

**THE INFLUENCE OF THE ARMED ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT
ON WOMEN IN ISRAEL**

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Isha l'Isha—Haifa Feminist Center is a Jewish-Arab center that strives to change Israeli society by promoting women's rights, empowering women, eradicating all types of violence against women and engendering solidarity between women from different backgrounds.

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1. Introduction

As part of our efforts to promote gender mainstreaming within the local discourses on the armed Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Isha l'Isha- Haifa Feminist Center has initiated a research on the civil, economic and emotional experiences of Israeli women since the beginning of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* (October 2000). This project, implemented between June 2004 and February 2005, focuses solely on Israeli citizens, namely Jews and Palestinians inside the Green Line, including a small sample of Jewish settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories. The research aims to produce an initial documentation of citizens' experiences of the conflict from the subjective perspective of women, whose voice is consistently silenced in matters of war and peace in this region.

Existing research on the effects on Israeli civilian population of the armed conflict, including Palestinian violent attacks inside Israel, has been grossly gender blind.² Very little data is available on injuries of women. Moreover, the few studies that do break down data by gender still do not adopt a gender-sensitive theoretical framework, they treat "women" as a ready-made demographic category rather than considering the political-economic conditions that produce and reproduce it.³ Accordingly, the explanations offered for response patterns characteristic of women ignore their specific responsibilities as emotional and physical caretakers, their relative economic disempowerment, or their exposure to sexual and gender-based violence. The local public discourse on "national security", likewise, is totally

² For Example, Yanay U, E. Bar-David and K. Shayte (2004) "Sense of personal safety among residents of neighborhoods in Jerusalem" *Hevra U-Revaha* 24 (2): 201-218. (Hebrew); Peled-Avraham, Maya, Y. Ben-Itzhak, R. Gagin, E Zomer and E Buchbinder (2004) "Reactions and emotional needs of social workers in the face of a multiple injuries event" *Hevra U-Revaha* 24 (2): 181-200; Zeidner, M. and D. Hadar. 2003 "The second *Intifada*: its effects on the citizens of Israel" *Nefesh* 15-16: 30-35 (Hebrew)

³ For example, Solomon Z., M. Gelkopf and A. Bleich. 2004. "Is terror gender blind? Exposure and reactions of women and men to the *Intifada*" *Hevra Urevaha* 24, 2: 125-145 (Hebrew)

oblivious to women's interests and knowledge. An obvious example is the complete exclusion of gender-based violence (from wife battering and sexual harassment, through sexual assaults, to murder of women by their male relatives) from discussions of "safety". Similarly, studies that attempt to assess the cumulative effects of previous traumas, in cases of injury on national background, systematically fail to consider past exposures to gender-based and sexual violence. This study therefore constitutes a first step in filling in the missing figures, in order to create a theoretical and evidential basis necessary to enable the creation of mechanisms that will reflect the needs of women and girls in Israel.

2. Background

Between October 2000 and December 2004, 1030 Israelis were killed as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the majority (717) of whom were civilians. 330 of the sum total were women and girls, nearly all of them civilians.⁴ 229 soldiers were killed in active duty in the occupied territories, among whom four were women. Although political violence affected most parts of the country, the casualties suffered by the civil population varied according to geographical and socio-economic factors. For example, due to the fact that most suicide bombings took place in major cities such as Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Netanya, Haifa and Hadera, women living in urban areas were far more exposed to this type of violent attack. However, the civilians who actually lost their lives as a result of suicide bombings represent all sectors of society. As to shooting attacks, most of these were directed against settlers living inside the occupied territories, thus affecting women settlers more. Lastly, *Kassam* rockets

⁴ Based on the formal statistics published by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 2004 (www.mfa.gov.il)

launched from Gaza have affected the lives of those living in the southeast of the country, mainly in the town of Sderot.

Israeli-Palestinians, beside their exposure, along with other Israelis, to attacks by Palestinians from the Palestinian Authority, have suffered political violence at the hands of the police and the army: between October 2000 and June 2004, twenty-nine Israeli-Palestinians were killed by the police and the army, including one woman.⁵

Another salient type of violence that affects the Israeli civil population is, as mentioned, gender-based violence, including trafficking in women for the sex industry.⁶ Also significant to mention is the wide distribution of firearms and small arms that circulate among the civilian male population, through compulsory or reserve service in the armed forces, through employment as security guards, and of course through proximity to criminal activities.

There are four major ways in which the armed conflict affects the Israeli civil population on a daily basis: **a.** A large section of Jewish households have at least one member in active military service, including reserve army, which turns homes into regular bases of emotional and other support of those directly participating in the occupation. **b.** In the past four years, the Palestinian citizens in Israel have come under increased exposure to state policing practices, as well as public Jewish hostility. **c.** Civilians all over the country, of all ethnic and class groups are under impending risk of terrorist attacks. However, different areas may become more at risk in different periods, with certain cities having been significantly more prone to attacks. **d.** The ongoing economic crisis has had differential effects on the civil population, with

⁵ From: *Racism in Israel Report*, The Mossawa Center in <http://www.mossawa.org>

⁶ The police estimates that approximately 1,000-3,000 women a year are being trafficked into Israeli sex industry, most of them are from the Former Soviet Union. See: Levenkron, Nomi and Yossi Dahan. *Women as Commodities: Trafficking in women in Israel 2003*, A joint publication of the Hotline for Migrant Workers, Isha L'Isha - Haifa Feminist Center and the Adva Center. Israel, 2003

Palestinians most severely affected and women in general being over-represented in poverty.

