

The Women Here Have Become My Real Family

Shelter Support Offers a New Start for Women Facing Violence

Some 29 percent of Palestinian women, or nearly one in three, have reported psychological, physical, sexual, social, or economic violence perpetrated by their husbands at least once during the preceding 12 months, according to 2019 data. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, service providers have seen a dramatic increase in demand for their services, due to increased household stress and financial pressures compounded by lockdown.

Courtesy of UNFPA

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ne of the women behind these grim figures is 30-year-old Amany (name is changed for privacy and protection), from a town in the governorate of Nablus in the West Bank. "I faced a difficult

childhood in poverty and suffered from violence from many people around me throughout my life," she reflects. She suffered years of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of her father, and little or no support from other family members. Her dream of completing high school and pursuing a university education remained just that – a dream.

Amany was 20 years old when she was first forced into marriage to a man she did not know. "I could not tolerate the marriage. He had psychological issues and was abusing me. Three years later, I got a divorce and went back to my parents' house. The abuse I faced at the hands of my father intensified." Much to her dismay, she was again forced into marriage at the age of 24, this

time to a man in his sixties. "I got divorced a month after the wedding day. He was old and physically ill; he was beating me all the time."

A year later, she met a man who appeared kind and reliable. Soon after they became close, however, he asked her for money and then left her. He threatened to kill her if she reported him, and her family refused to help.

Amany felt that she was unable to go on and that she had nowhere left to turn. "These were the worst days of my life. I was helpless. I had no hope and began to contemplate suicide."

She mustered the courage to try one final request for help and approached the police station in Jenin to tell them that she did not want to stay at her family's house. They referred her to the Family Defence Society women's shelter in Nablus. This was the first step to a new and better life for Amany.

"I was supported from day one at the shelter. I felt safe. In the three years that I have now spent at the shelter, I have never wanted to leave. The social workers helped me keep a self-reflective diary and provided me with individual and group counseling



United Nations Population Fund

sessions. I was also supported in continuing my education at the shelter."

This shelter is one of five in Palestine. For women who face gender-based violence (GBV), it provides comprehensive multi-sectoral services that include legal, health, and psychological services as well as economic empowerment.

Ikhlas Soufan, the shelter's director, believes that economic empowerment is very important: "We support these women so that they can become financially independent. They feel like they are producing something, which also helps them on a psychological level. UNFPA supports us in providing various types of training for these women, including drawing on glass, ceramics, embroidery, and beauty care. They also support women who

Achieving zero gender-based violence – one of UNFPA's three global strategic objectives – by providing psychosocial, legal, and awareness-raising services for gender-based-violence survivors.





UNFPA supports activities that aim to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, including multi-sectoral services and economic empowerment activities to help women get back on their feet.

wish to enroll in management or secretarial courses, or other fields of their choice.”

With the onset of COVID, however, such shelters faced unprecedented challenges. Not only did more women require support, but the shelter also struggled to ensure infection prevention and initially was unable to quarantine new arrivals. With support from UNFPA, the shelter was able to establish a

dedicated quarantine room and make use of personal protective equipment to keep staff and survivors safe.

“Ikhlas saw that I was ambitious about education and told me she could help me to complete my school diploma. At the shelter, they bought me all the books and the stationery that I needed and supported me with tutoring lessons during the last months before the exams,” says Amany.

“The day I received my results was the best day of my life. They threw a party for me at the shelter that was attended also by police officers and officials from the Ministry of Social Development.”

Amany’s ambition did not stop there. With the support of the shelter workers, she began to study social work at Al-Quds Open University and today has just one semester left. “I plan to do my master’s degree in psychology and a PhD afterwards,” she asserts.

The shelter soon offered Amany a job as a social worker. She enjoys supporting GBV survivors: “I was in their place at one time. I listen to the women and support them. I am very grateful for this opportunity. This work helps me develop on a personal level and gives me the strength to keep going.” She adds: “I belong to this shelter and will always belong here. I am proud to be working here. It is truly a safe home. The women here have become my real family.”

Amany’s relationship with her family has also changed, and she now visits them on a weekly basis. They respect her more, she says, and she is able to make personal decisions

without their interference. “I felt like a victim before, but I have become a new person, stronger and more resilient.” She tells girls and women facing GBV: “Don’t be afraid to seek help when you need it. Do not stay silent and never give up.”

Ikhlas makes clear that despite the tremendous work of many service providers, much more is required: “More national and international efforts are needed to end GBV in Palestine. It is important to tackle the root causes of this issue at the community level.”

Despite the hard work of many organizations and individuals, Palestinian women who face violence continue to lack proper legal protection. The Draft Family Protection Bill, pending for several years, is required to provide a framework for these services and to ensure that perpetrators face justice.

UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, with a mission to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person’s potential is fulfilled. UNFPA supports a range of services for women experiencing violence, including this and several other shelters, as well as “safe spaces” where women can access support and advice. Achieving “zero gender-based violence and harmful practices” is one of UNFPA’s global goals, and the agency works closely with both national and international partners to prevent and respond to GBV.

Article photos are courtesy of UNFPA Palestine.

