



INSIGHTS BRIEFING

Gender and Young People's Responses to House Demolitions in the Palestinian West Bank

ISSRAR is an international research project focussing on understanding young Palestinians' responses to house demolitions. Over three years we explored how these responses impact young people's ability to cope with violence, maintain dignity, imagine their futures and build sustainable development for Palestinians. We worked with young people to devise questions, conduct interviews, create drawings, photographs and art works across rural and urban communities while engaging with NGOs and civil society organisations.

For further information about the project please visit
<https://issrar.community>

INSIGHTS

Palestine has a predominantly young population. Young people (15-25 years) make up 21% of the overall population in the West Bank. More than half of the youth population is male.

Longitudinal impacts of housing demolitions under occupation can be disproportionately felt by young women who report gender-based violence and intergenerational mental health effects.

Housing demolitions limit opportunities for young women in particular as they transition into adulthood and seek increased independence associated with a new home, starting a family, further education or employment.

Technology and social media are increasingly used by young people in gendered ways to document, evidence and communicate the impacts of demolitions to international audiences.

'The demolition did not just change my life, it destroyed it. I used to dream of a future where I would get married and set up my own house. But now after the demolition, I have nowhere [...], there is no place to rest, nowhere at all' (Young man in Jordan Valley)

OVERVIEW

House demolitions are well documented as having a significant negative psychological impact on families across the Palestinian West Bank. By the first quarter of 2021, the Israeli authorities demolished or seized almost 300 Palestinian-owned structures, displacing more than 450 people across the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has highlighted between 2009 and September 2021, over 11, 866 people have been displaced, and 7927 structures destroyed, 79% of which are in Area C of the West Bank.

The violent act of demolition highlights ongoing dispossession of land from the Palestinian people, but the issuing of a demolition order does not necessarily immediately result in the destruction of the home. Between 1988 – 2016 over 16,000 demolition orders were issued. Almost 80% in process or on hold and less than a quarter executed. This extended uncertainty about 'when' a demolition might happen creates a protracted form of violence, placing families and communities in a constant state of high alert and anticipation in preparation for when the military might arrive.

This uncertainty impacts not only on the immediate family situation and mental health, but also on how young people devise strategies to cope day-to-day, while imagining, and defining what they do in their future lives. Young women in particular are impacted negatively depending on their geography and demographics. This can result in poor mental health and wellbeing, limited sense of agency in being able to cope and respond, feeling unsafe within the family home and in reduced education and employment opportunities with threats of violence and intimidation.



Settler homes overlooking growing and herding structures alongside homes in South Hebron hills. Each of these structures have been rebuilt after demolition several times.

HEALTH & WELLBEING

House demolitions and forced displacement have a disproportionate and long-lasting impact on women and girls. As the United Nations emphasised through the landmark resolution on women, peace, and security "UNSCR1325", women are the most adversely affected in situations of armed conflict, war, and political instability. In the local context of Palestine, evidence shows that unsafe environments resulting from Israeli policies on the demolition of homes poses direct threats to the health and wellbeing of women and girls in particular, and in some situations further correlate with psychological, physical and gender-based violence within the family home. Impacts of wider infrastructural demolitions of water structures and local healthcare facilities can further impact menstrual hygiene and maternal health. For young women, either growing up or forming new relationships in such environments alongside intergenerational trauma can have a devastating impact on their futures.

Young women in rural extended families in particular take on significant care duties. They often take on the role of carer for older generations who have poor mental health, while at the same time supporting younger siblings or their own children.

"My mother is suffering a lot of ailments, so her health deteriorates when she hears some bad news like a house demolition. She feels terrified, pained and worried. [...] My mum is what we care about the most, especially after my dad passed away. This is why we need to check on her health all the time. She is a source of optimism. [...] She is the source of love and security." (Young woman in South Hebron)



Prayer beads made from seeds from the Jordan Valley. An elder showing how she uses these to calm her nerves.