Israeli society is ethnically, nationally, and religiously diverse, and is characterized by very high levels of inequality. This study has been attuned to such differences and disparities and at the same time it has aimed to draw general conclusions regarding the women's population. In the findings section and the discussion we will therefore present both general patterns and comparisons between some of the main sub-groups.

3. Working hypotheses

We have assumed that women's traditional cultural role as physical and emotional care-givers of men and children multiplies their potential victimization, since in addition to their statistical chances to suffer direct injury they are highly susceptible to be afflicted by secondary trauma. Women are also more vulnerable to the economic crisis, because of their relative socio-economic disempowerment and their direct responsibility for the daily running of households. Lastly, we have assumed that gender-based assaults intensify national-based injuries in two major ways. First, domestic violence is likely to rise, since women are expected to contain and compensate for the trauma and frustration of men. Secondly, for women who are victims of sexual violence, direct injuries resulting from the armed conflict intensify previous traumas, which nevertheless tend to remain firmly silenced within local discourses on safety. Lastly, note that in the case of women in Israel gender-based violence does not serve as a weapon of war. Instead, it is perpetrated by men from the same ethno-national group as their victims which makes it much harder to name. It has therefore also been our assumption that in times of heightened political violence, women's gendered interests will be silenced even more strongly than usual.

4. Findings

The sample of 512 questionnaires represents a variety of sub groups in Israeli society. It covers Jewish and Palestinian citizens (79% and 20% respectively), with Palestinians including Muslims and Christians, and with Jews including a sample of new immigrants, as well as veteran immigrants and locally born (see appendix A for more details). For each of the two main national groups we sampled women of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, marital statuses, educational levels, and geographical distribution. Special attention was given to regions that were directly affected by Palestinian attacks against civilians, although we did not concentrate on these regions alone. The representation of women on the variables of ethnicity and education was matched to their distribution in Israeli society. Each participant answered a cluster of questionnaires that covered background information, socio-economic status, daily experiences in the shadow of the armed conflict, coping with the situation with children, the Separation Wall, civil participation, national, personal, and gender wellbeing, health, mood, and patterns of reaching out for support. In the coming sections we will present the findings regarding the women's proximity to political violence (4.1.1), their proximity to personal violence (4.1.2), their economic situation (4.2.1), their health and emotional state (4.2.2), their sense of wellbeing (4.2.3), their reaching out for support (4.3), their attitudes toward the Separation Wall (4.4) and comparisons between sub-groups (4.5).

4.1 National Security and Personal Security

The section dealing with the influence of the armed conflict on women's daily life included questions concerning the proximity to political as well as domestic and sexual violence in addition to other criminal assaults.

4.1.1 Proximity to Political Violence

By the term "political violence," we refer to all injuries resulting directly from the Israeli-Palestinian armed conflict. These acts of violence include suicide bombings, shootings, knifings, rocket attacks, military service (active combat), and injuries caused by the military. In other words, we refer to violence inflicted on civilians by armed agents, as well as to active participation of citizens in military activities, *as far as these influence their domestic surrounding.*

As demonstrated in diagram 1 (below), 33% of the women in our sample reported that they or people close to them were exposed to some kind of political violence during the last 4 years. Of these, 24.4% were exposed to violent attack by armed Palestinians, 6.8% were injured during military service, and 4.1% were victims of army or police activities.⁷ Most of these women, moreover, were acquainted with 1-5 persons who had been hurt directly by the armed conflict. In their narratives, women related a range of effects that the political violence has had on them. For example, a woman from Tel-Aviv wrote: *"I get nervous every time there is a suicide bombing in a place where my family might be, since 7 of my relatives have been hurt. Four were killed and three badly wounded"*. Or, as a woman from a kibbutz near Gaza (inside the Green Line) wrote: *"We've gotten used to speaking with all the "noise" around- (shootings, helicopters, Kassam rockets, etc.)"*

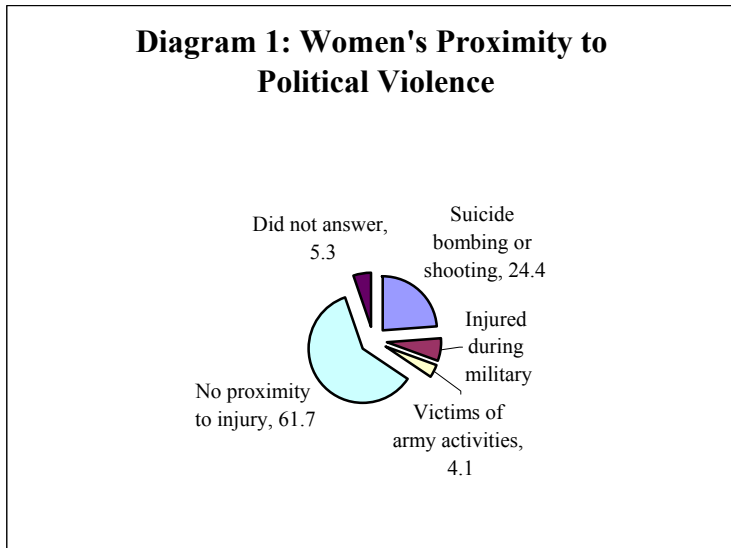
⁷ The question was a multiple choice question, thus women could check more than one possibility

