

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED

**Testimonials of
Women Human
Rights Defenders
Resisting the
Israeli Occupation**

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About Us



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.

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Intro

In the violent and war-stricken summer of 2014, Israel initiated an attack against the Palestinians in the West Bank (Operation Shuvu Achim / Bring Back Our Brothers), supposedly to search for the three kidnapped Jewish boys who had gone missing. Later on, it turned out that many in the decision-making ranks had assumed or knew that the three were already dead, but decided to take advantage of the situation and strengthen the occupation, to remind people who was in control and operate a wide-scale revenge operation that included arrests of hundreds of Palestinians, night raids and extreme violence.

Prisoners who had been released as part of the "Shalit agreement" were imprisoned again, together with Parliament members, minors and hundreds of people. Collective punishment was implemented, and arrests of minors and very obvious enticement took place. Demonstrations organized in the West Bank were oppressed through use of extreme force; inside the Green Line \ 1948 borders, the political prosecution of activists was intensifying.

Knesset members and the prime minister called to take revenge for the boys' killings and revenge did not fail to follow. On the night of July 1st the streets of Jerusalem were filled with riots; thousands of people ran down the streets shouting racist and violent slogans and physically attacking Palestinians. A few hours later, the child Mohammad Abu Khdeir was kidnapped outside his home in Shuafat by a number of extreme rightists who later burned him to death.

All of this happened before the official attack on Gaza, and in light of this reality, Operation Tzuk Eitan - Protective Edge began in July. Actually, during those previous weeks military attacks had already begun in Gaza. What continued as Operation Tzuck Eitan did not begin suddenly out of nowhere, but was built gradually during the weeks that preceded the official announcement.

In addition to the army and police-forces violence, the summer of 2014 brought extreme violence from citizens as well. Enticements against protests had begun, as well as attacks of protestors - which continued and intensified in the following weeks, during the assault on Gaza.

On July 8th 2014, the Operation Tzuk Eitan had officially begun. The deadly attack on Gaza lasted 51 days and took the lives of more than 2,000 Palestinians in Gaza, and 75 Israelis.

After the assault on Gaza commenced, more and more protests and demonstrations were organized. In Gaza, and in an almost-impossible reality, human rights organizations continued to work. A violent oppression of public protests in the West Bank was becoming more intense and so were the violent arrests, incitements and attacks of protestors during protests against the assault. All of this occurred in East Jerusalem, the Western part of the city, Haifa, Lod, Nazareth, Tel Aviv and more, at the hands of police and army forces as well as Jewish citizens.

During the protest against the assault on Gaza, over 1,500 men and women were arrested, 650 case files were opened - most of them against Palestinians, 350 indictments were filed, all of them, without an exception, against Palestinians inside the 1948 borders / Israel.

Due to these demonstrations and the exceptional violence, there arose a need for the sharing of personal stories of women involved in political activity that summer. The importance of publishing these voices was discussed and this is how the work on this booklet began, as an attempt to tell the stories of women Human Rights Defenders and describe their witnessing of certain events during the summer of 2014. Some of them were in Gaza, some, in the West Bank, and some, inside Israel. They were all active against the reality of oppression and killing.

After starting work on this project, we decided not to restrict women to talk only about the events of the summer of 2014, but to include additional stories of women who were active in different periods and various geographical areas.

Human Rights Defenders are those who are active in changing the current reality and who fight against discrimination, incitement, racism, inequality, occupation, different kinds of oppressions and who work for the recognition of human rights in their broadest sense. Their activity can be constant or occasional. It can be manifested through activism or through working in a political movement or a human rights

organization. It can be in support of someone else's struggle or on behalf of one's own life and shelter.

The term "human rights defender" was coined by the international community and the United Nations in 1998. Nevertheless it is not necessarily a well-known expression, and many women human rights defenders do not recognize themselves in it; they might say that they are fighting for their homes, or might call themselves "activists". But "human rights defenders"? Not necessarily. Very rarely, and especially less, in comparison to active men, who will define themselves as Human Rights Defenders and may even receive official recognition for it.

In many places in the world, human rights defenders suffer political persecution, silencing, arrests, and violence. Harming them can be an act legitimized by anti-democratic laws, and can include incitement or physical attack, investigation summons, an attempts to prevent their activity through intimidation, harassment, surveillance and threatening calls.

Clearly, when we speak about women who are human rights defenders and political activists, the assault has specific characteristics. It can be reflected in investigation summons that include sexual harassment or degrading comments based on gender / sex during an arrest. It can also be reflected in attacks on the basis of gender during a political activity online or in the public sphere.

The price paid by the women activists and human rights defenders that we interviewed for this report vary, and we must not ignore the differences in the realities and contexts of these women human rights defenders. We feel it is important to offer different voices and narratives in order to reflect the reality of protest in different areas, where women from different parts of society have participated. Some of them went out and raised their voices against the assault, and some did not have a choice, while suffering under the bombing in Gaza. Others went out to demonstrate during the First Intifada and paid a heavy personal price.

