

## The Living Death of the Bereaved: The Experiences of Women Survivors<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction and Motives

On average, ten women each year are killed as a result of the practice of femicide within the 1948 boundaries of the state of Israel, a geographic location also referred to as “48 Palestine.” While there exists literature which addresses the murders of these women and their denied right to life, there remains much analysis to be done on these women. There is a lack of research done on the women and girls in the families of those who have been killed; those left behind in the aftermath of the murders. This lacuna is the motivation for selecting this issue and delving into it here.

This paper sheds light on this issue through the stories of women survivors of a close female relative who has been murdered. Every victim has a mother, a sister, or a daughter left bereaved, shocked, and distressed, but still alive. We will attempt here to present briefly the experiences of those who have lost the women dearest to them. The framework for this

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is one in a series of position papers stemming from a research project on Palestinian Women’s Access to Justice, conducted within the framework of Mada al-Carmel’s Gender Studies Program.

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paper lies in the testimonies collected from women in the context of a forum for families established by the association *Na'm*, an acronym for *Nisa' 'Arabiyyat fi al-Markaz*, the Arab Women at the Center. We seek not only to present their emotional responses to the killings, but also to address how women survivors deal with criminal investigations, the legal system, and government institutions after the crime, and in turn, these official institutions view and treat them. We will also discuss the consequences of the changed family dynamic, and the daunting return to normal daily life in the aftermath of the murders.

### **Theoretical Introduction**

Some scholars have tried to address the position of family members in cases of femicide, but the majority of these writings have focused on the participation of family members—including women, whether mothers or sisters—in the crime.<sup>4</sup> For example, Fadia Faqir, in her article about femicide in Jordan, takes up the contribution of the nuclear family as a social structure in cases of women's killings. In order to curb this phenomenon, Faqir proposes putting in place a strategy with political, legal, and therapeutic dimensions that includes the family (Faqir 2010).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Hillary Meyell (2002) describes the various roles played by mothers and sisters in women's killings. She describes how female family members can actively support the acts of femicide, either through direct involvement in the murders or undertaking acts which abet the killing, or their support can be more tacit in

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<sup>4</sup> See also, for example: Phyllis Chesler, "Are Honor Killings Simply Domestic Violence?" *Middle East Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2009), pp. 61–69.

<sup>5</sup> Fadia Faqir, "Intrafamily Femicide in Defense of Honour: The Case of Jordan," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2001), pp. 65–82.



compliance, such as their expressed satisfaction or even just their silence in the aftermath of the murder.<sup>6</sup>

By comparison, Shalhoub-Kevorkian addresses the role of the community and the family in justifying or advocating for femicide, and she extends the concept of femicide beyond the actual act of murder to act to include the threat of death over women.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Shalhoub-Kevorkian argues that from the moment a woman receives a death threat, she is considered to be among the dead, even if she is allowed to live. The murders of a woman's mother, sister, or aunt—and in some cases more than one family member has been killed— leads a woman who is surrounded by death threats to feel that these threats represent a likely reality for her in her family. Evidence has corroborated this, as many women whose sisters were killed soon followed became victims themselves. This was the case of Amal Musrati and her sister Nasrin Musrati, as well as Narmin and Mayyada Abu Ghanim, sisters whose mother was killed before them, as well as others. How about this “It should be noted that Violence against women, including the threat of death, violent acts, and murder, is more widespread in lower socio-economic strata. Therefore, the women most threatened by acts of femicide are already residing in marginalized spaces in society, and are limited in all options and resources. Thus, the sisters, mothers, and daughters of murdered women, even if they are not killed, face continued vulnerability to a series of social, psychological, and physical violence.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hillary Mayell, “Thousands of Women Killed for Family ‘Honor’,” *National Geographic News*, 12 February 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Re-Examining Femicide: Breaking the Silence and Crossing ‘Scientific’ Borders,” *Signs* 28, no. 2 (2003), pp. 581–608.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Chesler, “Worldwide Trends Honor Killing,” *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (2010), pp. 3–11.