Data available from other sources on the number of Israelis exposed to armed violence against civilians is not consistent. For example, Bleich, Gelkopf and Solomon,⁸ with a similar-size sample which nevertheless included women *and* men, report a higher figure (16.4% directly exposed and 37.3% with family members or friends who had been exposed). This gap may be partly accounted for by our asking on exposure during the past four years only. Conversely, newspaper estimates from December 2004 mention that 11% of the general population has been directly exposed to violent attacks, exclusive of military activities, in addition to 20%, who have been exposed indirectly through friends or relatives.⁹

Among Israeli Palestinians, 13.7% of the women who answered the questionnaire reported some injury in a racist context. Other women referred to the imminent threat of ethnic cleansing, and described hearing racist comments and a generally hostile atmosphere in public places such as buses, the universities, or the work-place. One woman wrote: *"I am afraid of the ongoing political crisis. I feel helpless and sense that things are only getting worse. Also, when I hear comments about the 'demographic threat' and the possibility that Arabs might be expelled from the country..."*.

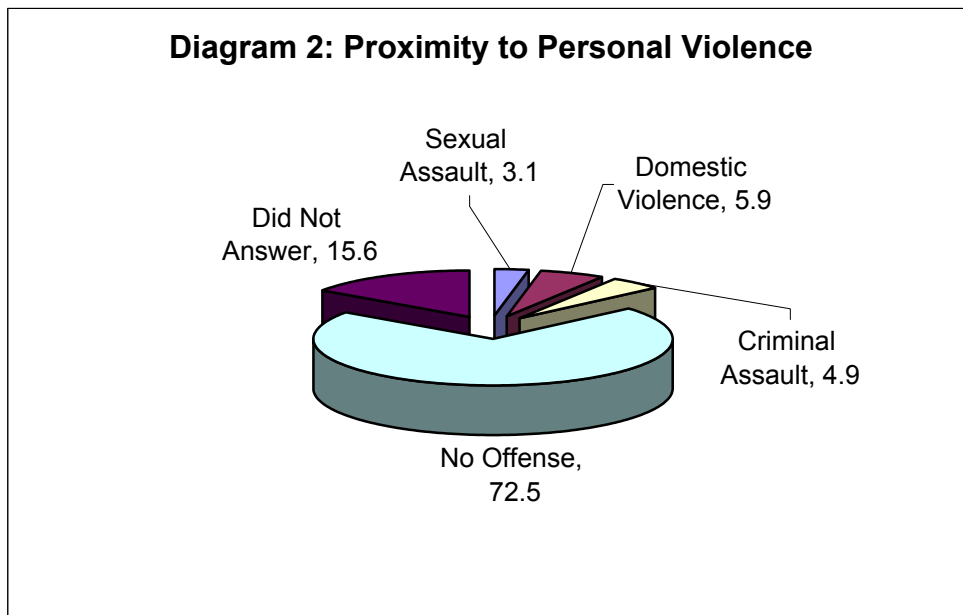
⁸ Bleich, A., M. Gelkopf and Z. Solomon 2003 "Exposure to terrorism, stress-related mental health symptoms, and coping behaviors among a nationally representative sample in Israel" *JAMA* August 6, 612-620.

⁹ From : Ruth Sinai, "Survey: 11% of the Israelis were exposed directly to terror attacks" in *Haaretz*, 03 December, 2004



4.1.2 Proximity to Personal Violence

As seen in Diagram 2, a very different pattern of responses was observed in the section dealing with the women's personal security during the last four years. Among those who answered the question, 10.6% reported some exposure to sexual abuse and domestic violence. Of these, 6.9% reported domestic violence and 3.7% reported sexual offense. 6% addressed the issue of crime. 83.4% stated that they didn't suffer from any proximity to injury. We would like to point out that the actual number of gendered and sexual injuries may be higher than reported. 15.6 percent of the women chose **not** to answer the questions regarding their proximity to sexual abuse and domestic violence, despite the possibility to choose a "no offense" option. The high number of missing values in this section suggests that women were more reluctant to answer the questions about sexual abuse and domestic violence than questions about their proximity to political violence. Likewise, the fact that this questionnaire was distributed only to women older than 18, excludes the experiences of young girls, who are more likely to suffer from sexual abuse. Lastly, note that our question did not encompass injuries that occurred previously to the last four years



For women who were victims of gender-based violence, the political situation is much more difficult. When asked to describe the main reasons for stress one Israeli-Jewish woman wrote: *“I feel stressed as a result of the ongoing struggle with the past as well as with the present situation (I am a victim of incest in childhood)”*. Another example was found in a comment made by an Israeli-Palestinian woman who reported that she was a victim of sexual abuse: *“Why does the questionnaire deal with the Palestinian people and the Separation Wall and not with the lives of women in general- her problems; her mental state in her life and feelings, her oppression and the humiliation she has to bear in order to live? How can I feel for others, if I myself am beaten?”*.

