



Kvinna till Kvinna

# **Inequalities facing Women living in Area C of the occupied Palestinian territories' West Bank**

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## **Summary**

This paper seeks to analyze three phenomena that all demonstrate the manifestations of inequalities that exist in the lives of Palestinian women living in Area C of the West Bank. By first reviewing some of the characteristics of Area C, the paper then deconstructs *early marriage, lack of political participation* and *challenges in addressing violence against women (VAW)* to consider why the nature of Area C further complicates the possibility to reverse these three mentioned challenges. In providing a detailed look at the underlying causes, the actual impact of living in Area C on the lives of women can be better understood.

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Kvinna till Kvinna is a Swedish foundation with an office in Jerusalem that gives grants and provides support and capacity building to national women's rights organizations. Its aim is to work with women in war and conflict areas to increase women's power and influence.

## Introduction

Occupation directly deters women in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) from fully participating in public and political life as it physically divides the Palestinian population in different ways. Restrictions on freedom of movement creates isolation that limits opportunities for networking among civil society actors and the ability to physically reach decision makers.

In addition to the siege on Gaza and the wall which cuts off East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, the West Bank is in itself divided. The Oslo accords delineated three areas: Area A under the Palestinian National Authority's full control; Area B under Palestinian civil control and shared Israeli-Palestinian security control; and Area C, which is entirely controlled by Israel. Traveling between these areas, although improved, remains complicated. Some villages in Area C are literally enclosed by the wall and special gates, controlled by the Israeli Defense Force, regulate the inhabitants' movements.

With the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) unable to access Area C, vital services (such as education, health, social services and civil policing) do not reach people who need them. In many Area C villages there are no health posts and residents have to travel outside the village when faced with an emergency situation. With no official presence of the PA in these towns and villages, national laws, programs and policy do not have the same potential to be implemented and thus cannot benefit all equally. With restrictions on construction and establishing a physical presence, challenges to implement development projects exist. As a result Area C has not had the same opportunity for economic development as other areas of the West Bank. These factors, in addition to concerns related to physical security, result in that conservative attitudes and behaviors prevail in many Area C villages.

These challenges have a very direct impact on the lives of women living in Area C, generating palpable inequalities and compromising their full enjoyment of human rights. While suffering the same restrictions and difficulties affecting the men who live in Area C, women are particularly vulnerable to the impact of traditional attitudes and more controlled by perceptions of threats against their security. Priorities for the Palestinian women's rights movement such as ending early marriage, increasing women's political participation, and addressing violence against women, are more difficult to implement in Area C, due to the layers of underlying factors.

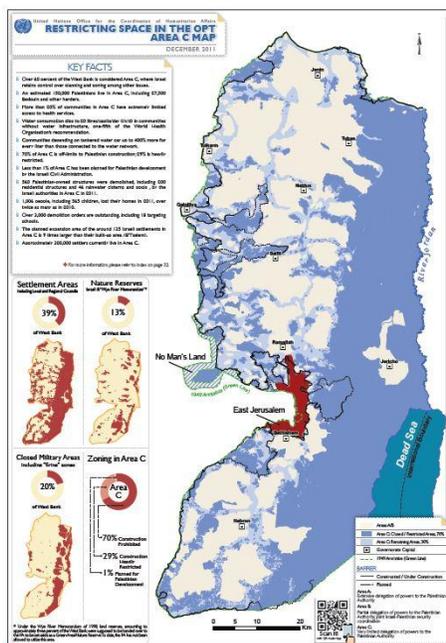
This paper looks at the specific conditions that prevail as a result of living in Area C and the impact it has had on generating and perhaps exacerbating inequalities between men and women in the occupied Palestinian West Bank. It seeks to unpack the phenomena, rather than to take an overarching approach. The paper seeks to demonstrate that it is not only the rural nature of Area C villages that is deepening the inequalities in women's lives, but also the effect of delineating the West Bank into different areas restricting access of the Palestinian Authority to its people.

