

Imprisoned Husbands: Palestinian Wives and Experiences of Difficulties

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Abstract This study aimed to investigate difficulties experienced by the wives of Palestinian men arrested and held in Israeli prisons. 16 captives' wives were interviewed using a semi-structured interview to provide them with a greater opportunity to speak about their experiences. Three main research questions were discussed; community difficulties, social support, and coping strategies. A thematic analysis was used throughout the interviews. We concluded that in addition to the stress of being separated from their

husbands, the frustrating visitation process to prison and the ongoing political conflict, the wives expressed a frustrating social network characterized by constant interferences in their personal lives and the choices they make. Most women expressed a lack in psychosocial support given through governmental and non-governmental organizations; in addition they expressed a need for that kind of support. Coping strategies ranged from religious, acceptance, distraction, to planning strategies.

Keywords Captives' wives · Social support · Community difficulties · Coping strategies · Visiting process

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Introduction

Sixty and more years of occupation have influenced the lives of Palestinians on many different levels. One aspect is the experience of being arrested or captured, which is practiced on daily basis by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians since 1967 (B'Tselem 2012; The Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs 2012). The number of captives has increased tremendously during the first and the second Intifada. During the nineties and the years of the second intifada the annual detention has peaked to 20,000 to 30,000. Palestinian society can be considered as the most imprisonment society in the world (Bornstein 2010; Ron 2000). In 2012 it was estimated that around nine Palestinians were arrested daily (B'Tselem 2012; The Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs 2012). A human rights report published in 1991 compared rates of incarceration between the US, usually known to have the highest percentages of incarceration in the world, with the Palestinian Occupied Territories. The report estimated that the rates of incarceration in Palestine have been 750 out of

every 100,000 compared to 300 out of every 100,000 in the US (Bornstein 2010). More than 40 % of Palestinian captives out of (700 000–800 000) are married and have children. Detention can last few days up to few weeks, months, years, and many can be sentenced for life and more; 1350 years is the longest judged period. There is no consistency in sentencing as it may seem, in some cases captives and their families are left with no information (B'Tselem 2012; The Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs 2012; Addameer 2011; Ramahi 2011).

According to the “Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics” (2011), 90.7 % of Palestinian families are headed by men. However, the Palestinian family dynamics in current times are changing and many women are having their careers outside home, and are being more active in decisions related to their lives and the lives of their families. Specifically during the first and the second Intifadas, many women became involved in political movements and in resisting the occupation (James 2013; Nusseibeh 1997; Unicef 2010).

There is an extensive body of literature on the suffering of women in general within war situations and ongoing political conflicts (Ahern et al. 2004; Brewin et al. 2000; Hadi et al. 2006; Hassanein 2012; Jarallah 2006; Liebling-kalifani et al. 2007; Maziad and Said-Foqahaa 2011; Robertson and Duckett 2007; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005; Weisfeld 1990). However, none of them have specifically investigated the experiences of women being separated from their husbands as a result of political imprisonment (The Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs 2012; Baker 2011, p. 101). Other studies did investigate the influence of having husbands arrested but for criminal reasons (Arditti et al. 2003; Codd 2007; Daniel and Barrett 1981; Fishman 1990; Hairston 1998; Lenora Madison 1992; Miller 2006; Piffner et al. 2001; Robin and Lisa 2001; Travis 2005; Wildeman et al. 2012). Several studies have found that the availability of social support is essential for the wellbeing of individuals in stressful situations (Agani 2001; Ahern et al. 2004; Bültmann et al. 2002; Cohen and Wills 1985; Olstad et al. 2001; Taylor et al. 2004).

There is to our knowledge no substantive study that has investigated the impact of imprisoned husbands on Palestinian wives and the difficulties the wives face. Therefore we see a necessity examining the experiences of Palestinian women in this area, the difficulties they encounter while having their husbands in detention, their ways of coping and their sources of social support.

It is important to study the difficulties experienced by these wives to contribute to the scarce literature on the impact of arrested husbands upon their wives within ongoing political conflicts. It is also a key ingredient to consider it from the perspective of the impact upon wives

within a society considered as male dominated where the male is considered the head of the family.