In addition, 20% of all the women who answered the questionnaire reported that they share a household with a person who is a regular soldier, policeman, security guard or reserve soldier. In an open-ended question about the way they are affected by this, women mentioned their fears for sons, daughters and husbands that are in active military service: *“I call my daughter-soldier many times a day to hear how she is, if she arrived safely to the army base after traveling on many buses”*. Or, *“When my*

husband is on reserve duty in the Territories I am of course worried about him and about my son. I keep asking myself, what will happen if...". A very important lateral effect is that nearly a fifth of the women in our sample, in fact live with people who have access to licensed weapons.

4.2 A gender-sensitive description of women's conditions

We found that over the past four years, since the beginning of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, women in Israel have fared poorly in respect to their economic situation, health, and the levels of their emotional strain, as well as in their personal, national and gender wellbeing.

4.2.1 Economic Situation

"The conflict affects the economic situation, and the economic situation affects the morale of the citizens, not to mention the personal security that is endangered --(in which cases money cannot compensate.- In both cases the situation of women is worse than that of men" (Written by one of the women)

Economic hardship is a major cause for distress, particularly for women of disempowered backgrounds. 38% of the women reported that their situation has worsened over the past four years, with 13% being afraid of losing their homes because of debts or loss of income source. Only 8% reported that their economic situation has improved. Israeli women's over-representation in poverty makes them structurally vulnerable to the economic recession. However, as the figure 38% indicates, the damage of the economic recession to women encroaches well beyond the poorest and most marginalized. The earning power of women *across the class-lines* is significantly lower than that of men, which implies an initial disadvantage in times when employment becomes scarce. A second cause of women's economic susceptibility is the fact that they are the ones most directly responsible for keeping

the household functioning, with or without the assistance of men. In times of diminishing income, women stretch and strain their resources to meet the household's social obligations and economic needs. This is, in all likelihood, the case in single-headed households (about 8% of the women in our sample), but in fact most households, including married couples. Thirdly, women are the primary care takers and those who do the bulk of physical housework. 41% reported being the primary care takers of children, 7% are primary care takers also of elderly or sick family members, and 66% do the majority of housework. Notwithstanding this intense level of domestic work, 65% of the women are also breadwinners, and an additional 10% define themselves as secondary breadwinners.

Women's economic situation, in other words, has worsened, despite the fact that they work inside and outside the home. Moreover, a large part of their work is devalued through its reclassification as extended motherly care.

4.2.2 Health and Emotional State

“We, the women, are those who pay the price of war. We are the real victims and nobody thinks how to take care of us, to support us, to rehabilitate us.” (Written by a wife of a man suffering from combat reaction)

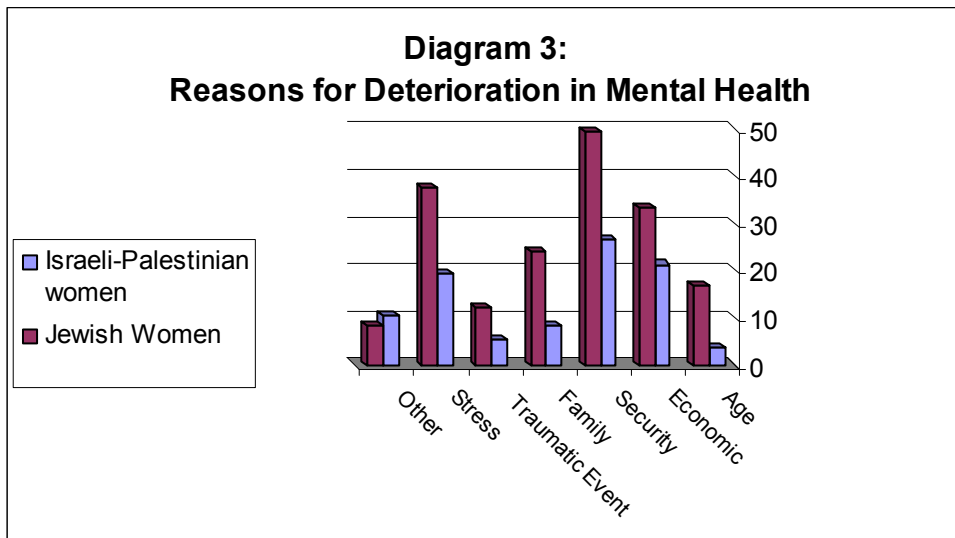
25.5% of women report that their health has deteriorated and only 2.8% report that it has improved. The three most frequent reasons given for the worsening health situation are anxiety 39.8%, age 27.6% and economic situation 22.7%. Jewish and Palestinian women differ in the reasons that they give for their worsening health condition. Whereas many more Jewish women (38.6%) than Palestinian women (25%) report anxiety as the source of their deteriorating health, Palestinian women mention the economic situation as the most frequent reason (26.9% vs. 22.2% of respondents in each respective group). When considering the two national groups

separately, age as a cause for a deteriorating health condition in fact appears only in the third place.