## Methodology for this research

Kvinna till Kvinna worked with two researchers, Sandy Washaha and Hadeel Sabagh, who met and discussed with women living in several West Bank villages all located within Area C: Al-Jiftlik, Al-Ram, Kufr Akab Um Safa, Deir Abu Mish'al and Al Walajeh. Women were selected randomly, or through already established contacts. They were asked to speak freely about the challenges and difficulties they face because of living in Area C. Only the first names of the women are used in this paper so to not compromise their identities.

In addition, Kvinna till Kvinna held a meeting with representatives of national women's rights organizations and international actors, including bilateral donors, to explore specific the challenges to addressing violence against women in Area C on October 24, 2012. Two organizations, Sawa and the Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development, gave presentations on their experiences at this meeting. Kvinna till Kvinna also spoke to Neda Noraie-Kia, a masters student, doing research on development projects in Area C.

## The nature of Area C



Approximately 62% of the West Bank is demarked as Area C (the dark blue sections in the map). However, Palestinians do not have access to more than approximately 30% of the land, as the remaining 70% is classified by the Israeli authorities as settlement areas, firing zones, or nature reserves. In addition to this control, restrictions apply to Palestinians seeking to build or implement development projects, including water management systems. As it is virtually impossible to obtain building permits, many build illegally – leading to demolitions by the Israeli authorities. 656 Palestinian were displaced in the first six months of 2012 when 125 structures were destroyed by Israeli Authorities. Many Palestinians cite intended settlement expansions as another reason for demolitions, but the Israeli authorities deny this – and say that they are applying the same law to Israeli citizens.

Many villages in Area C are located in close proximity to Israeli settlements. Living close to settlements creates additional security threats, with the number of attacks by settlers on Palestinians continuing to rise. This is having a social, emotional and psychological impact on Area C residents. Women interviewed for this paper who live in close proximity to settlements said that their friends and relatives have stopped to visit them as the Israeli Defense Forces quickly arrive to interrogate them the minute they park their car.

Although the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), which under the Oslo Accord was meant to be an interim government, has no authority in Area C and no representation as an executive body, residents elect local committees that are to serve as a political entity. However, these

committees are largely restricted in what types of projects they can undertake to ensure the residents basic services, due in part to the threat of demolition by Israeli authorities. Furthermore, during a seminar organized by Kvinna till Kvinna on “Addressing Violence against Women in Area C” participants questioned to what degree these committees can actually be held responsible for implementing the laws applied by the Palestinian National Authority, as well as to be held accountable to PNA policies and decisions.

Along with a lack of formal political representation, PNA services – including medical and policing services – do not reach Area C at the same time as the Israeli authorities do not provide any services either. Concretely this means that there is complete lack of protective services. For example, the Ministry of Health has not authority to build health posts within Area C. The police cannot respond to calls or follow perpetrators who escape into Area C. Nor can the police service promote any efforts or practices preventing violence against women. The Palestinian Authority’s National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women concludes that ensuring protective services for women who can be exposed to different forms of violence, including trafficking in persons, is much more difficult in Israeli controlled places such as Area C.

As Area C is largely rural, women work primarily in the agricultural sector and few have opportunities to pursue higher education. The level of awareness and access to information is low, and because they are physically cut off from networking with women’s organizations they do not have the same opportunities as women living in Area A to seek inspiration and support. Women have tried to form community based organizations, but many have had to close due to lack of funding. Isolated, these organizations also suffer from undemocratic structures with leaders who refuse to leave their positions. This has particularly limited the possibilities of young women to get involved, who do not find a space in the rigid structures.

Few development projects have been implemented in Area C, as the threat of demolitions is always present as well as the need to get approval from Israeli authorities. Without permission, international organizations cannot locate or run physical centers in Area C so their presence, although evident, is not felt as much as in cities across the West Bank. During the second intifada (2000-2005), Area C was completely isolated from the rest of the West Bank, closed off by checkpoints and other impromptu barriers built with mud and stones. Seeing as the number of checkpoints (both fixed and mobile) has only very recently diminished, national NGOs have been much more restricted from accessing and thus establishing cooperation with Area C. Conclusively, the scarce number of development projects or initiatives in Area C can have impacted both economic development in the villages, but also the potential to make changes in conservative attitudes and behavior.

