



Coalition of Women for Peace (CWP) is a feminist organization active in the struggle to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine, for the liberation of the Palestinian people from oppression, for the creation of a society based on principles of justice and equality, and for securing life in dignity for all the inhabitants of Israel/Palestine.

Women from all walks of life, Jewish and Palestinian, partake in CWP out of commitment to struggle against all forms of racism, oppression and discrimination.

Coalition of Women for Peace initiates political campaigns and promotes feminist discourse and values. Coalition of Women for Peace strives to promote discourse and awareness about the Economy of the Occupation, the involvement and financial interests of Israeli and global companies that profit from the Occupation. We make information on this issue accessible in Arabic, Hebrew and English. At the CWP activity center, we hold public meetings, trainings for activists, and offer support for Women Human Rights Defenders. We also provide consultation and workshops for NGOs on gender and feminism.

The project 'Women's Security Index' (WSI) is measuring the sense of safety and security of women active in different social struggles in Israel. In the Israeli discourse the term security ("bitachon") is used mostly in the military sense. But is this really the one and only level relevant to women's sense of security, or even the biggest one? What are the elements that contribute to women's sense of safety and security and what undermines it? The Women's Security Index aims at broadening this narrow definition and understanding of women's safety by relating it to issues of health, social, political, economy, physical, as well as sexual and gender identity, etc.

WSI is a coalition of 6 Jewish and Palestinian feminist organizations: Isha L'Isha – Haifa Feminist Center, Coalition of Women for Peace, Kayan Feminist Organization, Aswat Palestinian Gay Women, Women Against Violence, New Profile, each making it's unique contribution to the project.

Following a growing sense of escalation in violence used by security forces and civilians to silence and intimidate women activists, Coalition of Women for Peace and Women's Security Index set a goal to research and present activists' security from a feminist perspective. We believe there's a need to develop a strategy and build safety nets to strengthen the activists' security. In order to present an in depth analysis with reliable information, we conducted a survey concerning security issues among Palestinian and Jewish women activists who live in Israel.

"The protest came to an end when the last protestors who came from Haifa got on a bus and left. Or so we thought. This was actually the beginning. At this point, there remained about 50 protestors, mainly from Haifa, who had come by foot or by car. Our intention was to go home. The police began dispersing as well, but the extreme right- wing protestors did not show any signs of dispersing. On the contrary, they just kept multiplying. Not only that, we soon realized that they were spread out in groups in all the alleys surrounding us, behind bushes at the entrances to buildings, everywhere, ambushing protestors trying to leave. My friends and I (at this point we were 6 or 7) tried to leave through the backyard of one of the buildings, and soon were chased back by angry protestors who ambushed us with the intention of attacking us physically."¹

This is only a glimpse of what women activists face every day in Israel.

¹ From Khuloud Khamis's testimony about a demonstration in Haifa against the attack on Gaza in the summer of 2014. First published on her blog.

The survey

This survey is built on 7 in-depth interviews with Palestinian and Jewish women activists. The subsequent questionnaires were disseminated by "snow-ball" method, and was answered by 67 Jewish and Palestinian activists. They confirmed the trends identified in the original interviews. Approximately half of the respondents were involved in the struggle against the Israeli occupation, the other half in other areas, like the struggle for ending violence against women, the rights of the LGBTQ community etc.

The survey focuses on three central topics: the experiences of women activists relating to their feelings of safety, their fears as well as the impact of their perception of their (lack of) safety on their willingness to initiate or join social or political activism.

Context

As a norm, human rights defenders in Israel face violence, threats and violation of their rights. The government itself is involved in incidents against human rights defenders and their criminalization, while using the rhetoric of national security and the threat of terror to limit civil involvement and oppress opposition. The governmental incitement encourages non-governmental bodies and individuals (like the rapper The Shadow, organizations like Lehava and more) and they openly and increasingly use violence. Hate speech against Palestinians and Jewish human rights activists dominates the media and the public awareness. Women, despite their power and outstanding bravery, are particularly vulnerable and viewed as an easy prey. Women activists (and other gender groups and communities such as LGBTQ) in comparison to other activists, face particular challenges and oppression based on their gender. Sexual assaults, rape threats, physical violence and death threats are very common. As a result, today the activity of women activists includes actual threats to their lives which may affect their desire to become activists. These processes cause shrinkage in activism in Israeli society in general, and silence women's voice in the public discourse.

Research Findings

In women's security index we developed a special research methodology to collect data on women's security which we applied on the experiences of women activists, including the actual experiences that threaten their safety like assaults, harassments etc. by security forces or civilians. Our methodology also examines fear from violence, and how the lack of security affects the desire of women activists to participate in civil activism.

1. Experiences

Violence by civilians

The research demonstrates that most women activists have been exposed to violence by civilians, because of their activism.

75% experienced verbal assaults, including humiliating and threatening remarks.

69% faced personal assaults on social media.

40% reported sexual assaults and violence.

36% were exposed to physical violence.

"I am an Ethiopian woman, therefore I experience a lot of racism that includes sexual assault and physical violence, and humiliating treatment while stating the fact that my skin color is the motive."

It is important to note that among the women activists against the occupation, the percentage of women who have suffered physical violence is higher than the percentage among other women activists- 45%, a number which is valid for Palestinian and Jewish women activists.