Nearly half the participants (49%) report that their emotional state has deteriorated and only 6% say that it has improved. The most frequent causes for emotional distress are national security (44%) anxiety generally (36%) and economic hardship (32%), with Palestinian women reporting economic hardship as the second most frequent reason, before anxiety. The women's mood, *on average*, was neither good nor very bad. However, some issues stood out as contributing to their distress. These were anxiety, feelings of rage and anger, a sense of betrayal and lack of confidence, helplessness, emotional fatigue, and despair. As one woman wrote: *"I'm afraid since my boy is about to join the army. I am afraid that something will happen and all the family will get hurt at once. And especially, I feel helpless and desperate, a feeling that there is no way to resolve the conflict. I also feel ashamed that there's another people [the Palestinians] that are suffering under our feet. I fear greatly that at once many enemies, who hate us, will invade the country and murder all communities."*

The most glaring finding was that the women's sense of need to be strong in order to support others was the highest rated item on the mood questionnaire. This last finding is supported by the women's report that the burden of dealing with children and talking to them about the political violence is primarily their responsibility. Unlike men, women can hardly avoid facing their children and helping them cope with political violence. 37% of the respondents reported that they deal with the children on their own and another 53% share the responsibility with their husbands. Likewise, a majority of the women (59%) reported that being mothers affected their coping with the political violence in a major way. A woman from the southern periphery town of Sderot, which has been under continuous attacks of quassam

rockets wrote the following: “ *The situation increases the anxiety of women- especially mothers. Some women don’t let the children to go outside the house. So, the children don’t have freedom and friends, and the women find it difficult with all the children in the house.* ”



4.2.3 Wellbeing

The women’s overall sense of wellbeing was poor. Their satisfaction with their personal wellbeing was 58.5% (compared to statistics from other first-world countries, which report 70%-76%), that of national wellbeing was 34.8% (compared to 55%-61% in other first-world countries)¹⁰. Lastly, their satisfaction with their wellbeing-as-women was lower still, only 38%. This scale was constructed for the present study and therefore there are no comparisons to world statistics. The statistical analysis reveals a high correlation between personal and national wellbeing, more so between gender and personal wellbeing, and much higher still between gender and national wellbeing. According to the women's own interpretations, their personal and

¹⁰ Based on Australian Unity Well-being Index, Survey 1: Report 1, June 2001. <http://acqol.deakin.edu.au>

national wellbeing are only moderately correlated with the national-security situation, and their gender wellbeing even less so.

4.3 Reaching Out for Support

“As I see it, with regard to the impact of the conflict upon women- women are not treated in the right way or aren’t treated at all. The conflict is essentially “masculine”, “militarized”, “warlike”. The roles of women are seen as marginal or banal. I found a lot of burnout among women who work with me as teachers, due to the never-ending need to support others- as teachers and as mothers. I expect women’s organizations -- needless to say, policymakers! -- to remember this reality which has to do with all of us.” (A high school teacher from Jerusalem)

Despite the poor mood, high levels of anxiety and general expressions of distress, Israeli women do not tend to seek professional support. To begin with, a large number of respondents 14.3% declined to answer the question whether over the past four years they appealed for professional help. Of those who did answer, only 34.4% indicated that they sought professional support. The three main sources of support sought were mental healthcare (14%), medical care (12.8%), and welfare (9.2%), with women's groups appearing as the fourth source of support. Against this data, it is notable that Israeli women are very keen to seek the help and support of relatives and friends. For comparison, 56.9% of respondents said that they sought the support of friends (of these, 59.8% among Jews and 46.6% among Palestinians), 38.4% appealed to their spouse (39.7% of Jews and 31.5% of Palestinians), and 37.7% appealed to their parents for support (36.8% of Jews and 41.1% of Palestinians). These findings reflect that both national groups are strongly group and family oriented. However, it is possible that women do not seek professional support because the available mechanisms are not adjusted for their specific needs. A woman

from the town of Sderot, wrote: *“It is natural that women suffer more. There is not enough information and here in Sderot the psychological service isn’t good enough”*

4.4 The Separation Wall

We administered a series of questions regarding the women's attitudes toward the wall of separation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (hereafter the Separation Wall), which has stirred much national and international controversy since the beginning of its construction some two years ago. The questions targeted the correlations that women felt between the Wall and their security, human rights violations, and its effects on a future Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The findings will be reported separately for Jewish and Palestinian women, since the two groups clearly differ on this issue.