We aim to answer the following questions:

- What are the difficulties Palestinian captives' wives experience?
- What are the sources of support that these wives receive?
- How do they deal with these difficulties, and how do they cope with this situation?

Methodology

Study Context and Participants

Sixteen women chose to participate in this qualitative study out of 183 women who participated in the quantitative part of a larger research project concerning the psychological well-being of Palestinian family members experiencing paternal imprisonment within ongoing political conflict. Participants were randomly selected from four West Bank governorates out of 11 governorates (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2011; The Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs 2012) 89 % of the total Palestinian prisoners come only from the West Bank area. We excluded East Jerusalem and Gaza strip due to the difficulties in gaining access. Participants were between the ages of 28–52 all of which have children.

The Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted, with 18 open-ended questions. It gave participants more opportunity to speak about their experiences. Questions mostly focused on women's experiences from the moment of their husbands' captivity; their needs, relationship with the husband, children, parents, and families in law, their views on society, bringing up their children, ways they are dealing with the situation, and the meaning of life for them. All recorded interviews were transcribed accurately without editing (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999). All participants were reached by phone firstly and an appointment was scheduled. Interviewers had a letter of legal declaration from the Palestinian Ministry of Detainees and Ex-detainees to facilitate the mission.

Data Analysis

Interviews were qualitatively and manually analyzed based on (Braun and Clarke 2006) qualitative method. It consisted of looking for recurring themes across data while giving whole and equal attention to each issue. Thematic

analysis of our study was driven by specific analytic questions. Therefore the themes that have been identified, coded, and analyzed were a delicate reflection of the content of the entire data set in the interviews. Interviews were done in Arabic; therefore, two Palestinian colleges read and reread the interviews and the translation to English to try to reach the same intersubjective understanding.

A thematic analysis was carried out based on the steps of (Braun and Clarke 2006) mentioned in their article. It started with reading and rereading the data set and then we proceeded to search for meanings and patterns within the data set, taking notes and marking ideas, and giving careful attention to all of the data set. After generating a suitable list of ideas, the process of coding was the next step. Manual coding was used for this part of the analyses (Braun and Clarke 2006) reaching to several highlighted codes of interesting and important suggested themes. Through this coding process we reached a scheme, which describes the relationship between the suggested themes and subthemes, and which are strong enough to qualify for our study aims. All themes and subthemes then were revised and reviewed based on Braun and Clarke's method (2006), which led to identify three candidate themes.

Findings

Difficult Experiences

Difficult experiences articulated by captives' wives could be organized into two subthemes.

1. Community difficulties: Most women spoke about their social network, which included both family and non-family members. Their perceptions of their network seemed to be uncomfortable and negative. They described experiences where they were perceived by the community as suspicious, and as unable or incapable of raising their children on their own, on the other hand some women described a tensed relationship with their children, in addition to being controlled by some family members; not being able to live independently.

Suspicious: Um Jareer expressed how other people invaded her privacy and how women's 'decency'¹ in certain conditions is being questioned. At the same time she is implying that men think of her differently as a woman living alone.

People do not leave anyone alone. Interference is their job. People suspect every move where I go,

where I come from, who visits me...etc. Bad people think that I am a woman living alone and easy to get. Those people's thoughts are not right. I always feel observed, all women are observed, whether the wife of detainee, martyr or divorced, and the wife of the detainee has more pressure as her husband is still alive and she is not able to do anything.

Parenting issues: Most of captives' wives perceived their family in law as another source of interference, especially in relation to how they choose to raise their children and live their lives in general.

Um Yasin is expressing another kind of privacy invasion: "Many people interfere in my private life, even in how I spend money on my daughters, they believe that I should keep it until my husband get released from Jail." Um Nadeen added: "Family in law Interferes in my life and in how I raise my daughter, I can't raise my daughter as I want. The relationship with my family in law is based on uncertainty and distrust." Um Ali described a tensed relationship with her children: "My relationship with my children is very tensed filled with anger and strong emotions, sometimes I can't hear any voice from them, my responsibility is bigger than me and I can't stand it."