We are very thankful to the women who agreed to tell their stories and to all women still protesting against any kind of oppression.

Shirin Al-Shobaki

Age 37

Married

Resident of Gaza

I work for Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, where I am in charge of awareness, training and social communication programs. I am also in charge of all awareness and training activities and of all publications (posters, videos, training material, reports and fact sheets).

The occupation and strict blockade imposed upon the Gaza strip are among the most crucial challenges that I face during my work. This is especially evident due to the fact that I am unable to travel or move around in order to hold activities in Arab or European countries. This limitation is due to the fact that the Rafah border crossing is closed and that the Israeli authorities refuse to give me a permit to exit through the Erez crossing, debilitating our international presence.

There is also some internal pressure I experience, coming from my own society, seeing as I am a woman activist. Still, this cannot really be considered pressure in the exact sense of the word. It is more like a challenge that I have to face in order to prove the importance of what I do and to emphasize the main goal we work for, which is to enhance and empower a human rights discourse and international humanitarian law. The constant support I receive from my husband, my family and my colleagues mitigates these challenges and strengthens the message I carry about our work in the humanitarian field and the importance of empowerment of human dignity.

Occasionally, I face social and cultural challenges that push me to put more effort into delivering some messages across to the general public. For example, the concept of women's rights, when these are taught to the Imams of mosques, or to men who have

received traditional education, as well as to the Mukhtars (the traditional heads of families). Despite all of these challenges, I am happy with the end-results, since, as part of my work, I can pass on some information which has an effect on changing these men's view of women and how they treat them.

My activities are limited to the Gaza Strip, even though there are many activities that are carried out in partnership with other human rights organizations in the West Bank and some Arab countries. However, the occupation and the limitations imposed on our mobility, in the form of the ongoing blockade since 2007, greatly limit my ability to participate in these activities, especially in the West Bank and in conferences dealing with the human rights of Palestinians in general and, especially, Gazans. As I wrote earlier, I cannot attend international events and events that take place in the Arab world.

During the last Israeli assault on Gaza, I was in my house, in the southern Ar-Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City, close to the Gazan seaport. Despite the dangers of the continuous airstrikes by the occupation forces, I chose to continue my activities, helping my colleagues in the field research department by documenting the violations and sending the information to them daily, in order to issue daily statistics of the victims of the aggression. On an individual level, I joined a group of volunteers and we provided aid to the displaced.

When I tell of my own experience during the last aggression, I feel terrible pain. I go back in my mind to a very difficult time not too far away. I am able to relive every single moment of the aggression, that left so much damage on a personal and a societal level. During that time, not a single house in the occupied and blockaded Gaza Strip was spared from damage.

I feel deep sorrow on a psychological level, since I have lost so many people dear to my heart during the aggression. One of these people was my colleague Anwar Az-Za'aneen, who was killed while checking up on his farm and house in the northern part of the Gaza Strip. Losing him pained us deeply.

I run a project that empowers children to use mechanisms for detecting and documenting violations of children's rights. A girl that used to participate in this project, Arwa Daheer, was killed along with her whole family during the strikes - there were 19 of them.



Two lawyers that participated in a six-month training I had organized were killed in the bombings as well. The training was in the field of international humanitarian law and human rights. Their names are Abdullah and Hamza, and they were killed during the bombing of the Shuja'iyya neighborhood.

Mr. 'Isaam Yunes's father, who is the director of Al-Mezan Center, was killed, as was his stepmother and their son, Mr. Yunes's brother. I feel great pain for what has happened to his family.

Muneer and Basheer Al-Hajjar, brothers of our colleague 'Adnan Al-Hajjar were both killed. They were like our own colleagues.

"When I tell of my own experience during the last aggression, I feel terrible pain...During that time, not a single house in the occupied and blockaded Gaza Strip was spared from damage."

Another colleague, 'Alaa As-Skafi, lost 9 members of his family - his brothers-in-law and cousins.

My sister's house was burnt to the ground and completely destroyed, though her only fault was living in the eastern part of Rafah. My family's house was partially destroyed. All these events happened consecutively. We were also incessantly following every bombing and every strike. This is bound to wear any person down psychologically.

The hardest moments for me during the aggression were during the attack on Rafah - the execution of "Hannibal Protocol". My family and my sister's family were among those trapped inside the place. I was unable to contact them, the phone lines and cellular lines had been cut off until the next day. During that time, no one knew what was going on there. No one could tell us if they were among the injured, the killed or the survivors. I almost went crazy that night and the next day. They came out of it unscathed though, thank God.

The last aggression had, undoubtedly, a great deal of effect on my work and activities, which culminated in the release of a series of publications I worked on with my colleagues, in order to bring to light the violations of the Israeli occupation. One such publication dealt with the effect of the Israeli violations on the lives of women. As a representative

of the Al-Mezan Center, I worked on that project with several partners, such as the Al-Haq organization in the West Bank, the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC) in Jerusalem, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee in the West Bank and Gaza and the Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA) in the Gaza Strip. I consider it to be one of the most important studies dealing with the situation of women across the occupied territories, not in one specific geographic location but everywhere.

