

## Focus group with women's organizations – Gaza, 27 January 2009

A semi-structured focus group interview was conducted by Heba Qedwa and Vanessa Farr (UNDP/PAPP) at UNDP Gaza, in Arabic and English, with three women leaders representing a women's umbrella organization. Women's organizations doing relief work are part of this organization.

Interviewees:

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Women's groups have been involved in the humanitarian response but don't want this to be their focus: involvement in relief activities is necessary given the circumstances, but in their view, because women and men are equally badly impacted by the war, such work isn't properly the focus of women's organizations. Instead, women's groups want to re-prioritise the problems that women were facing even before the war, primary among which are access to justice and GBV. They want immediate humanitarian relief to be delivered quickly, but they also wish to conduct an impact survey on the long-term effects of the war on women, especially those newly widowed by the war.

Legal issues: when women's centres reopened after the war, there was an increase in the number of clients – women dealing with the usual issues such as divorce and custody battles, but also an entirely new set of challenges such as widows unable to resolve inheritance disputes especially when they're unable to prove a man's death or have been unable to retrieve a body from the rubble. There have been problems with a backlog in certifying deaths, delaying inheritance processes. Women unaccompanied by men also reported great social pressure on them, including social isolation. Women reported a higher rate of divorce ('repudiation?') after the war – often caused by disputes over where to flee to safety. The exaggerated nature of men's response to interpersonal conflict in the family correlates directly to the stress of the war. Already divorced women also report a significant increase in problems related to child custody including disputes over access to children to whom they were denied access in the height of the bombing. While no hard data has been collected yet about increased family violence (including GBV) during the war, experience from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifadas and the coup shows that the number will have increased.

### Action Points

**Women call for a two-track response: 1) emergency legal and psychosocial interventions. In the week after the war, women's centres have already been able to mediate many disputes and restore family harmony. Funding is needed for outreach programmes. More fieldworkers are needed now to assess and respond to incidents of family stress, before more time lapses and family breakdown becomes irreversible.**

**2) Long-term responses. Resources are needed to continue to deliver services for ongoing gender justice and women's empowerment work.**

Young women: teenage girls/young women (12-18 years old) who have been displaced are experiencing particularly extreme cultural backlash; this is exaggerated if they are separated from male family members or orphaned. While in shelters, they are confined "to the corner" and are not allowed to move around, speak or participate in activities unless chaperoned. They are unable to access any information not explicitly targeted to them; for example, girls who were menstruating or those who were infected by head lice were unable to access health information or services to assist them. There were also reports that girls were being kept back when schools re-opened last week as they didn't have appropriate clothing. Islamic groups have placed clear restrictions on access to shelters/IDPs by civil society organizations and are not permitting any psycho-social support except to organizations approved by them. There is a fear that young women are a particular target for religious/political propaganda and extremist recruitment.

By contrast, young males are allowed to move around freely and participate in/benefit from all activities. The challenge is to develop programmes that address both young women and young men (to overcome the growing culture of segregation) but that are also sensitive to the specific needs of each sex.

### **Action Points**

**Design all youth programmes for girls and boys. Do not offer sex-segregated psycho-social relief interventions – instead identify ways to address sex-specific needs without appearing to support sex segregation. Develop human-rights based social education programmes for youth (including political education) that supports critical thinking, non-violence and freedom of choice.**

Shelter: Experience shows that only male heads of households will be consulted with regard to shelter-related issues: what will happen to women with no male supporters? There is a risk they will be subjected to the wishes of extended families and will be forced to follow social pressure including through violent coercion.

### **Action Points**

**Women should be seen, equally with men, as victims of political violence for whom equal solutions, compensation and restitution should be identified. Women heads of household, including those who were recently widowed or divorced, need education and income generation activities to assist them**

to live independently. There needs to be a tailored programme for women's livelihoods/income generation run through women's organizations so that women are guaranteed individual support in addition to any they may get as members of an extended household.

***NOTE: It was reported that UNFPA's hygiene kits were very useful and entirely appropriate. However, they did not reach people not in UNRWA shelters and there were insufficient numbers of kits. Lack of potable water was/is a significant problem. In particular, shortages of clothing, especially shoes, were noted. There is a need for healthy foods for children over 5.***

Crisis preparedness: While capacity building enables women to manage households, organizations etc. during peace time, a lack of crisis preparedness means the women's movement experiences a setback every time there is an outbreak of conflict. There have been some efforts at crisis preparedness in Gaza, but no training initiatives to date could have anticipated the scale and intensity of this war. Hard-won gains in building women's self-confidence and resilience, including through psycho-social training, have been lost as women largely found themselves unable to support their family members.