## **Experiences of Bereaved Women in '48 Palestine**

Our collection and documentations of these women's stories made evident to us that there are a number of basic themes and issues that must be addressed in greater depth. These include issues related to psychological experiences, bureaucratic encounters, and the influence of holistic and collective family relations.

### **Aftermath of the Killings: The Survivor Struggles**

We have found that women usually reject the killing of a sister or a daughter, and this rejection is expressed by insisting on the prosecution of the killer. Their role is often to follow the developments of the case and to instigate men to action through symbolic expressions, most commonly for men do "Do something, man." Meanwhile, the men in the family prefer to avoid confrontation under the pretext of moving beyond the crisis, and treat the women who insist on "digging up the matter" as a source of inconvenience and annoyance. In addition to treating the killing as a passing event, the incident (which often goes unnamed, referred to as *hadak al-hadith*, or "that incident") becomes the cause of disputes, quarreling, and recriminations within the family.

With the passage of time, women—feeling isolated and abandoned—often give up dealing with the murder and the prosecution of the killers. Their shock and sadness, anger and despair become internalized, feelings they are left to deal with on their own. This situation breeds tension and leads to a deterioration in family relations during a time when the family is in need of stability and security in order to move forward in the investigation and prosecution process. This paper does not address daughters whose mothers were killed, although this subject has its own merits and importance as until now there is no research



that examines the life trajectories of these girls, not only in Palestine but globally as well.<sup>9</sup> Research has shown that women who have gone through the experience of the murder of one of their female relatives—even at the hands of a stranger—live in the shadow of existential fear of becoming the next victim, with death lying in wait for them as it did for their sisters or other female relatives.<sup>10</sup>

Rula's<sup>11</sup> story is one that embodies the extent of the threat experienced by women when they try to bring the truth to light. After Rula was killed in 2007, a number of women, including her mother, testified in court against her brother, who was accused of killing her. The women clearly stated that they had witnessed him murder Rula. Despite this, the brother was accused of having abetted the murder, but not of being the murderer. In the aftermath of the trial, the mother and every woman who testified against the brother was forced to leave her home and seek refuge elsewhere in order to avoid danger. Similar events unfolded in the aftermath of the murder of a woman named Marwa. As a consequence of testifying, Marwa's mother was divorced, forced to flee with her children, and persecuted by disgruntled family members. She says: "Their youth were put into prison with my son, what would you have me do? I haven't been back to [my town] since then." It should be noted that those threatening these women experienced no such displacement or exile. Fleeing after such events not only brings emotional and psychological trauma to these women, but also comes with significant financial struggles. These struggles include receiving the grant that

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<sup>9</sup> Linda A. Lewandowski, Judith McFarlane, Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Faye Gary, and Cathleen Barenski, "He Killed My Mommy! Murder or Attempted Murder of a Child's Mother," *Journal of Family Violence* 19, no. 4 (August 2004), pp. 211–220.

<sup>10</sup> Esther Madriz, *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Rula is a pseudonym. The names of all interview subjects in this position paper have been changed by the authors to protect the identities of interview subjects.



the Israeli government provide to the murdered person's family. Women need this grant in order to raise the children of the killed woman, or for building her grave. Instead. According to the law, the men; husband or father, receive this gran. Then, her mother or sisters find themselves responsible for paying the burial costs. That is in addition to paying the lawyers' costs and other duties related to the murdered.

### **Psychological Crisis**

The death of family member under normal conditions can constitute a great shock, and the ways of coping with it differ from one person to another. However, the murder of a woman in tragic circumstances, under a cloud of social stigma, by one of the victim's relatives, makes the support networks available to the female family members of the victim extremely limited. The family is often complicit in the crime and is unable to embrace or support the female relatives of the victim. Any confidence in the family unit is destroyed.

*"I started to doubt not only my daughter's husband, but my daughter herself [believing that] she told her husband something that he disclosed or let them kill her."*

This quickly and directly creates dangerous psychological reactions among those connected to the victim. These include depression and isolation, waves of anger and resentment, and psychological collapse.