I have also worked on documenting the stories and experiences of women during the last aggression against the Gaza Strip. I worked with researchers on collecting 25 stories that will be published, both in Arabic and English. These stories show the human emotions of the victims. I have also worked on a publication titled *In Children's Eyes*, which includes stories told by children about how they experienced the aggression.¹

Additionally, I am working on two films that will focus on the Israeli violations of victims' rights.

Lastly, I would like to add that the strike that does not kill you makes you stronger. This is my motto. If all this aggression and all these Israeli violations that we suffer do not kill us, they make us stronger and strengthen our belief in the important and necessary message we carry: solidarity with the victims and empowerment of a human rights discourse and international humanitarian law. We will continue our work, no matter what it costs us, so that humanity can live on.

I send you all my love for showing interest in these details that are unknown to many about us and our work. I wish you good luck with all of my heart.

The *In Women's Eyes* report - testimonies and stories told by women about the time of the aggression. Published by Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights.²

¹ <http://mezan.org/en/post/20256/In+Children%E2%80%99s+Eyes%3Cbr%3EChildren+and+War%3A+Stories+from+Gaza+children+in+summer+2014%E2%80%8E>

² <http://mezan.org/uploads/files/in%20womens%20eyes.pdf>

Lubna Bandak

Age 35

*Activist in the Popular Resistance Committees
and the Land Defense Committees*

Resident of Bethlehem

My activism focuses on participating in all meetings and activities of the popular resistance, youth resistance, boycott activities and land defense. One of the major activities I am involved in is the weekly marches against the segregation wall in the villages and zones that suffer under the Israeli occupation. The occupation's policies in these areas focus on the expropriation of lands, building of settlements on them and, as a result, isolating the lands from their Palestinian extension. Since the freedom of movement is limited within the West Bank, and since one must pass through military checkpoints in order to travel, my activism is limited to the areas of Ramallah and Bethlehem.

For the most part, my activism is either individual or takes place as part of the Popular Resistance Committees against the wall. Because I am a woman, I have to face several challenges while working, some of them internal and social. Since my work as an activist is voluntary and since I do not hold a position in a civil- society institution, my activism is limited to my free time and sometimes comes at the expense of my own job - I take part in running a family business. However, the biggest challenges and the worst limitations are imposed by the occupation, especially due to detentions during my work as an activist against the segregation wall.

Even though I consider myself to be a Human Rights Defender, the international community does not recognize me as one, and does not guarantee my protection from the daily violations resulting from the occupation. This is a big dilemma for the international



community and its institutions, defining who is a Human Rights Defender and who is not. This issue of protection is one of the challenges women activists face when fighting the occupation. It is essential that they feel protected, and this is something the international community does not guarantee to women active in these areas, which are subject to military law.

The question that keeps surfacing for me: is there a way in which female human rights activists on both sides can join forces, locally and internationally, in order to address the Palestinian cause fairly for a change?

Aya Mana'a

Resident of Majd el-Krum



It took me a year to write this testimony.

The summer of 2014 was hot and violent and the attacks on Gaza had started again. It was during the Ramadan season, many people were fasting, but due to my health

condition I did not fast. My health problems did not prevent me from participating in rallies and demonstrations though. I just couldn't sit quietly at home.

The protest in Nazareth on July 21st is one I can't forget - tear gas, water cannons, police horses and dogs. This experience silenced me for a while.

It started even before we gathered at the Karajat-Um Wassif junction; police forces started hitting us with water cannons, the Skunk (foul-smelling water cannon) and tear gas bombs. I ran away with the crowd and entered an ally. A family opened the door for me. In their home, I changed my shirt, drank some water and put some onion on my burning eyes. The phone network was down and I couldn't reach my mother and my cousin, who I had lost in the commotion. I was anxious and afraid for my mother.

This is why I went back to the street. The demonstration shifted down to Nazareth's main square, horses chased us. I fell but got up to run again. My foot had been injured in the fall. The streets of Nazareth smelled horrible, the smell of Skunk water. At this point, I decided that walking on the main road would be safer than trying to hide. I saw a policeman with an informer / undercover cop in a yellow shirt, he was laughing and chatting with the officers.

My heart was beating fast and I sped up and took a right turn, where I was able to call my mother, using a phone of a man who was hiding there. My mother was okay and so was my cousin, who was with her. We finally met near the bus station and went back home together, in complete shock.

The next day in my hometown, Majd el-Krum, we held a demonstration near the eastern junction. The police was waiting there when we arrived chanting. They ordered us to stop the demonstration and return to the village. We took a few steps back onto the sidewalk; still they decided to shoot tear gas. We withdrew but they came after us to the main street, using water cannons and tear gas bombs. This time I was prepared and had a bottle of vinegar, some cloth and water, so I was able to help the other demonstrators.