Being under-control: Um Hamdi is even telling how she needs to get permission before she can do something: "Sometimes the relationships with the family in law get worse because of the interference of the father in law in his son's family and don't leave them alone to do what they wish to do, he tries to put pressure on me too get permission for doing things, which she was allowed to do without permission before her husband was arrested"

2. Visiting arrangements: Visiting arrangements and contact with husband in prison were a second difficulty the wives expressed. We found three main patterns in this subtheme according to captives' wives opinions: getting permission, difficulties through the visit itself, and being totally forbidden to visit. All participants mentioned difficulties related to visiting arrangements, and how these visits are first of all controlled by the Israeli Prison Services (IPS), which grants permission and at the same time can refuse to give permission. The second difficulty is related to the process of visiting once the permission is granted, this has to do with checkpoints; waiting, being searched and inspected, and the delays all of which are a direct result of the occupation itself.

Getting permission: Um Farah said: "I have also asked several institutions for help but it was all in vain. It is always a refusal for security reasons." And Um Nadeen added, "After 5 years of suffering and searching for institutes help, I got a visiting permission for one time."

¹ Decency can mean different things in different cultures.

Visiting difficulties: Most wives who received permission to visit their husbands in prison expressed the long-suffering trip they had to go through. Suffering resembles the difficulties those who can visit encounter, starting from leaving their houses until reaching the prison, which includes waking up very early, going through checkpoints, body inspection, restricted and very short visiting times and the glass screen separation and bad quality of phones.

Um Mahdi as one example said, “Visiting permission requires from 3 to 4 months, and then the suffering begins. They block us in crowded rooms and children start crying. This takes around 1–2 h till our turn comes. Then I start talking with my husband by a phone and behind the glass fence. All what I wish is to talk with him directly without any barriers. They allowed once my child, who is less than 7 years of age, to go behind the bars where his father is. However, I told the soldiers I have to carry him and pass him through the little window, so I did and was able to touch my husband’s hand which relieved me. Normally the visiting period is 45 min and it is too short, especially when there are other relatives who want to see him so time will be divided to all of us.” And as Um Nadeen added, “I woke up at 5 am taking my daughter with me. Wondering why my daughter should be waking at the voice of the soldiers on checkpoints and inspections. After a long suffering journey of 9 h, we were only allowed to meet him for 45 min and even 30 min sometimes.”

Forbidden to visit: These wives never received a permission to visit their husbands from the moment of their husbands’ capture. For instance, Um Mahmood said, “My husband was captured on 27/5/2002. I have never obtained a visiting permission so far due to unjustified security reasons.” And as Um Farah said, “I have never got a visiting permission since the first day of capturing my husband in Israeli jails.

Sources of Support

Following up the question of the second theme about sources of support we can discuss four main subthemes. Captives’ wives mentioned support from governmental and non-governmental organizations as a source of support. In addition to that we observed other sources of support in the data such as the husband, children, and parents.

1. Organizations: Women mentioned both financial and psychological types of support. Um Nadeen said, “I receive a monthly salary from the Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs. My family and family in law also support me financially as well.” On the psychological level Um Majdy said, “Doctors

without Borders Association supported us in 2006; however, they suddenly stopped. We called them again and they came to our homes. We did feel comfortable because of their visit. They guided us on how to properly deal with our children under this situation. They helped us to get this heavy feeling off our chest.

On the other hand most of captives’ wives spoke about the lack or even absence of the non-governmental organizations’ role of supporting families of prisoners. Um Naseem expressed, “I am mostly suffering from the psychological side. I always find myself like a stranger in this world and feel very tired. I am always sick suffering from a big wide space in my life. Institutions for detainees’ families do not support us psychologically. They have to work on this side so we can have a sort of sympathy and happiness.”

