



## IMPACT STORY



# IN GAZA, HELPING MOTHERS REUNITE WITH CHILDREN SEPARATED BY THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Photo: Palestinian Center for Human Rights

Marima\* was desperate after her husband abandoned her with their two young daughters (aged 1.5 and 3), leaving them with no financial support. “I could not afford to buy them diapers or milk,” she recalled. “I went to his family to complain about their son’s behaviour and how he left us and asked them for help for my daughters. My mother-in-law got really angry and forced me to leave their house without my daughters. I left thinking that I would get my daughters the following day because they were so young and needed me. But this was not the case.”

Marima tried to get her daughters back, but she couldn’t afford a lawyer and had nobody to turn to for help.

As in the rest of Palestine, family law in Gaza is based on Islamic Family Law, which regulates Muslims’ marriage, divorce, custody and alimony rights. But the economic situation is dire, and few women can afford lawyers.

Then, some women told Marima about the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) and how it had provided them with free legal aid. Marima had not seen her daughters in three months when she visited the Center for the first time. After hearing her story, one of their lawyers made a custody request on her behalf and the court ruled in her favour.

**Photo above:** Palestinian Center for Human Rights trainee lawyer Haya Al Wehaidi filing a request for her client to be granted custody of her minor children at a Sharia court in Gaza. Photo courtesy of Palestinian Center for Human Rights.

## PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

**Promoting the Rule of Law in Palestine (SAWASYA II)** is a joint programme by **UN Women, UNDP and UNICEF** with funding from the Governments of the **Netherlands, Sweden and Spain**. In partnership with the **Palestinian Center for Human Rights**, it provides women victims and survivors of violence with free legal aid and psychosocial support to enhance their access to justice, recovery and reintegration. Since its inception, the programme has trained lawyers and provided free legal aid for over **25,000** Palestinian women.

In 2020, **9,000** women received legal aid under the programme, a **20%** increase compared to last year. Since March 2020, due to COVID-19, the Center provides legal representation and consultations by phone until in-person meetings are allowed.

The UN Women Palestine Country Office provided technical assistance and support funded with **regular resources**.

For more information about UN Women and our work, see the [Annual Report 2019-2020](#) and the [Regular Resources Report 2019](#).

“I was excited that I would be reunited with my daughters after so long,” she recalls. “But then, because of the coronavirus measures, public institutions—including the Sharia Court and its ruling-enforcement police—shut down and the decision was not implemented.”

When the Gaza Strip shut down in March 2020 to limit the spread of coronavirus in one of the world’s most densely populated areas, the suspension of the courts left many women with no legal backing to see their children. Many ex-husbands took advantage of this legal paralysis to prevent mothers from seeing their children or to stop sending alimony.

### “I feel safe and empowered by the law... I have lawyers standing by.”

In the absence of the courts, Marima’s lawyer activated PCHR’s public relations network and spoke to the judicial police and her in-laws to resolve the situation amicably.

“Luckily, following calls by PCHR and other non-profits [that argued] that urgent cases like mine could not wait until deconfinement, the court resumed work on my case,” said Marima. “I was very happy to finally be reunited with my daughters after more than three months of separation!”

Her lawyer then proceeded to file for alimony. Since her husband had gone abroad to Turkey, they requested support from the public “Alimony Fund” until he returns.

Mona al-Shawa, Director of PCHR’s Women’s Unit, says Gaza’s difficult economic situation prevents many women from accessing justice and rights to custody and alimony. “Most of the women who come to us cannot even afford transportation. The most urgent cases were alimony cases,” said al-Shawa. “The other cases were about children visitation and custody rights.”

In cases of divorce or separation, women have the right to see their children for a limited amount of time when the father has custody rights.

Amina\* is a divorced mother of two young teens (aged 12 and 13) who live with their father. By law, she has the right to host her children for 24 hours twice a month and to see them outside once a week for three hours.

“Although too little, this time was more than what my ex-husband wanted me to have with my children. He did not want me to see them at all,” she said. “When

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN GAZA

- 64% of the currently married or ever married women experienced “at least once” psychological violence by their husbands.
- 26% of the currently married or ever married women experience “at least once” physical violence by their husbands.
- 11% of the currently married or ever married women experienced sexual violence by their husbands.

*Data from a 2019 national survey conducted by the UN system in partnership with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.*

the coronavirus started to spread in Gaza, he used it as a pretext to prevent them from coming to see me.”






Her husband then filed a case to annul Amina’s visitation rights. But she went to court, represented by PCHR, and the court ruled in her favour.

“I used to be afraid of my husband. Now he is afraid of me,” she said confidently. “He knows that I feel safe and empowered by the law. He knows that I have lawyers standing by and that I am ready to sue him again if he tries to prevent me from seeing my children.”

“We have seen how COVID-19 has negatively impacted Palestinian women in so many different ways, including its impact on their child custody rights,” said Maryse Guimond, UN Women Special Representative for Palestine. “In times of crisis, no effort should be spared to help women access justice and reclaim their rights.”

\*Names have been changed to protect the individual’s identity.

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