Luckily, I was not badly injured that day. The only thing that happened was that I had a week of severe coughing, and that it took me a year to write this testimony.

Sahar Vardi

Age 25

Resident of Jerusalem

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Three Sequential Points in a Life of Activism

"I have been an activist for more than a decade, involved in direct actions and protests led by Palestinians against the Israeli occupation. I work with groups such as Anarchists against the Wall and Taayush; I am also active against militarization in Israeli society, materialized in my work for the American Friends Service Committee, where I coordinate the Israeli campaign that supports anti-militarization associations in Israel.

I am also studying to be a history teacher in high-schools, and hoping to continue working in the realm of education.

During a decade of activity, I have been exposed to forms of violence, aimed against me and my fellow strugglers. I was imprisoned for two months in a military prison for refusing to serve in the Israeli army, and later arrested a number of times, with four indictments. All this, in addition to being a victim of physical violence inflicted by soldiers and policemen during demonstrations and activities, and being threatened and attacked by right-wing activists.

At 16 years old, a demonstration in the village of Bili'n, in the West Bank

We reached the spot in the early morning with metal pipes and chains. We ran towards the point where the apartheid wall was to be built, it was still under construction back then, and we attached our bodies to it. The chains were wrapped around our hands with plastic links, and were hidden inside metal pipes in order to prevent the soldiers from

reaching the links. The aim was to prevent the construction of the wall, at least on that day, as part of our weekly activities.

The soldiers reached us quickly and detached us from the wall - they pulled us until the links were all torn, that is how they were able to tear up our human line. A few of us decided to try again, this time without using plastic links, and with chains wrapped directly around our arms, linking iron to iron, and again covering it up with metal pipes that covered all of the links, and re-attaching ourselves to the wall.

The soldiers arrived once again to pull us away. This time we did not have plastic links on us that could be torn, and they soon figured this out and stopped for a moment to try and think of what should be done. Eventually, they decided to try any way and we were simply pulled with force by five soldiers. The soldiers were close enough to hear and see my pain, and they understood what this act of pulling had caused, but that did not bother any of them. They succeeded, my thumb was dislocated, I was in tears, and my hand sled out. At the age of barely 16, I was defeated by "the most moral army" in the world.

At 20 years old in Jerusalem

One morning, at six or seven a.m. I was awoken by a phone call from my father asking whether I'd heard the news. "Heard what?" I asked him. It turned out that, during the night, a few right-wing activists had spray painted my name alongside curses and accusation of betrayal on the wall of my father's house in Jerusalem. My sisters were almost six and nine years old back then, old enough to read, and too young for me to explain to them what was going on without frightening them on the one hand, and without underestimating the issue on the other hand. Maybe this was a preparation for the day they went to their school, the bi-lingual school in Jerusalem, to find slogans filled with hatred on the walls, and maybe these slogans were a preparation for the burning of one of the first-grade classes in their school.

At 22 years old, a demonstration at the village of Nabi Saleh

Before being arrested on a Friday at one of the demonstrations in the village of Nabi Saleh, in the West Bank, we were walking next to a group of soldiers. I was walking very



close to them, while they headed towards the street. I walked next to them because I was aware that the closest area to the soldiers was the area where they would not throw tear gas - this is similar to the military procedure called “the neighbor procedure” [which means using humans as shields] but in an opposite manner.

I don’t remember if I spoke to the soldiers or not at that stage, I think I did, I think I asked them why they were here, and whether they were feeling like they were guarding anything or anyone, or even me. Then one of the soldiers turned around and asked me: “How long is the Arab bar (penis) you get?”

Many answers ran through my mind; part of them, if not all, were on the same level as his question. But no, I did not answer him, it was better not to answer since I did not have any interest in doing so, and he would not have heard me, so it would have been like

talking to myself. In spite of all that, his insult stayed on my mind for a few hours, it did not hurt me. It did not bother me that much, or maybe it did? Maybe it hurt me as a woman who is a political activist.

It hurt me because, as I said to the investigator later on when he asked me during the investigation if I had anything else to add: (and I had things to add): “I want to add that one of the soldiers asked me: ‘How long is the Arab bar you get?’”. The investigator was shocked. But he was less shocked by what the soldier had said than by the fact that I had had the courage to repeat it.

He asked me why I had said this, and because I knew he was going to ask me this question I was prepared and replied: “But Kos Immak (a curse in Arabic), what do you mean by ‘why did you say that?’ Shouldn’t you be asking why he said what he said?!”.

Huda Abu Obeid

Age 27

Resident of Laqiyya village in the Negev\Naqab area

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I currently work at a human rights organization called Gisha, where we provide assistance to Gaza residents requesting to cross the checkpoints from Gaza for humanitarian reasons. This is the only place where I am active at the moment, but I have been involved in several other projects in the past.

