

# Impact of Corona Pandemic on Social Relations in Gaza Strip\Palestine

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The Corona pandemic, currently invading the world, has put all human societies in the face of a new reality, imposing itself on all social interactions and relations. While facing the brunt of the measures taken by most governments throughout the world, especially the issue of social (physical) distancing, all forms of human gatherings outside families have suddenly disappeared, and society faded in favor of self-sufficiency, thus retreating to the smallest of its units. Along with that, suspicion of all forms of closeness has increased, mixed with a sense of danger and fear of catching the disease.

These preventive measures were introduced in societies that are used to a cultural pattern of trust and closeness, but prolonging these measures of isolation and social distancing has turned people's lives upside down, imposing new rules and postponing their regular routines, which used to make up their daily lives. Activities that were suspended included studying, working, worshiping in places of worship, going to cafes and visiting relatives and friends. Time no longer has a rhythm; days have become similar and the most difficult thing right now is having to adopt new beliefs and serious behavior adjustments in a short period of time.

Historically, social psychology indicates that the

relationship between individuals and society in times of pandemics depends mainly on the extent of the individuals' abilities to create their own realities using awareness tools they possess, and the psychological pressures they feel due to their sense of responsibility towards others. In rare cases of isolation, self and body are reconfigured as concepts of social dimensions, raising ideas about individual salvation, trust in others, death and fear of an invisible threat. Measures of social distancing have so far crippled public social activities, toppling intimate, social and public spaces and changing all standards, and if this goes on for a long time, it may lead to selective social relations within local communities, posing a clear threat to the collective concept and collective identity within the same community.

Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip is not immune to these dramatic transformations which have rocked human societies after the spread of the Corona pandemic. However, the Palestinian specificity in dealing with this pandemic stands out in its implications and reflection on the nature of interactions and social relations.

In their long history of facing disaster and crises caused by the Israeli occupation, which aim at dispersing Palestinians and threatening their social interactions, Palestinians invented several

defensive mechanisms to confront the existential threat caused by the Israeli separation. National cohesion and solidarity were some of the most prominent mechanisms to confront these exclusionary policies aimed at striking the structure of Palestinian society.

The perpetuation of disasters and crises, to which the Palestinian society is exposed, has pushed the level of Palestinian expertise required to deal with such crises and disasters up, automatically leading to high levels of social solidarity, synergy and comfort in the face of all challenges. This is true for the Gaza Strip, which was, and still is, exposed to a range of difficult humanitarian and living conditions caused by the siege and the internal political division, and the very difficult repercussions they left at all levels of living. This in turn is putting Palestinians in a state of conflict between having to abide by preventative measures necessary to face the Corona pandemic and between performing their social duties towards each other.

## Impact of preventive measures on social life in the Gaza Strip:

Preventive measures, especially home quarantine, have led to a set of negative effects, which can be detailed in the following points:

**High rates of domestic violence:** especially with the deteriorating economic conditions in the Palestinian society, particularly in Gaza Strip, and more specifically since people's committing to their homes has led to social and psychological crises affecting individuals and raising levels of tension, anger, and panic between family members. Some preliminary statistics and reports issued by the Ministry of Social Development mark an increase

in domestic violence during the period of home quarantine imposed by governmental agencies.

The Minister of Social Development pointed out that the Ministry's Women's Department received more than 70 complaints from women who had experienced domestic violence in various governorates of the country. Meanwhile, the General Union of Palestinian Women indicated that it had received more than 500 calls from women who had experienced psychological or physical violence during the quarantine period called for by the government. Minister of Women Affairs, Amal Hamad, said that the ministry used to receive a small number of complaints, but now it's receiving hundreds, indicating that psychological violence comes first followed by economic violence.

Hamad added that violence was concentrated more in Gaza Strip, where the ministry received hundreds of complaints from the Rafah Governorate in particular as well as other governorates in Gaza Strip.

