

Overcoming Fragmentation: Links between Income Generation and Psychosocial Counseling in Gaza

BARBARA WEYERMANN

Introduction

Armed conflict and violence affect women psychologically, socially and almost always economically. Support programs, however, often address these dimensions separately: women attend skills trainings to improve their economic situation and counseling sessions to deal with their traumas. Consequently, women are often unable to convert their skills into income or to improve their psychosocial situation. This paper presents the findings of a guided self-evaluation by a Palestinian non-governmental organization (NGO) in 2004, which both highlighted the insufficiencies of this fragmented approach and developed solutions to better serve the organization's program participants.

The NGO and its Socio-Political Context

The NGO was founded in the mid-1990s to provide psychosocial assistance to Palestinian women in the Gaza Strip who had been political prisoners. This target group soon expanded to include victims of domestic violence and women in difficult economic circumstances. Its primary objective is to promote participants' empowerment and improve their ability to protect themselves from further hardships.

The NGO works within a difficult and complex socio-political environment. Despite the Israeli army's withdrawal from Gaza in September 2005, Israel continues to control all vital aspects of development and, above all, the movement of people and goods across its borders. With the systematic de-development of Palestinian territories over the last 38 years,¹ no viable economy exists in Gaza and its people depend on handouts and external assistance. According to the NGO's staff, a day's meal for many participants may simply consist of "bread and if they have money they may buy some tomatoes."²

Decades of military occupation and high unemployment levels among men have deeply affected gender dynamics in Palestinian society. While during the first *intifada*,

or civil uprising, against Israel (1987-1993) Palestinian women participated in political activities and openly discussed gender issues, women disappeared from the political arena and public space during the second *intifada* (2000-2005) due to increasing militarization and growing conservatism in Palestinian society. On the other hand, the region's economic decline forces many women to leave their homes in search of income opportunities; often, these women replace male relatives as their family's primary provider. Women's larger economic role, however, does not necessarily result in their achieving greater negotiating power. In recent years, women's lives have become increasingly restricted in the name of family honor. Moreover, women's organizations report an increase in domestic violence, reflecting the bitter determination of many men struggling with daily experiences of emasculation, devaluation and defeat under occupation to defend their honor where they still can. Although the Israeli occupation did not create Palestinian society's patriarchal family structure, the humiliation of its continuous restrictions on daily life has reinforced rigid social and political values. Thus, according to the NGO's staff, women find themselves torn between their loyalty to social ideals of masculinity and femininity and their desire to explore the expanded opportunities that come with their role as breadwinners.³

Therefore, each initiative to support women's empowerment in Gaza must not only confront political authorities' lack of will to protect women's rights but also women's ambivalence toward their own autonomy.

Women's Empowerment

The NGO aims to empower women who live in difficult circumstances and are subject to violence. For these women to recover from traumatic and highly disempowering experiences caused by socio-political processes, they must gain the power to control their personal situation and to address and reduce social injustice.

OVERCOMING FRAGMENTATION

Empowerment has several dimensions. It relates to the “power from within,” meaning the self-acceptance and self-respect that come from understanding one’s past and present situation and recognizing how one’s interests are related to those of other people. Power from within is also connected to the perception of oneself as being entitled and able to make necessary changes.⁴

Closely connected to power from within is “power with,” which is based on the realization that individuals are not alone but part of a group with similar experiences working together toward change. Finally, “power over” relates to power relations that must be transformed to bring “people who are outside the decision-making process into it.”⁵ Empowerment thus goes beyond increasing the personal strength of individuals to generating real participation in socio-political processes to bring about change in existing power relations.⁶

Women’s empowerment is more likely to be achieved if the extent of their disempowerment is first understood and acknowledged: “People who have undergone great suffering have certain resources that help them survive and be resilient. However, in order to mobilize people’s strengths it is important to not deny their weaknesses.”⁷ Only if women are helped to face their feelings of vulnerability and despair, and their losses and adverse life changes, can they develop and make better use of their own resources.

The Guided Self-Evaluation

David Becker, a psychologist, and I guided the NGO’s six-month-long self-evaluation, which was designed to be qualitative and participatory. Over the course of two visits, we discussed with staff members the psychosocial situations of the organization’s participants and the staff members themselves, as well as the organization’s strengths, weaknesses and potential for future growth. Between visits, Becker and I wrote detailed reports on the staff’s reflections and suggestions, which were then sent to them for review and discussion. During a third visit, the staff provided feedback on our reports as well as new insights, all of which led to the formulation of our final recommendations.⁸

Taking into consideration the understanding of empowerment described above, we asked the staff the following questions:

- To what extent is individual empowerment possible in a context characterized by a history of occupation, a devastating economic situation and an increasingly restrictive social environment for women?