My activity as a woman living in a chauvinistic male society, especially in the Naqab area, is full of challenges, but the most apparent one is financial. This challenge of lack of funding creates an obstacle in financing the activities I organize, like demonstrations and lectures. Even though there are social organizations in our area, they are mostly feminist initiatives, working on empowering women in dealing with their daily lives, while there is an apparent lack of human rights organizations.



During the assault on Gaza in 2014, I faced many challenges, some stemming from the policies of the ruling government and some from my being a young female. At the time, I initiated a fundraising campaign for Gaza, in order to send medicines to hospitals there, but since there were many active campaigns, and since I am a young woman who has never been active in fundraising before, it was easier for donors to collaborate with more experienced organizations.

Being in the Naqab area creates many challenges, the social and political reality we live in is extremely tough. We have to face daily life and its difficulties, like finding jobs after Israeli authorities have turned our Bedouin villages into poverty-stricken complexes, lacking work places and adequate conditions to provide a good life for their residents. This policy is full of political struggles to do with land and home, just like the daily struggle of any Palestinian, within the boundaries of 1948 (within the Green Line) or 1967. In addition, Naqab residents face home demolitions and attempts of displacement on a daily basis, especially on the unrecognized villages. There are 38 villages in the Naqab that Israel refuses to recognize since 1948, where 85,000 people live without receiving any kind of municipal service. These challenges reached their height after July 2013, when the Israeli government approved a plan initiated by the minister of Planning, Ehud Barak, aimed at displacing Palestinians in the Naqab area. As a result of the authorization of this plan, massive demonstrations and protests were held by Palestinians, especially in the Naqab area, in order to prevent this plan and a new Nakba, similar to the 1948 one. During this struggle, having been an activist among hundreds of other activists, I was a victim of harassment and prosecutions by the State's law-enforcement authorities: at one point, a policeman came to my home and threatened me in front of my family so that I would stop my activity against the Barak plan.

It is worth mentioning that the protests against the Barak plan have succeeded, even if temporarily. The Israeli government decided to stop the implementation of the plan, but that does not mean that this is the end of the daily home demolitions and displacement policies in the Naqab.

In the following times, I will continue to struggle and will probably also continue paying a personal price as a Palestinian woman acting against oppression.

Ahlam Wahsh

Born 1963

Married, with 4 kids: two daughters and two sons

A liberated prisoner

The imprisonment experience

I was arrested in 1979 and sentenced to five years in prison, on various charges related to my activity during the first Intifada. Attorney Walid Al-Fahoum managed to appeal the sentence and to rectify it, seeing as I was not of legal age yet (I was not even 16 years old at the time). The sentence was reduced to two years of actual imprisonment and a 3-year suspended sentence. During my imprisonment in Ramla prison (Neveh Tertza), I was assaulted by Israeli criminal prisoners and part of my nose was broken. A few days after being released, I was arrested and held at the detention center of the Nablus police, where I was assaulted and beaten, that is when my nose was completely broken.

My activism, in general, is patriotic, feminist, social and legal. The challenges I face are first and foremost, the occupation, then the sexist local mentality and the absence of laws to protect women and provide them with equal rights. Currently, I am the president of the Bethlehem branch of the General Union of Palestinian Women.

Through my activism, I try to improve the state of Palestinian women, to increase their participation in politics and to create opportunities for them to advance to decision-making positions, in addition to combating violence against women and fighting for a society governed by justice and equality. We do this work by actively and constantly fighting for the enactment of advanced and just laws and by raising awareness in society and among women about CEDAW and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which

calls for the reduction of the maximal penalties for women and minors. We also organize a series of activities aimed at exercising pressure on the president, given the absence of a Legislative Council, an authority legally entitled to enact laws.

During my work at the General Union of Palestinian Women, I was persecuted for being involved in patriotic activism. I have been persecuted by the Israeli intelligence services and the Israeli army for four years. During the First Intifada, I was not allowed to leave the country and would not have been able to leave had I not become ill. I eventually did thanks to Dr. Ahmad Tibi, who intervened on my behalf so I could be allowed to receive medical treatment in Jordan.

It is largely thanks to my family and my husband that supported me through trying struggles that have kept on. I consider my work to be a bundle of tasks that are very difficult to perform separately - they are all interconnected. In 2015, we held a feminist protest, in which we demand that the authorities enact or amend certain laws, most importantly the Penal Law, the Personal Status Law and the Family Law. Our aim is to focus on the Penal Law, especially in the areas that have to do with the so-called honor killing of women.



Aya Bsheer

Age 27

Resident of Gaza

My activism is political, social and cultural. One of the most important challenges I face, is the fact that I live in Gaza, which has been under siege for more than 7 years now. I have missed several opportunities to travel and study abroad because of the blockade. This blockade is fatal not only for my freedom and liberty of movement, but also for my intellectual and cultural development. I am very ambitious, but the conditions of the blockade, the war on Gaza and the occupation (both direct and indirect) prevent me from achieving what I wish to achieve.

I am active in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel, known internationally as BDS. I joined the campaign directly after the war on Gaza in 2008-2009. One of the most important factors that pushed me to do so was the helplessness I felt during the war. I consider the Boycott campaign to be a weapon of resistance and a chance to show the world the real face of Israel.