2. Husband: For most women, the phone calls they receive from their husbands were considered the most important kind of support to them. As Um Gassan said, “The phone call of my husband is the most moral support for me. I feel more secure and content when he talks to me by phone. His sweet words make me feel that I am still a woman then I feel better and provide me a psychological comfort. There are words I cannot talk to anybody except my husband so I feel relief to talk to him what I want.”
3. Children: Children were the source of strengthening the family bond for the majority of women; they were the source to let them adapt and accept their situation. Children represented for many participants a reason to live. As Um Amer said, “It is true that we suffer in this hard life in the absence of husband who is the lover and the supporter. However, this is God’s will and we have to accept it. In addition to this, having children helps us to pass these difficulties in order to achieve this hard life by raising our children based on national ideology and to be proud of their fathers.” And as Um Asad said, “My elder son is in the university. He has taken his father’s place and deferred his study to run his father’s business. However, he has reregistered again at the university with a less load of courses trying to manage between work and study. He supports and helps me to raise his brothers and sisters, and they obey his orders.”
4. Parents: One’s own family is another kind of moral and financial support according to some of these wives. As Um Sondos said, “We moved to my family house until they guaranteed us a home to live in it. So I can raise my children in the way I like and feel free at my own home. My family has stood with me and supported me, especially my mother who stood with me in every

difficulty that I and my children faced. I did not find anyone else to support me except my family.”

Coping Strategies

The third main question is related to ways of coping with the situation. Captives' wives spoke about four main kinds of coping strategies. The categorizing of the coping strategies below are based on the Brief coping strategies style developed by (Carver 1997, P, 96).

1. Religious coping: Most women talked about religion as a lifestyle, its role in providing comfort and patience in such difficult situations. As Um Farah said, “Another psychological relief and comfort I found in praying, reading Qur’an and supplication. I go to attend religious sessions in the mosque. These sessions make me stronger and raise my spirit up”. And as Um Hamdi commented, “I view myself as a battery about to die and go there to charge it up. So I continuously feel the need of these religious sessions.”
2. Self-distraction coping strategy: By involving themselves in social activities to decrease the time they spend on their own and so to decrease the potential of thinking about what happened. As Um Asad said, “I involve myself in social activities for Association of Women Committees for Social Work. I mainly spend my time there. I also sometimes gather the wives of some prisoners and pay a visit for new prisoners' wives to support and encourage them in their hardship, so they can stand against it.”
3. Planning strategy: Having short and long-term plans and goals, some wives plan to continue higher education to cope with this situation and plan to work after graduating. AS Um Amer said, “I decided to continue my study at university to have a BA to go outside this situation, my husband called my family in law “because they rejected” and he supported me in this decision, also my own family support me. Now I finished my studies, now I am searching for work, this develops my personality and helps me to face difficulties of life, to be more, as a wise woman.”
4. Acceptance strategy: participants learned to live with this situation and accept the reality that the arrest and detention is a fact of their lives. Living life for their children and for raising them up, and continue their objective in life is one of the coping strategies that some of captives' wives mentioned. Um Sondos said, “I am the father and the mother for my children. I try to meet all what they want, I am living for them. I need to raise them. My life is not for me, but it is only for my children, this thing and this message gives me the strength to live this life and to accept it.”

Discussion

The current study aimed to focus on the difficulties that are experienced by captives' wives whilst living in a state of occupation and experiencing the absence of a husband. Community difficulties within patriarchal traditional system, sources of support and coping strategies that have been obtained and have culminated as a result of stress situations. Palestinian traditional society is characterized as interdependent, which means that the goals and behaviors of individuals depend on the relationship with others (Taylor et al. 2004). Others include family members such as husband, parents, children and parents in law, as well as neighbors, friends, colleagues and institutions. The findings of this study specified that the majority of Palestinian captives' women despise interference from family in law and society in their lives; in how they choose to raise their children and spend their money. This is another source of “stressor or stressful circumstance” those women experience (Thoits 1986, p, 416).

Our findings regarding the first sub-theme of the first question, “community difficulties”, were similar to the findings of (Hassanein 2012; Maziad and Said-Foqahaa 2011; Weisfeld 1990) on difficulties Palestinian women experience in general. There were in a greater part similar to (Folkman and Lazarus 1988; Punamäki 1986) who noted that living in such situations is considered a stressful event. Our findings were in line with the findings of (Al-Horani, 2011; “Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics” 2011) who studied the role of Palestinian wives and their ability to make decisions.