Jewish women tend to agree, although not very strongly, that the Separation Wall increases security (mean 1.84 on a scale from 1-3, with 1 representing agreement and 3 representing disagreement). As a woman living next to wall (inside the green line) wrote: *“Since the wall was built in the Genin and Gilboa area, the situation in our village has improved- [before the Wall] there had been a shooting attack inside our village which created a long term shock. Also the thefts from the fields have stopped completely.”* They likewise tend to think that Israel ought to complete its construction despite international pressure against it (mean 1.84). However, they are less supportive of the Wall's particular path (mean 2.11). *“It is important to build the wall, but not in this way- the path of the wall needs to be reconsidered. The wall as it is now is very problematic in my eyes.”* wrote one of the women.

Although they moderately tend to agree that the Wall increases the hostility between Israelis and Palestinians (mean 1.9), they do not see it as violating human rights (mean 2.06), and even less so think that it will undermine future settlements with the Palestinians (mean 2.31). The ambivalent approach towards the wall could be seen in the words of a woman from Modi'in (next to the Wall in the Jerusalem area): *"Maybe this is some kind of solution. On the other hand it might perpetuate the hatred and lack of acquaintanceship of both sides. But in the current situation I think we need to try everything. This ambivalence makes it difficult for me to relate to the issue."*

Palestinian women strongly oppose the idea that the Separation Wall increases security (mean 2.88), and reject its particular path even more strongly (mean 2.93). They think that the Wall will impede a future settlement (mean 2.89), yet they generally do not think that international pressure against the Wall is good or relevant to their cause (mean 1.67). In their narratives, Palestinian women emphasized the multiple damage of the Wall to people's lives. However, it is interesting that in their multiple-choice answers, their opinions on whether the Wall violates human rights and whether it increases the hostility between the two peoples are much more moderate (mean 1.43, 1.56 respectively). As an Israeli-Palestinian woman from a small village next to the wall wrote: *"The wall is racist and inhumane because it divides one family into two parts and one country in two. It prevents the farmers from cultivating their own land and earning their livelihood. The international pressure against the wall should be stronger, in order to break it down"*

4.5 Comparisons between sub-groups

Based on the assumption that national, social and personal background shapes women's experience, we conducted further analysis comparing mood, sense of wellbeing, and attitude toward the Wall of Separation between groups of women. The most salient and significant differences were found between Palestinian and Jewish Israeli women, between women from various social economic background, and between women who were in different proximity (themselves or someone close to them) to victims of a terror or armed attack, or to victims of crimes against women. The following is the Analysis of these differences:

Comparison between national subgroups showed that Palestinian women were significantly more depressed (mean of 2.69 vs. 2.03 on a scale of 0-7) and expressed a lower sense of satisfaction from their national wellbeing (1.41, compared to 1.89 among Jewish women). At the same time, they expressed a higher sense of satisfaction from their personal wellbeing (3.9 compared to 3.63 among Jewish women). There was no significant difference between the two groups on gender wellbeing (see diagram 4). As mentioned, Palestinian women opposed the Wall of Separation significantly more strongly than Jewish women (mean of 2.73 vs. 2.02 on a scale from 1-3)

Diagram 4: Comparison of mood, wellbeing and attitudes toward the Separation Wall, Between Palestinian and Jewish women in Israel.