- How can empowerment work be organized under such conditions?

Fragmented Support

The NGO’s empowerment work focused on helping women strengthen their power from within, gain self-confidence, expand their personal space and improve their economic situations. Because domestic violence is a taboo subject in Palestinian society and mental illness is stigmatized, the NGO offered women an acceptable entry point in the program by providing vocational training in sewing, knitting, pottery and beauty care. In addition, psychologists counseled the women, legal experts helped them with their divorces or child custody battles and social workers visited them at home to help them manage difficult family relationships.

Because women’s lives are strongly shaped by the socio-political conditions in which they live, individual therapy and counseling as a means to recovery seemed somewhat limited. The staff thus engaged in activities designed to raise community awareness of the impact of violence on women and made efforts to sensitize health workers, police and lawmakers. However, these activities were unsystematic and, while the staff clearly understood the importance of publicly addressing social problems that affect women on a personal level, it appeared that they felt more secure when working in the private sphere.

The NGO’s income generation program most clearly revealed the limitations of its empowerment approach. At the time of the guided self-evaluation, very few vocational training participants were able to make a living after completing their courses. The staff defended training the participants in gender-stereotyped skills on the grounds that the skills were connected to the female experience and allowed women to work from home as, for example, tailors or cosmeticians. They further argued that such traditional, domestic arrangements were more readily accepted by women’s relatives, thereby making it easier for participants to engage in income-generating activities. Still, the staff remained ambivalent toward the vocational training, alternating between considering it to be a serious means of equipping women for the marketplace and regarding it as occupational therapy with little value in an overwhelmingly adverse economic environment.

Clearly, an NGO that lacks the means to significantly influence a society’s political and economic framework can extend only limited support to individuals. In a region where even seasoned professionals experience difficulty in finding work, the type or quality of skills

training courses is not the most important nor the only factor for success or failure in generating income. A case study presented by the staff illustrates that it is equally important to consider how a woman is able to cope with her social and emotional situation and how support measures respond to her personal disempowerment.

For 35-year-old Abeer,⁹ the NGO's programs did not sufficiently respond to her personal needs. Abeer's parents died when she was very young, so she had no family to protect her from her abusive husband or help care for her four children. Abeer excelled in the NGO's knitting training and, at the end of the course, she wanted to buy a knitting machine. She did not, however, have enough confidence to apply for a loan. Therefore, her personal situation did not change.

To effectively assist Abeer, the staff needed to address her ambivalence toward her husband, which was shaped by her experience both as an orphan and as an abused wife who had come to believe that she had no right to receive help.¹⁰ Abeer also needed practical assistance in overcoming the obstacles to starting a small business in Gaza. However, since the staff did not perform a comprehensive disempowerment analysis they had no clear vision of the help that Abeer required. Moreover, the different support measures available to Abeer were carried out in parallel: the psychologists counseled her, the trainers taught her vocational skills, and neither exchanged notes on her case. Consequently, the trainers with whom Abeer spent most of her time were unaware of how they could help facilitate her empowerment. The psychologists, likewise, were oblivious to Abeer's practical difficulties.

Linking the Program Fragments

As a result of the self-evaluation, the NGO redesigned its programs to more effectively assist the participants. Therapy sessions, which had been exclusively individual, now include group work while the economic empowerment work, which previously had a generalized approach, now centers more on individual needs. Efforts to influence the social conditions of women have become more focused.¹¹

To strengthen the women's "power from within" and "power with," the staff started to gather participants together for group meetings. With support from a psychologist and a social worker, the women reflect on their situations, their fears and their hope for change. Based on a careful analysis of each participant's economic needs and assets, as well as the nature of her social relationships and emotional problems, the facilitators and participants jointly develop individual empowerment plans.

As a result, not all women receive skills training from the NGO; instead, through referrals, they may attend courses at other institutions or work with specialized organizations to create business plans and apply for loans. However, regardless of their individual empowerment plans, all women meet as a group at least once a week throughout the year they spend with the NGO. These meetings provide a space where women build trustful relationships and experience the power that comes from sharing and building solidarity.

Rana's story provides a good example of the new approach's success in helping women. Coming from a very poor family, Rana lacked the confidence to imagine how she could make money. Her brother raised birds but did not want to include her in his business, so she searched for an alternative way to earn an income. During Rana's time with the NGO, however, she realized that breeding birds was not only her expertise but also something she enjoyed doing. Through group discussions and individual counseling sessions, she gained a better understanding of her wishes and capacities and overcame her insecurity and fears. Finally, Rana gathered the strength to confront her brother: he could either agree to a business partnership or face her as a competitor. He accepted her as a partner. The staff helped Rana apply for a loan and supported her in discussions with family and community members who were initially unprepared to accept her as a businesswoman.