### **Towns and villages visited for this paper**

The nature of Area C towns and villages differs, however the majority are agricultural and its residents rely on farming as the primary means to sustain their livelihood. As a part of this research, six villages and towns in Area C were visited, and a random sample of women were interviewed. These included: Al-Jiftlik, Al-Ram, Kafr 'Aqab, Um Safa, Deir Abu Mash'al and Al Walajeh.

Al-Jiftlik is a Palestinian village in the West Bank's Jordan Rift Valley. The village inhabitants are primarily farmers and Bedouins who make their living on livestock. Within a few kilometers of the villages are the Israeli settlements Massua, Hamra and Argaman. Like several other villages in the Jordan Valley area, it has been continuously subject to land confiscation by Israel, attempts to move residents, systematic harassment like arresting residents of the village and international solidarity activists, as well as attacks on properties by Israeli settlers. Furthermore, the village has been subject to restrictions on development activities, including digging wells and the construction of houses and collecting water.

Al-Ram is a Palestinian town which lies only 7 kilometers north of Jerusalem. The wall runs through dividing the neighborhoods. It is considered the northern suburb of the city of Jerusalem, where most of the institutions of the Palestinian Authority of Jerusalem are located. Many families who live in Al-Ram do so because one partner has a West Bank ID and the other Jerusalem ID or Israeli citizenship. Al-Ram residents pay property taxes to the Israeli authority but do not have the same access to services as Jerusalem residents do.

The town of Kafr 'Aqab is located approximately 13 kilometers north of Jerusalem and 4 km southeast of Ramallah and falls under Jerusalem full jurisdiction. Kafr 'Aqab is predominantly undeveloped, with only 8% built-up and developed. According to the last Palestinian census in 2004, the population is 10,257 people.

Um Safa and Deir Abu Mash'al villages lie less than 30 kilometers outside of Ramallah. Both are mainly populated by residents who depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood. Last, Al Walajeh village is located to the south-west of Jerusalem by 5.8 km, it is considered the western entrance to the city of Jerusalem. About 1% of the village consist of bypass roads for primarily the settlers to use and 0.10% of the village has been confiscated by Israel. It is also predominantly agricultural.

### **Ending early marriage**

Early marriage of girls is a widely perceived phenomenon in many villages of Area C. As with other issues, there is not only one factor that contributes to this, but rather a combination of issues due to the nature of living in Area C. For instance, fears related to the security situation, which in turn contribute to dropping out of school, coupled with the community's conservative attitudes. These factors motivate control over the lives of women living in rural areas of Area C.

Feelings of fear, which thus result on restrictions on freedom of movement, were noted among all the women interviewed for this paper. Primarily, they cited worries of being attacked by Israeli settlers or the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). As a result, many believe that they cannot leave their homes, as something might happen when they are away: *"We are afraid to go out of the house all of us at once because we don't want settlers to come to our houses while we're away. And, we're afraid to leave our children at home alone because we fear the Israelis"*, said Um Muhammad from Um Safa village. Except in emergency cases, few of the women actually move outside or even within their own village. Um Omar, who lives in the Jordan Valley, explained: *"I don't recall going outside the village since I was born except probably once when I left to take my son to the hospital when he was sick."*

Unable to move freely impacts access to services and possibility to participate politically, but for younger women and girls it affects their right to education. Without accessible educational services, especially institutions to pursue education beyond an elementary level, the possibility for young women and girls in Area C to finish their schooling is not always guaranteed. Schools are often located at great distances causing students to have to walk far every day. Women interviewed also reported that the Israeli Defense Forces visit the schools on occasions. Parents and the community cite these fears of military and settler violence as a reason for why they are hesitant to allow their daughters to continue and complete their education. When women and girls do not finish school, they do not have the same opportunities to develop the self-confidence and skillset needed to find work outside the home or the fields. In addition, parents feel that they can become a financial burden.

Add conservative attitudes and behaviors to economic challenges and ideas that it is not safe for a young woman to stay in the home, and a common solution applied by parents is early marriage. Zeinab from Al-Jiftlik village said: *“My dad made me get married when I was 16 to protect me because at that time Israeli soldiers were coming every night claiming that they are looking for wanted people though there were none in our house.”* Early marriage then in turn further limits a woman’s potential for self-development, and becomes the basis for subsequent inequalities because the same opportunities do not exist from the start. As the young woman is married off to a man, the husband is then perceived to be in charge of her protection, which in practice entails preventing women from leaving the house, further restricting her freedom of movement and potential to participate in public life.