There are two different categories of women in Gaza: early findings are that women in more conservative areas were particularly badly affected as they are forbidden from the management of household affairs such as safekeeping of documents. Where women are more empowered and resourceful, and are able to claim their rights, their survival and the safety of their households was greater; for example, women trained in first aid in 2002/3 drew on this training in the recent war and were sometimes able to save lives. Their ability to take decisive action is now assisting in their personal recovery.

### **Action Points**

**In the state of ongoing crisis in Gaza, women need specific awareness raising and training on crisis response – from evacuation planning to first aid training to lessons in household management without infrastructure (such as cooking without gas) to household preparedness (e.g. what foods to stockpile, water management, how to store essential documents for quick access, etc.). Women leaders need training on how to report the violation of human rights (by either IDF or Hamas). They need to know how to respond to violence and other crimes against women. Different methodologies are needed to reach women in religiously conservative areas. Crisis training response will build resilience and may present a window to raise awareness of women's rights.**

Income generation: Small and medium enterprises suffered whole-scale destruction, especially in rural areas.

### **Action points**

**Priority should be given to including women in all restoration of livelihoods, not only to give them an independent income but as a means to restore dignity, provide restitution, and continue existing work to empower women and promote gender equality.**

Women's rights and protection: Women leaders did not feel adequately prepared to understand, record, explain and report various human rights violations, or to respond to an escalation in family violence; and in the midst of the war they found it difficult to determine how to report particular violence/violations and crimes against women. The women were at pains to explain that gender-based violations were not only caused by IDF, but also by the de facto authority which has of course not signed up to any UN mechanisms for the protection of women. There is too much fear, and no mechanism in place, to report such violations.

In particular, because there was a lot of misinformation and fear about the long-term impacts of inhaling white phosphorus, women felt inadequate about how to reassure those who had been in proximity to this substance.<sup>1</sup>

### **Action points**

**Women are a potential provider of mine risk education (MRE).**

**Women leaders need more training on human rights including recording testimony for reparations. While its immediate purpose may be to record war violence and violations, such training should also be designed to enhance the general project of empowering women and promoting gender equality especially through preventing GBV. Specific attention needs to be paid to a) how women can benefit from protective international mechanisms, and b) how these can be localized. One suggestion is that neutral community based bodies – such as emergency response units – could be established to take care of immediate needs for shelter, first aid, protection etc – in the event of another incursion.**

Disabilities: Estimations of the longitudinal impacts of war injuries suggest that as many as 10% of the population may be permanently disabled as a result of the war. A particular concern was expressed that women burned with WP may be more vulnerable unless they are offered some form of reconstructive surgery, without which they are at greater risk of being divorced or abandoned.

### **Action points**

**Before this war, people living with disabilities were treated separately through special services; in the reconstruction period, the disabled should be treated as part of the larger community so that they are rehabilitated as comprehensively as possible. Young newly disabled people need special attention especially to get them back to school. Women who are caregivers of those with disabilities need extra assistance, especially if the disabled was also a primary bread earner.**

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<sup>1</sup> The military purpose of white phosphorus (WP) is to create a smoke screen. It is only dangerous to humans if it touches exposed flesh; however, those inhaling it at a distance will experience a temporary burning of the throat and lungs which is very frightening. UNICEF's Mine Risk Awareness has included information on WP but much more needs to be done to educate the population on its impacts.

Men's issues: (Please note that responses to this question have not been cross-checked with male leaders, except informally). There is a general fear that war has made men and boys more aggressive and prone to resort to violence, partly to combat their feelings of inadequacy at being unable to meet gendered ideals of protecting women and children. Furthermore, men were specifically targeted as men (as is attested to in the high numbers of men arrested and imprisoned, and the number of dead male civilians). As a result of being attacked *as men*, men appear to be displaying more symptoms of depression than women in the post-conflict period. This depression is compounded because there is very little men can do to start reconstruction efforts in the ongoing blockade. There is some evidence that risk-taking behaviors have increased among males: cigarette smoking has doubled and there may be more drug use (including intravenous – drugs are brought in through the tunnels) although this has not been systematically documented.

### **Action points**

**Psycho-social support must be offered consistently and comprehensively to all family members and not only reach women and young people. While it should be gender aware, care must be taken *not* to exaggerate or appear to support increasingly clear gendered social divisions: for example, girls and boys should not receive segregated support.**