I would like to stress that ending the occupation is a necessity, because it is illegal. I do not think that by ending the occupation we can guarantee a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. We must still talk about the return of the refugees. I support the idea of living in a single democratic and secular state for all, regardless of any differences of race, religion or gender. I would also like to see some cultural life in Gaza; we have no theaters here, no cinemas and no concerts.

During the assault on Gaza, I was active on an individual level and focused my work on supplying humanitarian aid during the "humanitarian ceasefires", which were generally violated by the Israeli army in order to kill more people.

"When I exercise my activism in Gaza, I do not face the occupation directly, but it is there, lurking in every corner of the Strip. The occupation fights us from a distance; it is a hindrance to our lives and our work without direct engagement."

I also wrote in English about my experience and the reality I was living, and published this writing on the Internet so the world could see the daily life in Gaza under the airstrikes and destructions.

I do not think there is a single person in Gaza who was not hurt during the war. I think we all suffered at least psychologically, even though we tried not to let it show sometimes. During the last assault, I lost several friends and relatives. Others have become handicapped or homeless after their houses were destroyed, while other friends lost their jobs, after their workplaces were bombed.

We live in the city of Deir al-Balah, in the center of the Gaza strip, which is why many relatives sought refuge in our house, even though it was no longer safe. No



place in Gaza was safe, and now no place in Gaza remains undestroyed or free of suffering. There is no electricity, no potable water, no emergency medications and no infrastructure. There are thousands of destroyed houses. To top that, no one can leave the Strip. Education is in bad shape as well and there is a considerable increase in unemployment.

My activities are not free of challenges and social pressure that seek to disturb or stop it. But I am of the opinion that the occupation feeds this pressure. For example, if

Gaza were not under siege, I could have moved to any other place in Palestine in order to work and be independent. However, the current situation only increases the social pressure and this ties me down.

When I exercise my activism in Gaza, I do not face the occupation directly, but it is there, lurking in every corner of the Strip. The occupation fights us from a distance; it is a hindrance to our lives and our work without direct engagement.

Maayan Dak

36 years old

Resident of Tel Aviv-Jaffa

Political activist

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In the time period this testimonial refers to, I worked as a General Co-coordinator at Coalition of Women for Peace. I grew up as a political activist in Jerusalem and have almost always been involved as a participant or leader in different forms of activist protest and political activities.

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It is not news that it is less legitimate for women to oppose war. It is not news, neither here nor in the world. For this reason, when I take a stand against killing and oppression, I do not use rationales like "I am a security expert", or "I was a soldier, so I know this is wrong." This automatically detracts from the legitimacy of this discourse in the eyes of very wide sectors of the public.

It is not news either that feminist movements have always been, throughout history, leaders of protests against war and oppression - all over the world and certainly in Israel-Palestine. My activism is part of all that.

During the summer of 2014 I spent most of the summer in Tel-Aviv - Jaffa, between my house and the office of the Coalition, and between the office and the protests in Tel-Aviv's streets. Sometimes I left Tel Aviv - Jaffa, mostly to go to other demonstrations.

Starting from the middle of June, when the "My Brother's Keeper" military operation began, alongside the raids on the West Bank, and until the end of the aggression against Gaza, I organized weekly protests with several other activists in

the Coalition of Women for Peace and our partner organizations. I also participated in demonstrations organized by others, mostly in Tel-Aviv - Jaffa, but also in Lod and other locations.

In Gaza, the bombings were fatal and incessant. In the south, people hardly left their "safe spaces". Hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes. It is not always comfortable for me to bring up the violence I experience in demonstrations. Some say that the Palestinians suffer much more or that while people die in Gaza we harp on about the beatings in Tel-Aviv. Of course, there is an undeniable truth in what they say. However, we live and work each in our own reality. My activism that summer was in Tel-Aviv's reality. That reality was unusually violent, as well as sexist, scary and infuriating. This is important.

This happens simply because I am a leftist, and will always include elements that arise because I am a woman. I've heard it said that men get beaten more in these situations. During the summer of 2014, "they" simply went berserk



I have been an activist for many years. I have had my share of violence dealt by civilians, cops and soldiers. This violence, almost always, includes some sort of sexual or otherwise humiliating references which target women specifically. Whether from a citizen, a soldier or a policeman, I have heard many calls or remarks involving the body and many aggressive calls that have sex-gender characteristics: “Blow me!”, “I hope your Arab friends rape you”, or - as I recall from past days - “Arafat’s whores”. I actually take it for granted that something like this will happen to me as an activist in the public sphere.

The violence in the summer of 2014 was very shocking and difficult for me. I had not experienced such levels of violence before and had never felt so threatened by civilian violence. My general feeling is that that summer featured a combination of the awful violence and killing that got worse and more exasperating day by day in Gaza, and of those circumstances, in which it was dangerous to go out and protest even as a leftist Jew in Tel-Aviv. True, I was not shot at, and no one threw gas bombs or shock grenades at me. However, civilians attacked me without flinching, as policemen stood by watching.