The new approach also affected staff members' roles. Formerly autonomous professional groups now cooperate closely with one another and status-conscious staff members have learned to move beyond hierarchical communication.¹² Moreover, team members have worked to overcome fears that previously confined them to the NGO compound and prevented them from making more serious public efforts to influence women's political and social conditions. Decades of living under occupation and an increasingly restrictive patriarchal regime had convinced them that it was neither safe nor worthwhile to attempt to influence the larger community and to take on a public role.

Vocational trainers best demonstrate the benefits of overcoming such fears. Instead of hiding behind sewing machines, they now venture out into the community to support participants in their individual dealings with neighbors or organizations and to raise public awareness of women's rights issues, such as the negative impact of early marriage. Initially, these trainers argued vehemently that such public action would impair their honor and, in any case, be a futile endeavor. Once they dared to try, however, they realized that they

OVERCOMING FRAGMENTATION

enjoyed expanding their boundaries. Their positive experiences enhanced their pride and self-confidence. Today, the trainers are the NGO's most enthusiastic advocates of community work.

The staff also identified key issues in the disempowerment of women to be discussed with community groups and in schools. Advocacy efforts, which were previously few and far between, have evolved into a campaign with other organizations to change the legal framework to better protect women from domestic violence.

Conclusion

Psychosocial programs for women whose history is marked by experiences of powerlessness and hopelessness must focus on helping them gain control over their lives. Effective empowerment requires that psychosocial programs view each woman as an individual, consider her personal history and provide options to improve her economic, social and psychological well-being. Only when a woman's specific situation is understood can opportunities and adequate support measures be identified for an individual empowerment plan.¹³ Such an approach requires close cooperation across professional and organizational boundaries—psychosocial experts must be aware of clients' economic realities while skills trainers must understand their emotional makeup. Experience in Gaza and in other parts of the world shows that it is possible to combine measures for income generation with psychosocial support within a single project or by linking two or more organizations with different specializations.¹⁴

The NGO's implementation of this approach positively affected the lives of its participants. The fact that the staff now treats participants as individuals with specific needs and capacities has helped the women gain a better understanding of their own desires and strengthened the women's ability to defend themselves amid criticism or doubt from family members and the wider community. Thanks to the increased confidence and skills gained from their association with the NGO, more women are able to make money at the end of the one-year program than before.

However, it is important to note that only a few women earn enough to fully extricate their families from poverty. This should not be taken as a statement on the NGO's psychosocial approach but rather on the situation in Gaza where, amid ongoing military occupation and systematic de-development, women continue to struggle with spiraling poverty and increasing social and moral restrictions imposed by men wishing to defend

their besieged masculinity. While there is no question that these women need individual treatment and support, their suffering must be understood as a reaction to the political and socio-economic conditions in which they live. Therefore, psychosocial interventions should also aim to alleviate suffering by denouncing the political and socio-economic conditions that breed violence against women and by publicly discussing the need to expand notions of femininity and masculinity. Without such action, even the most sincere empowerment efforts will be frustrated.

BARBARA WEYERMANN is a consultant who specializes in psychosocial work in conflict and post-conflict regions. She is currently working with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation to introduce a psychosocial approach to their programs in Nepal and Tajikistan. Weyermann recently co-authored a toolkit on gender, conflict transformation and the psychosocial approach for organizations working in areas affected by armed conflict.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Susan M., Teresa R. Boulette and Amy Schwartz. "Psychological Maltreatment of Spouses." In *Case Studies in Family Violence*, ed. Robert T. Ammerman and Michael Hersen. New York: Plenum Press, 1991.
- Becker, David and Barbara Weyermann. *Gender, Conflict Transformation and the Psychosocial Approach: A Toolkit*. Bern: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2006.
- Chang, Nash. *I Just Lost Myself: Psychological Abuse of Women in Marriage*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996.
- Fronk, Camille, Ray L. Huntington and Bruce A. Chadwick. "Expectations for Traditional Family Roles: Palestinian Adolescents in the West Bank and Gaza." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 41, no. 9/10 (1999): 705-735.
- Higson-Smith, Craig. *Supporting Communities Affected by Violence: A Casebook from South Africa*. Oxford: Oxfam Publications, 2002.
- Johnson, Penny and Eileen Kuttab. "Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada." *Feminist Review* 69, no. 1 (2001): 21-43.
- Kodis Consult. *Opportunity Analysis for Vocational Education and Training in Sri Lanka*. 2003. http://www.vetnet.ch/files/Counselling_Approach_Sri_Lanka.pdf (accessed May 20, 2006).
- Loring, Marti Tamm. *Emotional Abuse*. Canada: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1994.
- Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). "Humanitarian Update: Occupied Palestinian Territories." September 30, 2005. http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.nsf/fd807e46661e3689852570d00069e918169e094825b6b441852570a100535db9!Open_Document (accessed July 31, 2006).
- Pan, Esther. " Hamas and the Shrinking PA Budget." Council on Foreign Relations, April 21, 2006. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10499/> (accessed July 7, 2006).
- Rodenberg, Brite and Christa Wichterich. *Macht gewinnen. Eine Studie über Frauenprojekte der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung im Ausland*. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 1999.