These are indicators that seriously threaten family cohesion, especially with the prolonged duration of protective measures and the continuation of the crisis for a longer period of time. This has been confirmed by all international reports on domestic violence, which were recently issued.

## Possible increase in societal violence and high crime rates:

All expectations indicate the possibility of increasing social problems and social violence as well as an increase in crime rates in the Palestinian territories, especially problems between neighbors, problems within extended families, and others, as a result of home quarantine; an increase of more than 58 percent,

according to a poll by the Arab World for Research and Development (AWARD).

### **Increasing burdens on women**

Women bear the majority of the burdens resulting from preventive measures taken to face the pandemic including the disruption of schools, the presence of children at home for long periods of time and having to follow-up with children's education through remote education (learning on-line).

According to the previous AWARD poll, 58% of women said that their household burdens increased, while 40% of men said their household burdens increased. Also, 41% of women stated that childcare obligations increased, compared to 32% of men.

### **Worsening economic conditions**

Economic conditions are getting worse for many social groups, which suffer from financial and social fragility due to deteriorating economic and living conditions. This constitutes an existential threat to them turning the Corona pandemic and the sudden changes surrounding it into a ghost that may destroy fragile groups in society turning them into victims of marginalization in light of focusing on the pandemic and not giving these people enough attention leaving them vulnerable and unable to face the disease, which would cause more complex issues to deal with in the Palestinian society.

## **Pandemic's andemic's impact on the performance of NGOs in the Gaza Strip:**

There is no doubt that this pandemic poses a new

challenge to Palestinians, who, as mentioned above, have been used to confronting crises and disaster, through social solidarity. This requires Palestinian NGOs, which have long been proactive in empowering Palestinian society in the face of disasters, to take a number of measures aimed at protecting the Palestinian society from collapse in the face of this pandemic, the most important of which are:

### **Taking a lead role in enabling the Palestinian society**

to withstand the consequences of the pandemic on the social level, especially that NGOs, over the past years, have become one of the most important arenas in shaping Palestinian relations. They have done so through workshops, seminars and trainings they held as part of their programs and projects aimed at formulating the collective identity of Palestinians, and keeping Palestinians from everywhere, whether diaspora, the West Bank, Gaza Strip of the 1948 land, together, as part of their attempts to reshape the collective identity of the Palestinian people. NGOs have been proactive in using electronic technologies in this regard.

### **The new reality poses a special challenge to NGOs**

in the context of social relations and interactions at the level of local community, especially in the Gaza Strip, which lacks many digital capabilities and thus requires repositioning according to a creative vision in protecting the Palestinian social fabric from fragmentation in the light of the challenges posed by the Corona pandemic.

**NGOs must respond to the challenges posed by this pandemic**, which means they need to take rapid steps towards adopting

programs and projects aimed at strengthening a culture of prevention for members of society, and also adopting a set of urgent humanitarian interventions to protect society, ensure its safety, and face the negative effects of protective procedures and measures. This could overshadow these organizations entrusted to playing a number of complex roles in the face of this epidemic.

**Preparing an economic contingency plan that guarantees the provision of basic needs** to the citizens, especially marginalized groups. This means that the authority should play its social role and bear the responsibility of providing such needs to the citizens, especially since poverty in the Palestinian society is multidimensional. Poverty is not limited to social poverty, but there is also health poverty, where the Gaza community has been suffering due to depletion of its health resources in the past two years due to the march of return and in light of long years of blockade.

**Adapting programs and projects that are responsive to the repercussions of the pandemic.** Many NGOs have transformed their programs and projects according to the nature of the pandemic, and began to adapt their services to the groups affected by these repercussions. In doing so, they began to coordinate with government agencies regarding quarantine centers, providing logistic services for them. On the other hand, NGOs began to put forward contingency plans for dealing with the pandemic, despite the limited funding opportunities available to them, while realizing that they are facing an almost impossible task in the face of a global pandemic, and that they need to be well prepared and ready on all levels including NGOs, government and citizens.

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