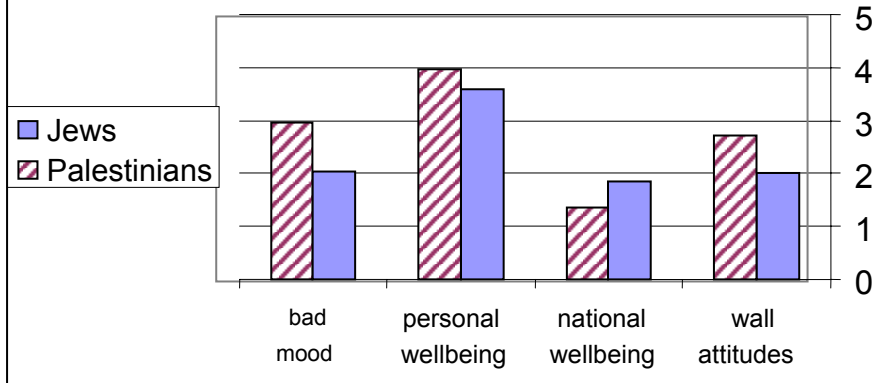
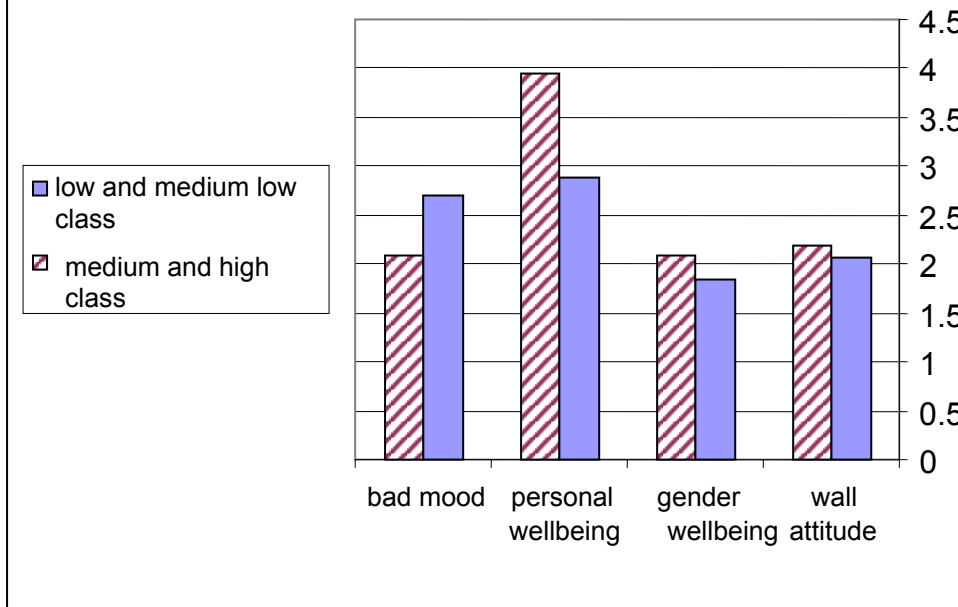
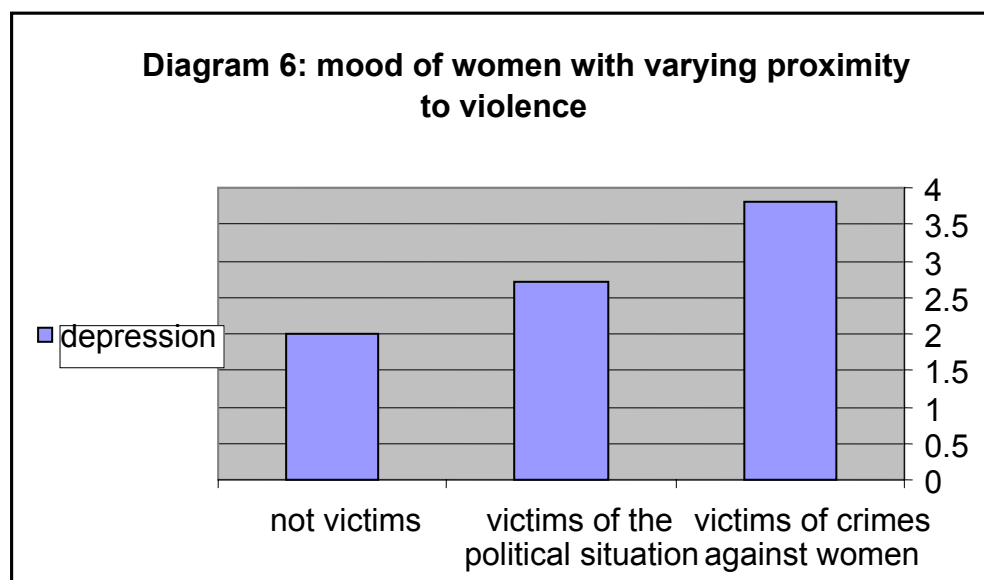


Diagram 5: Mood, wellbeing and attitudes toward the Wall of separation of women from different socio-economic class



Comparison between subgroups of women based on socioeconomic differences showed that women living in poverty were significantly more depressed (2.69 vs. 2.08) and expressed a lower sense of satisfaction from their personal (2.88 vs. 3.9) and national (1.62 vs. 1.81) wellbeing than middle- or upper-middle class women. In addition, they supported the Separation Wall more than the middle- and upper-class women (2.06 vs. 2.19) (see diagram 5).

Analysis of differences between women with various degrees of proximity to violence showed that women who were victims or close to victims of either the political situation or violence against women, were more depressed than women who were not. The most depressed were women who had been victims or close to victims of violence against women (3.18), next were women who had been victims or close to victims of the political situation (2.71), and the least depressed were the women who had not been in proximity to violence (2.01) (see diagram 6).



5. Discussion

An integrative approach to women's lives has revealed some of the practical meanings of national-security issues. Against the gender-blind mainstream local discourse on "security", we argue that the ongoing armed conflict affects women in Israel in specific ways (not necessarily more or less than men), which are important to expose and articulate. In particular, we have found connections between national hostilities and several aspects of women's marginalization, namely gender, socio-economic status, and national affiliation.

5.1 Gender Roles

A preliminary idea about the concerns of Jewish-Israeli women in the shadow of the armed conflict is provided by *Natal - the Israel Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War*. *Natal* operates the only hotline offering immediate assistance to the victims of national trauma. The number of calls to the hotline increased dramatically during the period of the *El-Aqsa Intifada* (Oct. 2000-2004), totaling 11,580 calls, with a significant increase during 2002, the peak of political violence in the region. 6,600 of the calls (57%) were initiated by women, mostly civilians, as opposed to only 41.8% by men. One-third of the women (approximately 2,100) suffered direct physical or emotional injuries as a result of the political violence. Another 20% (1,333 women) were mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and grandmothers of those who had been hurt in a suicide bombing, shooting or military service (recent or in the past). The main issues that concerned the women who called *Natal* were, in descending

order, trauma caused by a specific event, stress caused by the political/security situation, an emotional state that needed attention, and physical injury.¹¹