### **Increasing women’s political participation**

Political participation – ranging from the more formal participation in elections to gathering thoughts and ideas that can be brought to decision makers – is restricted and threatened in Area C. Security threats, lack of space and presence, as well as conservative attitudes that block women’s political empowerment, including the chance to gather knowledge about political processes, all contribute to controlling and limiting women’s participation. Not only does this compromise women’s rights, but it also contributes to broader disenfranchisement, it compromises representative decision-making processes and a general lack of trust in democratic organizing, when half of the population is not taking part.

Although there are village-based committees present in Area C, many formal institutions lack representation, compromising women’s access to them. Local committees and councils established to collect public opinion and ideas, such as those established in relation to the government program entitled “Palestine: Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State” launched in August 2009, cannot be as present in Area C as in other areas. When access is compromised and it becomes an extra effort to reach decision-makers, the level of participation cannot be the same as in Area A.

Some of the women interviewed stated that they were largely unaware of ongoing political processes. Some women said that their engagement had been ad-hoc, and often forced by a relative. Fatma who lives in Deir Mish’al voted in the Legislative Council elections in 2006. She

says: *“During the elections, my uncle took me out of the house and made me elect people who I don’t even know who they are or what they do. I didn’t understand anything though I was sure that those who are doing an election campaign won’t do anything to serve this country”*. Not being aware or having access to information restricts participation.

Important to note is that, like Fatma, the women interviewed cited a lack of trust in the authorities and in fact an ambivalence towards both the Israeli and the Palestinian authorities. Some expressed that they essentially do not feel like they belong to either side. Trust-building in decision making structures is an important tenant of state building. For the sake of working towards a two-state solution, and the process of consolidating a democracy, such feelings of disconnect must be taken seriously and addressed by ensuring increased levels of participation.

Meeting and discussing needs and priorities is another way to be politically active for women. Few women will bring their individual complaints to decision makers. This underlines why the need for a forum that can bring women’s different voices together, recognizing shared needs and formulating responses to decision makers is so important. Yet in the villages visited for this paper, the women complained that there were no physical places for them to meet and that efforts to establish community based organizations have not succeeded due to a lack of funding. Compounded with conservative values and fears related to movement, even inside the village, few opportunities exist for women to get together and share opinions and ideas, in order to be able to develop their messages.

In some cases, opportunities do arise – but then these outspoken women face the same backlash that many women human rights defenders around the world are subject to. Women from Area C tend to be more present in specific demonstrations against the wall and settlement expansion. These demonstrations often turn violent with the Israeli Defense Forces responding with tear gas, rubber bullets and stun bombs. An examples of these are the meetings in Al Walajah that the popular committee organizes, to which external actors are also invited, aimed at highlighting the difficult situation in the village. However, the IDF often tries to close these events and dissuade the people from continuing to organize and participate in them. *“I was arrested many times and I was threatened to be sent out of the country,”* said Fatima, one of the women who nonetheless still continues to regularly join the meetings.

### **Addressing violence against women (VAW)**

Violence against women is an all too widespread phenomena across both the West Bank and Gaza. Several advancements have been made in moving the problem into the public sphere, but it remains – to a great extent – a private matter. Families often prefer to cover up the problems or to resort to customary practices. While very few cases are thus reported to the police or taken up in the courts, the possibility for developing and implementing multi-faceted, structured responses is more difficult in Area C.

VAW needs to be addressed with an interdisciplinary approach that connects women to the necessary health-, social- judicial- and policing services. To increase the effectiveness and reduce re-traumatization, all interventions should be coordinated from the side of the service-providers through public policy and planning. Yet, when physical presence is limited, this

coordination becomes more difficult and creates another barrier for facilitating women's access to protective services. Furthermore, due to the lack of executive institutions in Area C, follow-up and implementation of policies and law is limited. A speaker at Kvinna till Kvinna's seminar on "Addressing Violence against Women in Area C" raised a concern that when law and policies cannot be implemented, customary law or traditional response mechanisms often fill the vacuum. It is generally understood that such mechanisms do not take the woman's best interest into account.