All wives of Palestinian men subjected to arrests had suffered from the restrictive vetting processes imposed by the (IPS) regarding the visitation process. Some women are forbidden to visit their husbands from 5 to 12 years for unconvincing security reasons. Two-third of them spoke about the suffering related to obtaining permission to visit with one such woman describing it as a “*trip of hell or torture*”. These findings were in line with the findings of the report of the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in Occupied Territories and the manual report of Ministry of Detainees and Ex-detainees and Affairs (B'Tselem 2012; The Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs 2012). This kind of suffering and loss has a direct correlation with heightened stress levels and feelings of hopelessness.

Second and the third research questions respectively tackle the issues of sources of support and coping strategies, which are different but closely related to one another. Depending on individual factors, such as: how each woman perceives herself, her agency, locus of control, and the particular meanings she attaches to what she has been

through. Skinner (2007) suggests dealing with stressors and coping strategies as a system and not as an individual process. The surrounding social network influence how people deal with and how they perceive the stressful event. The findings of the current study support the suggestion of this theory. Being within an interdependent society means that the person's daily life is connected with surrounding people. We found through our research that social network, such as husbands, parents, brothers, children and institutes have a big role in supporting most wives in relieving the effects of pain resulting from the arrest of their husbands, and relieving stress of interference of others as well as the stress of occupation itself. These findings were in line with other studies (Ahern et al. 2004; Bültmann et al. 2002; Lepore et al. 1991; Olstad et al. 2001; Taylor et al. 2004). On the contrary people who receive low levels of social support appear to be less resistant to stressor situations (Cohen and Wills 1985). Positive personal network relationships and good social support can relieve the result of stressors. Participants in our study were surrounded with a social network. However, they despised it. For them it was limiting and restricting and therefore it was but only another form of stress.

The coping strategies that have been used by these women were mostly, religious coping strategies. This derives from the religious nature of the majority of Palestinian society. Praying, reading Qur'an, supplication and religious lessons in mosques help these women in finding comfort. Acceptance strategy, learning to live with this situation and accept the reality that this tragedy has happened as a matter of fact, by accepting the result of the situation and live to bring the children up and raise them in a good way. Planning strategy; putting a plan to come up and know what to do in the short term and long term future through planned steps, such as to seek high education at university and planning to search for employment to fill their time and increase the family income. Self-distraction coping strategy, some of these wives involve themselves in social activities, visits and sporting to decrease the amount of time they spend alone that can trigger negative thoughts. These findings were in line with (Haj-Yahia 1994; Lavee et al. 1997) studies conducted in the Palestinian society.

Conclusion

From the above-mentioned perspective we progressed a thematic analysis about the lives of women of captured husbands, through stories of 16 Palestinian women. This kind of analysis allowed us to identify and to picture the different experiences of women ranging from their social network, their perception of others and of themselves in the context of experiencing a stressful life event. In

considering these stories we identified three main themes, difficult experiences, sources of support and coping strategies. Their stories showed the different layers and dimensions of women's experiences dealing with the arrest of their husbands and with the daily interferences of others coupled together with having to live under occupation.

Reactions of women vary from one to another. This can be due to differences in age, type of social network, their relationship with their children, and their relationship and support from their husbands, in addition to their perceptions of others and their selves. What others may have perceived as support, women came to perceive as interference in their lives. Participants also expressed contradictions; despising interferences from others and at the same time doubting their ability to stand up and make decisions on their own. These factors can be like a double-edged sword in that they can protect women from the network of interference and give them the ability to take decisions, and cope with the situation, and can also increase the stress that they experience at the same time.

Implications

The results encourage Palestinian governmental and non-governmental organizations to take their role in supporting wives and families of arrested husbands. Further, where needed, specialized mental health interventions need to be provided (Ehnholt and Yule 2006), and mental health workers need to be trained in the specific needs and situation of these women. One particular area these organization and mental health workers need to proceed training programs, to open possibilities for women to perceive themselves as 'whole' persons who can make decisions in their daily life and stand up for themselves and their children.

Limitations

Future research could be strengthened by collecting data from more participants, from wider areas of the Palestinian Occupied Territories, and from those who have no children. Taking into consideration that our 16 stories gave a particular picture of the Palestinian society, of how our participants perceived it; other women with different backgrounds and experiences may well provide an entirely different picture.

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