

Coping with Insecurity

By Salwa Duaibis



I always look forward with apprehension to accompanying visiting delegations to Ofer military court, where they can witness injustice in “concentrated doses.” The visits are always stark reminders of what life is like for ordinary Palestinian men, women, and children who live in the shadow of settlements, along bypass roads, or behind the wall. This time, however, I was a bit relaxed because I knew I didn’t have to convince anyone of anything or to explain the obvious, as I was accompanying two Palestinian women: my sister and a lawyer friend of mine. What I did have to do, however, was to calm down my sister a bit as she kept expressing her “fear” of witnessing mothers in distress. I don’t think I succeeded in calming her as I myself could not put my finger on what exactly it was that made me believe there was no reason for her to worry.

The first thing that struck us – once we got over the unpleasantness of the incomprehensible yelling coming from a soldier behind bullet-proof glass and the humiliation of the security checks – was the large number of families waiting to be called into one of the pre-fabricated rooms where they could attend the court hearing of a loved one. It took no more than two minutes before one family after another started to tell us one horror story after another. Bewildered mothers who had traveled for hours from towns, villages, and camps throughout the West Bank in order to get a glimpse of their sons during hearings, which on average lasted between 5 and 10 minutes, recited their experiences in the most matter-of-fact manner possible.

One mother told us how soldiers broke into her home in the middle of the night and arrested her 20-year-old son without giving the family the reason for his arrest; another told us how her husband had to hand

over their 14-year-old son to the Israeli military who had summoned him for interrogation about a stone-throwing incident; another told us how her house was broken into by Israeli soldiers while she and her husband were away, and their teenage son and his friend were arrested just as they put out some snacks in preparation to watch a favorite TV program...and on and on it went. When asked whether they were able to sleep at night, they all responded with a facial expression whose closest translation would be, “Are you kidding me? You must be joking.”

One mother, who was in her mid-thirties, caught my sister’s attention as she told us her story with a sort of smile on her face. “How did you feel when you heard the news of your son’s arrest while you were away?” my sister asked as the sheer thought of something similar happening to her traumatized her. “I felt nothing unusual, عادي,” the mother responded with confidence, wondering what my sister’s point was. “If I allowed myself to mentally process what happened, I would go mad,” she calmly elaborated.

A recent report submitted to the United Nations by the Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling* conservatively estimates that the Israeli military conducts close to 1,400 night raids on Palestinian communities each

Mothers in the court room. Photo by Sylvie LeClezio.

The insecurity experienced by Palestinian women who live in close proximity to settlements is endemic and tends to compound pre-existing insecurities found in Palestinian society that arise from rigid patriarchal structures. Many women cope by mentally shutting down.

year. The report, which was based on 100 testimonies collected from women in 34 locations who experienced raids in 2014 and 2015, also notes that the Palestinian communities most affected by night raids are on average located within 2 kilometers of an Israeli settlement built in violation of international law. One village near Ramallah was raided 16 times in just one month, which meant that Israeli soldiers were in the village every other night, waking mothers up, terrifying children, conducting searches, arresting people, and instilling fear, to the point that mothers believe it is not a question of whether their house will be raided and their children arrested,

but rather a question of when. If this does not cause insecurity, I don't know what would.

In my work over the years, I have come across dozens, if not hundreds of women who, in my view, suffered from one sort of insecurity or another that affected every aspect of their lives. Insecurities arising from having to live under occupation for decades are only one type of insecurity for Palestinian women. In a society where legal and societal discrimination against women is endemic, where women are largely economically dependent on male members of their families, where job opportunities are scarce, where movement is restricted, where communities are geographically disconnected, where gender-based violence is widespread, insecurity

whichever way you look is the norm rather than the exception.

Palestinian women have had to struggle for decades against rigid patriarchal structures within Palestinian society. While inching their way across these hurdles – with some successes here and there – they have also had to endure decades of institutionalized dispossession, dehumanization, and denial of the most basic of human rights inflicted by a hostile occupying power. For Palestinian women, experiencing insecurity is a double-layered reality; one aggravates the other to the extent that untangling the threads is almost impossible. One woman once told me she believed that women in her village were like "...doormats. We get it from the occupation and we get it from our husbands and we get it from our society

and from the authority. Everyone wipes their feet on the mat."

Palestinian women know very well that fake peace negotiations conducted in bad faith are not going to bring them security; that an authority with no meaningful authority is not going to bring them security; that reversing historical negligence, negative cultural legacies, and discriminatory social attitudes towards women will not happen overnight. It should come as no surprise then that in the meantime Palestinian women feel that they are on their own in the struggle for security and equal rights and that they are having to improvise coping mechanisms to overcome feelings of fundamental insecurity, be it from within their own community or as a result of nearly half a century of occupation.

Although women in the region and around the world don't have it any easier, it is probably a sign of the extent to which Palestinian women feel insecure, even inside their homes, that they feel they need to shut themselves down and not think about it lest they "go mad."

Towards the end of the court visit, I asked my sister how she felt and whether she had learned anything new. She told me that the visit had made her realize the extent to which the whole process is systematized. Everyone plays a little role in a rigged game, and there is no room for feelings or emotions because they will simply get in the way. Everyone knows exactly what is going on and everyone plays their little role knowing that the "monster" is much bigger than what any of them can take.



Parents waiting outside Ofer court. Photo by Sylvie LeClezio.



In this situation, it is better to pretend that the “monster” is not there, at least in the small domain where one has some control. The insecurity is too grave for the psyche to tolerate, and it is best not to process it. When injustice and insecurity are present on such a massive scale, a self-induced tranquilizing mechanism kicks in.

My lawyer friend commented that this was not any different from her own experience with African American and Muslim American mothers whose children find themselves caught up in a system where injustice and discrimination against them are part of a bigger reality. The same sense of resignation pervades, and all that remains within reach is a coping

mechanism to be used in order to survive and to get by.

It seems to me that on an individual, personal level, this coping mechanism appears to be working. The question is at what cost to long-term physical and psychological well-being. Although I will leave this for the psychologists to answer, since I am not an expert, I beg not to be told the answer. My own self-induced coping mechanism tells me that I won't be able to tolerate the answer.

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* UN Submission on Night Raids (2015), Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, <http://www.wclac.org/english/etemplate.php?id=1560>.