I do not live my life thinking that the police necessarily protects me during protests. Still, I was quite astonished and shocked when, time after time, they deserted the demonstrators in face of terrible, sometimes even life-threatening, violence.

On the evening of the 12th of July, after about three weeks of protests since the beginning of the West Bank raids and the “My Brothers’ Keeper” operation, we arrived to Habima Square in order to demonstrate. Having had some experience in previous demonstrations against the aggression on Gaza in 2012 (the Operation Pillar of Defense), we knew that Habima Square had a shelter we could run to. We were thinking of ways to keep our demonstrators safe.

We arrived there, as usual, with banners and signs, and saw a group that was (quite) small that had come to hold a counter-demonstration. Some of us were prepared for this, having seen calls for a counter-demonstration on social media. It did not look like a threat during the first few moments.

Then, within minutes, a group of men quickly assembled just next to us, and started shouting and cursing. Each remark/curse a man directed at one of our female demonstrators included rape threats. Every slogan called for slaughtering the traitors. Very few policemen were present at the scene. They were not really moved, even when the other group got so close to ours that they could stretch their arms and slap us, or worse.

Seeing as the police did nothing about this, several demonstrators, both male and female, huddled together in the front row in order to block the attacks with their own bodies.

When a group of men stands in front of you in a demonstration, spitting at you, on your shirt, cursing you and trying to break you - perhaps this is described in the reports and discourse of the international community as a result of the fact that you are a Human Rights Defender. But on the street, at that particular moment, this terminology is null. This happens simply because I am a leftist, and will always include elements that arise because I am a woman. I've heard it said that men get beaten more in these situations. During the summer of 2014, "they" simply went berserk.

Yes, a bit of rocket debris did fall here, along with larger metal parts, even right in front of my house. But the truth is that the looks in the eyes of those men and women who came to attack us during those protests scared me much more.

When the alarm went off during the first protest in which we were dramatically attacked, during the summer of 2014, it did not even occur to me to go down to the parking lot or to the shelter, along with many of the violent and racist attackers, or along with the cops that showed no interest in stopping the violent attacks. Even while the alarm went off and explosions could be heard in the sky, they kept spitting, cursing, shoving and attacking. The cops? Almost all of them ran toward the shelter and left us there, alone. Regardless of any alarms or explosions, the danger there was much more tangible.

It was clear to us that we could not really disband at that point. We tried to talk to the police in order to coordinate a direction, in which we could disband, but our attempts failed and we ended up marching together and disbanding down the street. The cops, however, did not accompany us. They did not pay any attention and showed no signs of wanting to really do anything when the others started chasing us down the street. We saw them enter and run through the gardens around the buildings. When we got to an intersection down the avenue, they suddenly jumped out at us from every direction.

Months later, on the buses, and even today, a thought suddenly creeps into my head: "What if I suddenly see one of them today?" Even today when I pass

by Habima Square and by the intersection where we were attacked, I take a deep breath and say to myself: "Dear Lord. It really happened here. We were really chased by Jewish masked men and attacked with chairs and fists on our heads and necks."

After all, that night ended much better than we could have thought or feared.

The summer of 2014 has passed and it seems that life here goes on as usual. We are two years away from all that, and Gaza is far from reconstruction, if it is at all possible to rehabilitate after that onslaught of destruction.

The thought that keeps running through my head is very simple: we must always be ready, because who knows when the next attack might take place.



Khulud Khamis

Resident of Haifa

About a dozen feminist activists gathered in the Haifa Women's Coalition house to prepare signs for a protest march, against the strike on Gaza, scheduled to take place on July 19th 2014. The atmosphere was positive, there was a sense that we were doing something, raising our voice, refusing to be silenced.

As soon as we arrived at the gathering point of the protest, we were completely taken aback by the scene. At least 2,000 extreme right-wing protesters stood where our march was to begin. We were moved to a different nearby location. I don't think there were more than 250 of us. Maybe even 200.

We could not march. The extreme right-wing protesters kept coming in, they spread out on the other side of the main street, mainly chanting "death to Arabs" and "death to leftists." I felt the fear rise in my throat. I began taking pictures. At one point, I realized that when the protest ended, it would be too dangerous to disperse. I searched for our international intern and made sure she did not intend to leave alone. Then I asked three of my friends – separately – if I could join them in their cars and if they could drive me home. Three, because I wanted to make sure that if I lost sight of any of them, I had alternatives.

The protest came to an end when the last of the protestors who came from Haifa got on a bus and left. Or so we thought. This was actually just the beginning. At this point, there remained about 50 protestors, mainly from Haifa, who had come on 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.

Back with the group of 50 protestors, we found ourselves moving slowly down the street, with no clear plan of what to do or where to go. At one point, my five friends succeeded somehow to break away and leave. Later I learned that two of them had been beaten, and one ended up in the hospital with a concussion.

