparatively low at 4 per cent of total marriages.

⁵⁰ General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), *The National Strategy for the Advancement of Palestinian Women* (GUPW).

Despite some gains in labour legislation, most notably the extension of maternity leave to conform to international standards, current labour laws do not adequately cover domestic, agricultural and informal labour, including work in family enterprises, which represent areas of work with comparatively higher proportions of women. Moreover, current legislation excludes places of work with fewer than five employees.

While the Palestinian women's movement has successfully lobbied for women to receive Palestinian passports for themselves and their children without the permission of a male guardian, there is no general nationality legislation that regulates citizenship and the rights of citizens.

In 1995, women accounted for approximately 11 per cent and 29 per cent of lawyers and law students in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, respectively. This proportion is expected to rise given the current enrolment of women at an encouraging 42 per cent in the new law school at Al-Quds University, Jerusalem. However, during the past five years, only two judges have been women and, moreover, female judges are barred from sharia and ecclesiastical courts that, respectively, govern personal status laws in the Muslim and Christian communities.

While past surveys have identified domestic violence as a serious problem in WBGS, most respondents have been reluctant to bring formal charges. Consequently, existing crime statistics do not contain adequate data on violence against women. However, women actively use specific hotlines for advice on such issues as rape, incest and other forms of violence.

2. Initiatives and opportunities

There are a number of important initiatives and opportunities in the area of legal and human rights, including the following: (a) to strengthen the peace process by integrating gender into the critical negotiating issues with particular attention to the problems and rights of women refugees, the right of family reunification and the problems of residency in Jerusalem; (b) to link women's rights to the rights of citizens within the context of development; (c) to promote and lobby for legislation that is gender-sensitive, particularly family law; and (d) to address the needs of poor women by promoting social security and welfare legislation and through legal safeguards in the informal, domestic, and agricultural sectors.

F. HEALTH

1. Background

In 1994, the Palestinian Ministry of Health took charge of the health services in WBGS, which had previously been the responsibility of the occupying forces. These services had severe deficiencies in the areas of infrastructure, services and human

resources due to minimal investment and years of neglect. For example, while the population doubled in the previous 25 years, the number of beds in governmental hospitals remained the same. During the years of military occupation, Palestinian NGOs and charitable organizations played a key role in addressing these weaknesses.⁵¹

This nascent health movement developed an approach that emphasized primary health care, which, while not always reflected by adequate budget appropriations, was subsequently adopted into Palestinian health policies. In the six years before the Oslo Accords, NGOs doubled the number of primary health care facilities and began to develop initiatives in the areas of women's health and reproductive health. These initiatives were taken a step further with the establishment of the Women's Health and Development Directorate in 1995 in the Ministry of Health.

The Ministry of Health ran a budget deficit of 60 per cent in 1995 and continues to face major financial constraints that affect its ability to administer and develop health programmes and to provide material support and priority to women's health and reproductive health. Additionally, the restrictions on movement imposed by border closures have deeply affected communication and coordination in the health system and public access to services, particularly to specialized care in hospitals in East Jerusalem. Governmental health insurance currently covers approximately 39 per cent of the population, principally public sector employees and workers in Israel for whom such cover is mandatory.

In the past decade, family planning and reproductive health programmes have developed rapidly to respond to and redress the high fertility rates of WBGS. While these programmes have generally been attentive to women's rights, they have largely underestimated the strong link between family size and such socio-economic factors as survival strategies in the context of instability, conflict and economic uncertainty; gender roles and responsibilities of women and men; and the absence or inadequacy of social provisions. These socio-economic factors need to be properly addressed at a societal level in order to tackle such key fertility determinants as the preference for sons and the early marriage of daughters.

2. Gender gaps in health

According to the official census of 1997, women's knowledge of contraceptive methods is very high and exceeds 98 per cent; and 31 per cent of women used modern contraceptives, rising to 45 per cent when traditional methods of contraception were included.⁵² A total of 20 per cent of pregnant women did not receive any prenatal care,

⁵¹ Within that context, UNRWA served and continues to serve as the major health provider for registered Palestinian refugees in WBGS and elsewhere in the region.

⁵² PCBS, *Population, Housing and Establishment Census – 1997 Statistical Brief* (PCBS, 10 December 1998).

and 80 per cent did not receive any postnatal care. While approximately 90 per cent of births in 1996 were in a health facility, specialized physicians and midwives only attended some 60 per cent of these births in the West Bank and 34 per cent in the Gaza Strip.⁵³

Environmental problems contribute both to health problems in the family, particularly children, and to the burden of women in the home. These problems include, inter alia, the degradation and inadequacy of groundwater in the Gaza Strip, and the lack of piped sewage systems in rural areas of the West Bank.⁵⁴

In 1995, approximately 40-50 per cent of women interviewed in a survey on mental health reported psychological distress, particularly depression, somatization disorders and obsessive-compulsive behaviour.⁵⁵

In 1992, 55 per cent of cancer cases among Palestinian women were related to the reproductive system.⁵⁶ There is no real reliable data for AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases.⁵⁷

While women have a higher rate of disability due to congenital, genetic and birth disorders, men have a higher overall disability rate at 2,302 per 100,000 compared to 1,802 per 100,000. Moreover, men tend to suffer more disabilities through injuries caused by accidents and the conflict. However, it has been suggested that the gender gap in disabled females deserves investigation to see whether premature death due to neglect could be a factor.⁵⁸

In 1996, there were only two certified gynaecologists operating in the Gaza Strip despite the stated preference for female doctors by women in gynaecological care.

3. *Initiatives and opportunities*

There is a need to adopt a holistic approach with regard to the health needs of the population in the larger context of violence and conflict, particularly in terms of the different impacts on women and men, and girls and boys. This multifaceted approach to gender and health needs to encapsulate the legal, social and economic

⁵³ Abortion is illegal and statistics for illegal abortions are unavailable.

⁵⁴ A modest 2 per cent of rural households in the West Bank have piped sewage systems.

⁵⁵ Sansur, R.M. *Environment and development prospects in the West Bank and Gaza Strip* (Bethlehem University, 1995).

⁵⁶ Barghouti, M. and Lennock, J. "Health in Palestine: potential and challenges" (the World Bank, March 1997).

⁵⁷ A total of 24 cases of AIDS were reported in the period 1987-1992.

⁵⁸ PCBS, *Women and Men in Palestine: Trends and Statistics* (PCBS (Gender Unit), 1998).

dimensions of WBS. Moreover, family planning programmes must be seen in the wider context of reproductive health and rights, with specific reference to population issues within the political, social and economic context of Palestinian society.

Palestinian health policies and programmes initiated by the PNA, UNRWA and NGOs have begun to move beyond treating women's health primarily within the framework of mother-child health, which was the dominant perspective until the 1980s. While a number of issues are beginning to be incorporated into official programmes and, to a lesser extent, service provision, including menopause and adolescent health, gender gaps remain in both health services and status. There is therefore a strong need for policymakers and providers to strengthen those initiatives that are underway and link them to reproductive health and rights.

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