Young men are impacted in different ways often being violently targeted while responding to the displacement caused by house demolitions. In some communities young men can be much more visible to the military in actively resisting demolitions by forming barriers or creating distractions. Young men work together to take on specific roles to document what happens if the threat of a demolition is imminent while actively protecting the family home, and the homes of other community members. This places them at increased risk of imprisonment, violence and restrictions on their ability to travel within and outside of Palestine without ongoing surveillance and interrogation. This constant state of high alert alongside post-traumatic stress of repeat attacks and micro-aggressions from the military results in high levels of stress response that can further lead to increased gender-based violence in the home.

COPING & RESPONDING

Young people cope with and respond to the ongoing uncertainty and violence of demolitions in a myriad of different ways. For more traditional communities such as Bedouin and agricultural families, young people often draw strength from their elders using stories and phrases to help guide them in how they should respond to occupation and demolitions. Connecting with the land, its history and ancestry is also important. For more urban youth they draw from a wider range of popular culture, music and friends to help make sense of and cope with the challenges of demolitions.

"[T]he old tell us such stories to give us some sort of motivation. Despite the many demolitions, the residents managed to rise from ashes. They rebuilt their houses, started new lives and never gave up. The stories told by the elderly help raise spirit and enhance our resilience. Even if the Israelis destroy our residences again, our feet will continue to be on the ground" (Young woman in South Hebron).

Groups of young men in some rural communities use social media, photography and video to evidence and communicate internationally about the injustices of demolitions. Reaching out to international audiences is perceived to be more impactful for example in raising funds and support for legal cases against demolitions. Young women in rural and traditional communities appear to be less familiar with using social media in this way and are often less visible and vocal about demolitions to international audiences. Young women who are vocal about the injustices of demolitions also report experiences and fears of reprisals including imprisonment and increased interrogation at check-points. While many young people express doubt that social media and media documentation is the most effective form of resistance against occupation, it is considered to be more effective in galvanising support and preventing and slowing down demolitions than seeking direct support from international or local NGOs or the Palestinian Authority.

"Recording is important, because a lot of assaults happen, such as beating and demolition. So, to record these actions is a means for resistance. It is also a form of self-expression to express our anger" (Young man in South Hebron).



Photographic collage in community centre in South Hebron Hills. The collage is made from photographs of action taken by the community in response to demolitions, demonstrating how this practice now forms part of the cultural memory of communities where the destruction of buildings have been happening over decades.

FAMILY LIFE & HOME

Having either witnessed demolitions or experienced demolitions and their consequences first-hand many young people take the decision to defer marriage and having a family to avoid the suffering of future generations. At the same time children are perceived to be a source of hope for the future. For young men and women in more traditional rural communities they feel the expectation to marry and have children. In most cases young couples who marry do not have the opportunity to move into their own home due to limited housing available and the lack of housing permits to build new properties or extend existing ones. This results in many new couples living together in cramped conditions with their families or living apart. It is most common for young women to join the family home of her husband and this can be challenging with limited privacy and space, which can further lead to violence in the home.

Independently living in their own house for many young people therefore remains more of a hope than a reality. Even if the family home does not have a demolition order, where young people live in communities that have a high number of orders, they worry theirs could be next. Many young people report keeping a demolition bag of important things they will need just in case they have to move quickly in the night and these are highly specific to geography and gender. For communities who co-ordinate their actions young people pack a demolition kit including cameras and phones to document injustices. Young women report staying fully clothed in case they are removed from their homes during the night to avoid the potential indignity of not being respectfully dressed in front of Israeli soldiers. Others report packing essential clothing such as underwear so they are not shamed while packing under military surveillance and force during an eviction.

"By God everywhere [...] is a dangerous place. You would be sleeping in your own house and you don't feel safe. I mean whenever someone knocks on the door at night they would say it's the army, they're coming towards us. By God even in your own home while sleeping you cannot rest" (Young man in Jordan Valley).