Rowlands, Joanna. *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*. Oxford: Oxfam Publications, 1997.

Roy, Sara. "A Dubai on the Mediterranean." *London Review of Books* 27, no. 21 (2005).

_____. *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development*. Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995.

Shehada, Nahda. "Les paradoxes du mariage précoce à Gaza." *Études rurales*, no.173-174 (2005).

Weyermann, Barbara. *Unravelling Malnutrition: Challenges of a Psychosocial Approach*. Lausanne: Terre des hommes/Sagun, 2003.

World Bank. *The Impending Palestinian Fiscal Crisis, Potential Remedies*. May 7, 2006. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA/Resources/PalestinianFiscalCrisis,PotentialRemediesMay7.pdf> (accessed July 31, 2006).

World Bank. *The Palestinian Economy and the Prospects for its Recovery*. Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, no. 1 (2005).

ENDNOTES

1 Roy, 1995; Roy, 2005.

2 After Palestinians elected a Hamas-led government in January 2006, the Israeli government withheld tax revenues and blocked goods from entering and leaving Palestinian territories. Similarly, the European Union and U.S. suspended aid to the Palestinian Authority. World Bank, 2006; Pan, 2006; "Israeli General: Sanctions Won't Topple Hamas," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2006. Cutting this assistance has only exacerbated the region's dire economic situation. Before the election, 44 percent of the population lacked the basic requirements for survival despite external assistance. Now, as a result of Israeli, European and American actions, the World Bank estimates that poverty levels will rise to 67 percent in the occupied territories. OCHA, 2005; World Bank, 2005: 6.

3 A full discussion of the change in family structure and perception of gender roles as a result of occupation, political resistance and intensification of conservative Islam is not possible in the context of this article. However, a huge body of literature exists. See Fronk et al., 1999; Johnson and Kuttub, 2001; and Shehada, 2005.

4 Rowlands, 1997.

5 Ibid.: 13.

6 See Rodenberg and Wichterich, 1999 for a comprehensive discussion of different dimensions in empowerment work with women in development projects.

7 Becker and Weyermann, 2006: Sheet 2.

8 Although our approach was time and resource intensive, it allowed evaluation participants to develop deeper insight into their organization's work and to actively influence the evaluation's outcome. This approach is especially appropriate when dealing with psychosocial issues because the required information is of a qualitative nature shaped by the psychological perceptions of programmers and participants. In Gaza, for example, where the evaluation took place amid political instability and direct threats (e.g., Israeli incursions and demolition of houses in the local community), we had to provide staff with an opportunity to talk about their fear and insecurity before they could effectively think about their hopes for future developments in the organization.

9 All names have been changed.

10 The complex social and psychological reasons for why women find it impossible or at least very difficult to leave their violent husbands have been discussed extensively. See Chang, 1996; Loring, 1994; and Anderson et al., 1991.

11 Program participants are selected in two stages. Initially, community workers refer a woman who suffers from domestic violence to the NGO. The woman then discusses her problems with a psychologist or social worker at the NGO to assess whether they can help her improve her situation. If the woman and the NGO staff agree that the NGO can be of support, she joins the program.

12 Strong hierarchies and status consciousness are not only a problem for the staff in Gaza. In countries as diverse as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Nepal, I have witnessed how a lack of communication between different professional groups and hierarchy levels create obstacles to the interdisciplinary approach required by psychosocial work. See Weyermann, 2003.

13 See Becker and Weyermann, 2006: Sheet 5a for empowerment analysis tool. This tool helps develop individual empowerment plans and contains key questions that clarify the extent of fragmentation for an individual and her family as well as in her community/society. The tool assists in formulating empowerment objectives and facilitates setting priorities between different types of support activities. An important purpose of the tool is to show what links are necessary between interventions at the individual and community level to improve a woman's psychosocial situation.

14 For other models of linking individuals' psychological, social and economic development, see Higson-Smith, 2002 or Kodis Consult, 2003.