I remained with the 50 last protestors, and we came to a corner and stopped there. The scene in front of us was terrifying. In my estimation, there were about 1,500 of them. Surrounding us, approaching us, chanting "death to Arabs". I looked at the street, and saw maybe 15 regular, unarmed policemen, where half an hour before had stood hundreds of policemen, some on horseback.



I sit at my computer and write a short description of my experience, and as I write, I realize that what went on there was a pogrom. I realize that it could have ended not with people injured, but with people dead.

We shrank back. A young teenage girl began crying behind me. An older woman said “Let’s go into one of the apartments”. I yelled at one of the policemen: “Get us a bus!”. Then the same thing at one of the organizers. It would have been so easy at that point to just call a bus and get us the hell out of there. We found ourselves posting on Facebook that we were surrounded, we began calling 100 (the police hotline). At this point, stones began flying at us. Large stones. One of them hit the side of my friend’s head. We were now crouching, our hands over our heads. I could smell the fear among us.

To me, this seemed to go on forever. It went on for maybe an hour.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the police decided to start moving us alongside the sidewalk. We began walking, chased by the angry mob. As we walked, they emerged from everywhere: alleys, entrances and houses. Stones kept flying in our direction. We kept moving through the alleyways. I had a feeling that the police had no plan, no idea of what to do with us. We walked for about one kilometre. We stopped at a roundabout. Now the police officers started to argue about what to do with us. I tried again: “bring us a bus!”. About 15 to 20 minutes

later, a bus passed by, one of the night lines. The policemen stopped the bus, got the passengers off, and we got on.

The bus started moving. It seemed to me that we were driving in circles, as the angry mob was still chasing us in their cars. It seemed like the ride was taking forever. We didn’t know where the bus was taking us. Finally, we arrived at Maxim restaurant, by the beach. The place was full of police, and there was a water cannon. We got off the bus, and there seemed to be no extremists in sight. It seemed that everything was behind us. We got on another bus that was waiting there. We had no idea where this bus was going to take us. Yet there was a feeling of relief. We all got on the bus, and the bus started pulling away.

All of a sudden, and out of nowhere, rocks started to fly at the bus. There were moments of terror. The side windows broke and there was glass everywhere. We started yelling at the driver to keep going, as the police had left us and we were on our own.

The bus arrived at the German Colony, an Arab neighbourhood. We disembarked. At last, there was a feeling of some sort of safety. Still, I found myself looking around me. Some of us, who lived nearby, dispersed. The rest, about 25 or so, headed to the headquarters of the Hadash party. I was shaking.

My friends drove me home, and during the drive, we kept watching the cars passing us by, making sure we were not followed. When we reached my neighbourhood, a Jewish one, we stayed in the car for several minutes to make sure nobody was around. Then, my friend walked me home. In the safety of my home, suddenly, I felt exposed, unsafe. The cat’s movement made me jumpy. An hour later, a friend called to bring me something. I went outside to meet her and she put her finger to her mouth, indicating we should not speak in Arabic. We stood in the street, speaking Hebrew.

I sit at my computer and write a short description of my experience, and as I write, I realize that what went on there was a pogrom. I realize that it could have ended not with people injured, but with people dead. I shiver as I recall those eyes full of murder. People who actually wanted me dead. For being an Arab. Not for any other reason.

This is my personal account of what happened that Saturday night. I have heard similar experiences from other activists who were with us.

This was Haifa in 2014.

“ If all this aggression and all these Israelis violations that we suffer do not kill us, they make us stronger and they strengthen our belief in the important and necessary message we carry: solidarity with the victims and empowerment of the human rights discourse and the international humanitarian law. We will continue our work, no matter how much it costs us, so that humanity can live on.

I send you all my love for showing interest in these details that are unknown to many about us and our work. I wish you good luck from all my heart. ”

Shirin Al-Shobaki
AlMeezan Center for Human Rights



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Pictures: www.activestills.org

Collection of Testimonials: Reem Amer

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- Guide for Activists Before and during Demonstrations and during Detention (2014)
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- The Right to Shelter as a Fundamental Right – Gender Aspects (2013)
- Sexual Harassment in CSOs and Groups of Political Activism. The Existing State, the Desired State and the Modes of Action (2013)

Most publications, as well as lectures and workshop are available in Arabic, English and Hebrew.

” During the assault on Gaza (2014), my activism, on an individual level, focused on giving out humanitarian aid during the “humanitarian ceasefires”, which were mostly violated by the Israeli army in order to kill more. I also wrote in English about my experience and what I was living, and published it on the Internet so the world could see the daily life in Gaza under the airstrikes and destructions.

I do not think there is a single person in Gaza who was not hurt during the war. I think we all suffered psychologically, at least, even though we tried not to show it sometimes. During the last assault I lost several friends and relatives. Others have become handicapped or homeless after their houses were destroyed, while others lost their jobs after their workplaces were bombed.

Aya Basheer