Rather than a space of sanctuary and safety young people often report their houses are places of threat, where they feel fear and discomfort in anticipation of being removed. Safety is often sought elsewhere in other communal spaces and community members. Despite feelings of discomfort, staying put on the land and being physically present in the home, is considered an important part of resisting with the hope that one day justice will prevail. For young women these feelings of threat and lack of safety can be further exacerbated if they are also victims of abuse and violence from family members or partners.



A demolished house next to an existing family home in the Jordan Valley. The owners of the destroyed house were a young family wanting to move out of the existing family home due to cramped conditions living with several generations, but were not granted a permit to build. Less than 4% of Palestinian building permits are granted in Area C of the West Bank.

EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

It is widely understood that education is negatively impacted for young people if they have experienced demolitions or have a pending order on their home. Many schools have also been demolished in rural communities meaning travel across several checkpoints becomes necessary to regularly attend school and especially when attending higher education. Young women can experience harassment, intimidation and inspection from Israeli soldiers at checkpoints and report physical violence and humiliation. Familial concern for the welfare of young women attending school and higher education when there is daily travel is widely expressed and can eventually result in young women feeling overwhelmed and dropping out of education.

"I study in a school far from the village; there are checkpoints on my way to school, and soldiers who stand at them. Such a situation indicates constant intimidation and inspection of people passing through them, which in turn affects education; I feel scared daily. This situation affects girls more than boys. Parents worry about girls more than boys due to the checkpoints of the Israeli army. Moreover, the street is filled with settlers. Due to these daily fears and worries, and the customs and traditions of the village, girls are not always allowed to pursue their education because of the danger while going to school." (Young woman in South Hebron).

Education is perceived to be a powerful mobiliser for responding to the occupation but more specifically to legal issues associated with demolitions. Young women expressed interest in becoming lawyers to fight for justice in their own communities. Others said that learning and teaching English helped them reach out to international networks of supporters. Studying outside of Palestine was also desirable to escape the oppression of occupation. If families have to move due to a demolition alongside restrictions and interrogations, this often results in young women halting or deferring their education. If a young person had a demolition order on their home or lived in a community where there were many orders, they expressed not wanting to go away to university in case they returned and their homes were gone.

"My wish is to study abroad, but I cannot even dare dream that because I fear that our house might get destroyed while I'm outside of the country. I wouldn't bear that. Where would I go if that happens? And what if the neighbors aren't there either?" (Young woman in Bethlehem district)

Unemployment is high across certain areas of the West Bank. Given there are more work opportunities in urban areas many young men in rural communities struggle to find work when not only their homes are demolished but agricultural buildings and structures such as water storage and herding fences are destroyed and building permits for businesses are not granted. They report feelings of being encircled by the military in watching their every move and describe having no choice but to carry on or seek work in construction, travelling for miles each day choosing to cross the border through checkpoints into Israel with thousands of others in harsh conditions. Young women can also struggle in rural areas and often work in low-skilled labour in Israeli settlements in Palestine or in Israel. As a consequence they report experiences of physical and verbal abuse on a daily basis.

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CRITICAL ISSUES

Despite facing significant challenges young people show resourcefulness in responding to sustained attacks on their homes. The different types of gendered responses are, however, not always acknowledged or supported by civil society organisations or policy makers.

Education remains key for empowering youth and young women in particular, but significant challenges prevail when demolitions increase the chances of violence within the home and during travel.

The international community is important not just in providing aid but through networks of solidarity and moral support using technology and social media. How young men and women use these channels differently and the risk this presents is of significance for organisations seeking to engage with young women experiencing demolitions.

FURTHER RESOURCES

WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom). "Palestinian Women Under Prolonged Israeli Occupation: The Gendered Impact of Occupation Violence." January 2018. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Palestine-UPR_web-2-5.pdf

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