*"My mother was in a woeful condition. This woman who is before you lost thirty kilos. It was difficult for us to take her out or for her to go anywhere. Maybe this thing brought her closer to religion. Maybe prayer alleviated her condition."*



In most cases, other family members do not pay appropriate attention to the psychological suffering of these women, which only contributes to the deterioration of the condition of the bereaved mother or sister.

*"I went once to the psychiatrist. I was like a madwoman, it was eating me up inside, I was smoking a lot. He gave me medicine, but I could only sleep and get up and go to sleep again, so I gave it up."*

It is worth mentioning that according to an Israeli government decision of 2011, the Welfare Ministry is responsible for providing psychological and logistical assistance to the families of women who have been killed. A Jewish association won the bid to run different centers throughout the country that support the families that have suffered from such crimes, but of all the victims' families known to *Na'm* and throughout this research, we did not find a single family that benefited from this service.

### **Bureaucratic Difficulties**

Women also describe the bureaucratic difficulties they encountered often on a technical level, as it is often difficult for them to navigate and follow developments in the case. For example, oftentimes details such as the location of the trial are not disclosed to them, nor do they have transportation to the locations. Many of the women we spoke to expressed intense frustration of not being able to follow the case.

A victim's mother told us:

*"I went to the police after the funeral to see what they would do. They told me, 'We are not in charge of the file any more. Go to Acre.' Okay, but where in Acre? To whom? God only knows. After several days, I went by myself to Acre, and nobody helped me. They told me that the investigator responsible for the file was in Nazareth, as if Nazareth is a small town! Wherever I turn, I am by myself, floundering, not knowing who to ask or about what."*



Lack of information or access to it produces daily suffering among these women. Even when dealing with simple and basic right to information, such as what exactly happened to their loved one, the process is complicated for these women, not to mention the challenges facing them when they attempt to demand for punishment or to file a charge.

Another mother of a victim recounted the following experience:

*“We are in Haifa, driving ourselves crazy coming and going. One day they contact us and said to us ‘Come to Kfar Saba.’ I don’t have a car and I have never in my life been to Kfar Saba. Why couldn’t we meet here? Why?”*

The government t plays the role of guardian of cultural values and social norms. But they overlook the fact that the mourning women are ill-equipped and unprepared for the procedure; they forget that this may be the first exposure of these bereaved women to the legal system in this way. It cannot be assumed that these women are knowledgeable or familiar with the legal structure, including but not limited to the locations of investigations or police stations. Structural impediments also include inadequate public transportation to take these women from place to place. The establishment therefore increases the exclusion of survivor women from the process, compounds their feelings of grief in the wake of loss, and deepens the psychological shock resulting from the brutality of murder and loss of life.

According to another victim’s mother:

*“I went to ask about my daughter’s things: her identity card, her notebooks—she wrote and drew. They<sup>12</sup> took everything. I want the things that she left, and they said, ‘Enough, these are ours.’”*

This is another kind of deprivation coming after the first one. In addition to that, in some cases, to enact their right to bring the girls’ killers to justice, the families—who cannot put forward a criminal case, even if their right to do so is clear as day— have to figuratively knock on every door, even going so far as to seek the assistance of a member of the Knesset.

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<sup>12</sup> The husband’s family.



The justice system itself is inundated with the same sexism which permeates society, further obstructing women's agency in seeking justice. As one victim's sister said:

*"I went to the police to ask them what happened. They said: 'Send your father or your brother.' I'm a forty-year-old woman. My father is sick and my brother doesn't look after us. What do you mean send your father to ask? I want to know, not them."*

This reaction indicates the patriarchy and the reactionary nature of the formal system that empowers patriarchy and within the Palestinian society. The system makes it difficult to envision a woman in a position of strength, demanding her rights and those of her sister or her daughter who has been killed, especially when the system sometimes has prior knowledge of the threat to her life and did not intervene.