Some women activists noted that they suffered from sexist behavior and sexual assaults not only by right-wing activists, but sometimes also by male activists in their own movement or organization.

"Sometimes the behavior of male activists scares me more than the behavior of the police and civilians".

Security Forces

The survey shows that a lot of the women activists were exposed to violence by security forces, based on their activism.

48% suffered verbal assaults, including humiliating language and threats.

22% faced sexual violence and sexual assault.

33% suffered physical violence.

33% reported being followed to their houses and being under surveillance.

19% went through arrests, interrogations, physical searches, and house searches.

"A policeman came to my house and threatened me in front of my family in order to deter me from continuing with my activism"²

Another aspect of the lack of security is the financial status of the women activists. 30% of the women declared that their financial situation has suffered in the last two years as a result of their activism.

2. Perception

68% of the women activists who participated in the survey felt that the civilian violence against them has increased in the last two years.

The Jewish women activists in particular that feel the increase; possibly because civilian violence has been always directed against Palestinian women activists. However, since 2014 on, violence has increased also against Jewish women activists. Therefore, violence against Jewish "lefties" is increasing.

² From the testimony of Huda Abu Obeid, published for the first time in the booklet "This is What Happened: Testimonies of Women Human Rights Defenders Resisting the Israeli Occupation" of the Coalition of Women for Peace

55% of the participants felt that the violence directed at them by the security forces is larger than it used to be. Among Palestinian women activists, the numbers are even higher.

3. Fears

Regarding Women activists who did not face actual violence, its high probability of happening still affects them. These fears add to the women activists' chronic stress and together, they decrease women's desire to take part in activism.

45% of the women activists who participated in the survey fear physical violence by civilians, and 40% fear sexual violence as a tool of revenge for their activism.

Regarding confrontations with security forces, 40% of the participants fear arrest, 48% fear physical violence, 43% fear sexual violence, and 52% fear surveillance and wiretaps.

"The police, which gives the strongest feeling of lack of security, has to change its policy- I don't need to be out for activism and fear that today a policeman might touch me and assault me (something that happens) or today he'll hit and threaten me."

61% fear that their financial status will suffer because of their activism. This fear is particularly common among Palestinian women.

4. The General Experience

The collected data in the survey indicates that violence against women activists, in its different forms, became part of the Israeli routine nowadays. This is in addition to the feeling of lack of security that women activists experience. Only 28% of the women activists are paid a salary higher than average, in comparison to 45% in the general population.

It's not a surprise that 63% of women activists claim that they suffer from chronic stress, in comparison to 30% of the general women population. They also tend to be less satisfied with their lives, only 55% of them are satisfied with their lives, in comparison to 75% of the general women population.

5. Coping mechanism

The data shows that very few of the women have sought legal advice, or filed a complaint at the police. Some of the women activists don't have faith in the willingness of the police to investigate violence incidents against them. As a result, assaults against women activists are hardly ever investigated. This creates a reality in which many women activists are not eligible for legal protection, a pattern of not punishing criminals, and the continuation of violence.

"The government is obligated to protect me, and if someone threatens my physical or mental safety, there must be an immediate involvement- we know that this doesn't really happen; therefore, I don't bother at all to go the police to file a complaint and so on."

Women mostly seek help from their close circles. 60% go to friends, family, their partners, or other activists whether they are men or women, in order to receive support.

Decrease in activism and civil society

In addition to the continuing dangers, chronic stress and fear that women activists feel, there are other harsh consequences that these women face, as they insist for civil resistance and democracy in Israel to continue.

Half of the participants in the survey said that their activism rate is lower than what they would want it to be, haven't they feared for their safety.

This can lead to experiencing guilt and shame.

"I know a lot of women activists who think that they are not okay, because it is hard for them to deal with violence, including strong violence by security forces"

Jewish and Palestinian women activists reported that fear for their safety is one of the most important factors to why they are less active than they would like to be. Another important factor is lack of time. Another factor that Palestinian women emphasized is that their activism does not make a change. Jewish women reported another factor, which is feeling burnt out.

There are women who continue with their activism, but seek safer frames.

"This is a man's world, whether they are Palestinian or Israeli, they created and worsen the chaos. It has been years since I've been trying to volunteer for women mainly."

One of the women activists added that not only direct violence, also laws that aim to criminalize human rights activists, strike fear and stop activism.

"The law which criminalizes activities that support the BDS movement, though no preoccupations have been made under it, had a very important silencing and paralyzing effect on the women's activity regarding this issue."

6. Practical suggestions

So far, there have been significant efforts to protect activists from violence of security forces and individuals. However, the survey shows that women activists are still far from feeling secure. There is a need to develop initiatives to protect women activists and stop the decrease in civil resistance through legal steps, emotional support, security, pressure security forces, taking actions against violence towards activists by civilians, collecting and analyzing data, among other steps. It is also important to acknowledge the incitement which adds fuel to the fire and puts the lives of activists at risk. The government which is supposed to protect these women activists, is cooperating with different hate organizations.

There is a need to examine, by cooperating with other bodies, which actions must be taken to protect and support women activists, also how to strengthen activists' networks, how to strengthen the impact of civil activism, and prevent the shrinkage in civil society.

We intend to have a series of discussions, which includes, but not limited to, a dialogue between human rights organizations and women activists from the field; in order to achieve deeper understanding of the issue and find new solutions for the problem of the escalating violence.