To begin, social and health services are restricted from establishing physical presences in Area C. As a result, women do not have equal access when compared to those living in other areas. For example, even though few women in general in the occupied Palestinian territories take their VAW-related injuries to health posts for review and documentation, when opportunities are fewer as they are in Area C, the possibility to encourage women to pursue such options are highly reduced.

Special challenges arise when accessing justice is concerned. Only specific areas of some Area C villages and towns (including parts of Al Ram and Beit Jala), where residents have to pay Israeli property taxes, allow Palestinian West Bank ID holders who marry Palestinian Israeli citizens or Jerusalem IDs holder to live together. In these cases, confusion arises when incidents occur over which court the victim should apply to. Furthermore, if appeals are made to Israeli courts, it is often impossible for part of the couple to attend hearings. Such challenges do not only come up in cases to address VAW, but all personal status law related concerns.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Police Service (PPS), whose recently established Family Protection Unit is especially trained to address VAW, does not have free access to Area C. In general, access to Area C requires coordination with Israeli authorities. Women interviewed explained that as a result the police do not usually come to their localities. Yet according to some of the interviews, the situation seems to have gotten somewhat better with the police responding to family disputes. Um Malek explained: *"When my husband had a fight with our neighbor because of building a wall, they were about to hit each other but, thank God, the police came in the right time and stopped the fight."* However, this is a typical challenge, and compounded by the lack of access, that policing services do not see the same need to address different types of violence faced by men and women equally.

The PA's National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women does seek to develop some interventions that would follow up with cases of VAW in Area C, including developing follow-up mechanisms and court decisions for cases of VAW where the perpetrators are living in Area C. However, implementing the National Strategy in its entirety is essentially not possible as it relies on PNA institutions and councils.

In conclusion, social structures and institutions (including informal committees and councils) do respond to some of the problems discussed above. However, they are not formal representatives and questions of accountability arise. Palestinian women's rights organizations who participated at Kvinna till Kvinna's seminar on "Addressing Violence against Women in Area C" said that these bodies are often very patriarchal and conservative in nature and do not

take vulnerable women's needs and priorities into account. Additionally, they do not necessarily account for legitimate representation of the government institutions, and therefore are not sustainable counterparts to the organizations that try to work for social change by changing attitudes.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has sought to consider some of the inequalities that prevail in women's lives in the West Bank's Area A and in Area C. As well as the inequalities apparent between men and women, who both live in Area C taking into account the lack of access to basic services, inability to fully implement rule of law and the security situation.

It can be seen that the rural nature of Area C villages is but one of the underlying causes for some of the inequalities facing women. In addition, the absence of the Palestinian Authority, the restrictions on construction projects and economic development and the fears and security threats that come as a result of being designated as Area C are also essential to the analysis.

These overarching factors can in turn be broken down into several specific points that contribute to the development of these specific inequalities, with some of them being:

- The lack of opportunities for economic development in Area C;
- The absence of basic services, including health and educational services;
- Conservative attitudes and behaviors that seem to be strengthened by feelings of fear and insecurity in the community;
- Concerns related to the security situations which result in further restricting women's opportunities to move freely both within and outside the village;
- The lack of executive authorities who can oversee the implementation of governmental plans and programs;
- No physical spaces for women to meet together and share needs and priorities;
- The unsustainable nature of community based organizations to promote information sharing and raise civic awareness as they cannot secure funding;
- The inability of policing services to respond freely.

They in turn generate inequalities such as early marriage, shortcomings in political participation and the challenges to implement multifaceted approaches to address violence against women. By examining the underlying causes to each of these phenomena, we can more clearly see how living in Area C directly impacts the lives of women and deepen the inequalities.

The international community, national civil society and decision making authorities must continue to unpack the several factors that contribute to the unequal living conditions witnessed in Area C. As with any challenges to ensuring equal enjoyment of rights, the various degrees of causes need to be understood so to better develop a plan that can address them, and thus work in a way that will benefit men and women alike. Although the general focus on examining the impact of living in Area C has been targeting the humanitarian responses, it is clear that rights-based groups and organizations must also continue to work with the women affected.

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