The treatment of women seeking justice by the police gives rise to frustration and a lack of trust. The mother of another victim said:

*"My dearest daughter was taken from me, just like that. At the very least, shouldn't we know who killed her? And how? And why? I want him to be imprisoned for life. I went to ask, and they told me, 'Go to the yamar.'<sup>13</sup> What is this yamar? How should I know? They told me, 'The investigator will contact you, leave your telephone number'—this to the face of a visitor! Nobody called or asked me anything."*

Because of situations like these, women often express their complete lack of confidence in the police, explaining that they do not feel that the police, or any of the other Israeli judicial institutions, provide them or their daughters with protection or a sense of security—the very things for which these institutions were established and which give them a reason for existence.

## **Fiancées, Husbands, and the Married Sisters**

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<sup>13</sup> The acronym for the "central unit" of the Israeli police.



Our research has shown that when the victim is married or engaged, her husband or fiancé is greatly inclined to forget or to move past the murder.

*“My daughter’s husband, who in his whole life did not get to know us or take an interest in anything, came yesterday and told me to my face, ‘Your daughter killed herself, that’s it, she’s gone. We don’t want to keep coming back to the matter or making it worse and disgracing ourselves.’”*

Additionally, the husbands of bereaved sisters hastily try to isolate their wives from being present and dealing with their families after the crime. They do so under the pretext of protecting them from danger or from damaging their reputation, or to keep “the children from being affected by the incident.”

*“My sister’s husband forbade her from speaking to the television or the newspapers. ‘Enough, (or?) the scandal will come back,’ he said.”*

This puts a victim’s married sister in a difficult situation, for she wants to preserve her marriage and her home while at the same time she wants a proper investigation of the crime. She may also want, for example, to engage in demonstrations, or to spend extended time with her mother, to be present to support her psychologically during this ordeal.

*“My husband wasn’t a good, but I was silent, trying to set matters straight. But after my sister was killed, he became a different person, easily angered and influenced by what people were saying. My mother-in-law, too, was exasperating. I was alienated and alone there, and they weren’t happy to see me go to and from my mother in [my home town]. In the end, I got divorced and I stayed with my mother.”*

### **Confronting Society as a Whole**

In addition to facing neglect and ignorance from official institutions, and beyond being ignored by the immediate nuclear family, bereaved women also confront the view of society with regard to dealing with the family and with them as sisters and mothers of those who have been killed. For example, Siham’s family was forced to leave their home and find a place



to live in a town far away. When we asked why they left, the victim's sister responded: "My father moved them in the 1970s, when he couldn't take the people and how they treated them. He could no longer go to the mosque. He told me that one couldn't live in a place that could kill a poor girl like Siham."

Similarly, the mother of Maram moved from her house in the same neighborhood where the killer lived, as being near him made her depressed. Nihaya, however, had after her sister Nariman killed seven years after the murder of her other sister Rawan, found herself saying, "My sisters are honorable." In this way she pushed back against her sisters' image before an accusatory society uninterested in the details of the cases. This is in light of the failure of the police to protect Nariman and Rawan even after they had complained and were aware that they faced death threats.

Beyond this, mothers attempt to make up for the loss of a daughter by taking care of the deceased daughter's children. Yet even in this, they often face difficulty because on the other side is the husband or the husband's family, struggling to assert custody over the children, even if the husband himself is accused of the murder.

## **Recommendations**

According to these initial findings, we recommend the following steps be taken:

- Protect women so that they do not suffer from the threat of death on a daily basis.
- Make women in the family visible to state institutions so that the state ceases to ignore them under the cover of sensitivity to "local culture."
- Empower women and give them training in legal advocacy. This can be done as part of the work of various organizations, as it is currently being done by some women's rights organizations.



- Establish a judicial and psychological support apparatus for female relatives of a woman who has been murdered.
- Reform state institutions such that they demonstrate an understanding toward women's need to know the details of cases and that they meet this need to the greatest extent possible.