This depiction reveals that direct injury and care for others who were injured are inextricably connected causes for women's distress following the political violence. While this may well be true for many of the men as well, some gendered patterns are discernible in the appeals to the hotline, which our findings reinforce. In our research too, as reported, women do the lion's share of domestic work, contain their children's anxious responses to the national violence, and fret over their potential injury. Particularly salient was the women's determined sense that they need to be strong for others, and the comparably strong sense of mental fatigue and anxiety. To interpret this finding, we need to look at women's role as emotional caretakers or "dependency workers", to use Eva Kittay Feder's appropriate term.¹²

In Israel, most Jewish and Druze and many Bedouin households have family members in active military service or in the Reserves. Among the general consequences of this situation for gender relations is the expectation that women will extend their dependency work also to "men in the front". This applies primarily to mothers and spouses of soldiers, including reserve soldiers who spend on average a month-a-year in active service, and to spouses of men who had been injured while in service; as we shall see below, it often extends even further than that. Although national discourse habitually hails such women as heroic, and although the state extends varying degrees of financial support to some of them, many of their pressing needs remain unanswered and unseen.

For example, wives of reserve soldiers tell of the emotional, economic, and personal toll that they pay each time their spouses leave the home for a period of several weeks or a month. During such periods, they become single parents, and are

¹¹ We thank *Natal*, especially Efrat, for sharing processing the data especially for this research.

¹² Kittay Feder, Eva (1999) *Love's Labor*. NY and London: Routledge.

expected to halt or seriously compromise their work, studies, not to mention social life, and appeal for the help of relatives if they cannot afford paid help.¹³ Yet the ongoing passages of men between military service and civil life produce also other consequences for women, which are nevertheless much more difficult to share. Many of the men return home after direct involvement in the occupation. They may have practiced acts of brutality against civilians, combated with armed Palestinians in the midst of residential areas, and experienced mixtures of strong hatred, fear, revenge and possibly also guilt. All too often, these shaking emotions, which are never discussed in public, are unloaded on the women at home. They are the ones who contain and absorb their men's anxiety, frustration, and violence. Frequently, they have no recourse to reject this role and no legitimacy to seek protection.

Wives of combat-reaction victims are an extreme case of victims of secondary trauma, whose emotional injury is ignored, at the same time that their social roles multiply. They become sole breadwinners of their households and life-long nurses of their traumatized husbands, who are often violent and suicidal. They have to bear alone all the parenting responsibilities, and are usually extremely lonely, because they face social isolation alongside emotional detachment within their marriage. Yet, they are strongly discouraged from divorcing their husbands.¹⁴

A wife of combat-reaction victim interviewed by Hofit Sofer and Idit Abuksis (2004) tells:

He is like a baby that needs constant tending. It's a 24 hours [job]. After he tried committing suicide it became clear that if I'm not there one of our daughters needs to look after him. I left the house only a year ago, when she felt that things

¹³ See a discussion in the Website: <http://www.beofen-tv.co.il>, regarding "My husband in reserve" (Hebrew)

¹⁴ Divorce rates among wives of victims of combat reaction in Israel are lower compared to their parallels among Vietnam war veterans. See Neria, Y., Z. Solomon, K. Ginsburg, R. Dekel, D. Enoch, and A. Ouri (1998) "Wars and their mental cost: Different aspects of mental trauma among soldiers and civilians in Israeli society" *Havra Urvaha* 18 (1): 125-139 (Hebrew).

were getting a little better. On Friday nights we eat together for our daughters' sake. He forces himself to do that for them. There's no partner. I'm his nurse 24 hours a day. It means doing everything alone. Going to the bank... I have no choice.

Another wife said: *"The Ministry of Defense told me clearly: we treat him, not you. The truth is that I myself suffer from PTSD, only I'm not treated for it... I have absorbed from him many things that I can't process on my own. I wish I had somebody who could release me of all this."*¹⁵

In an article titled "Is terror gender blind?", Zehava Solomon, Mark Gelkopf and Avi Bleich argue that although men are more exposed to terror, women in Israel are much more susceptible to develop PTSD in the aftermath of terrorist attacks; they are significantly more depressed, and have a much lower sense of self-efficiency.¹⁶ Concomitantly, men's and women's coping strategies differ. Men are problem focused, while women are emotion focused. Men respond to events of political violence by collecting details about the event and talking about what they can *do* (even when they are not in a position to do anything). Women, on the other hand, call their friends and relatives to find out that they are safe, and talk about the emotions that the event stirs in them. Similarly, although we did not compare women and men, we too have found that women in Israel suffer very high levels of anxiety, depression, despair, helplessness, and that their mood generally is not very good.

It is our contention that the explanation for women's strong emotional distress, as well as for their coping strategies, lies in the gender division of emotional labor in the family. While men's coping strategies may be interpreted as enabling them to

¹⁵ Soffer, Hofit and Idit Abuksis (2004) *Drafted without an order; the lives of wives of combat-reaction victims*. Term paper under the instruction of Dr. Shaul Kimhi. Tel-Hai Academic College (Hebrew).

¹⁶ Solomon Z., M. Gelkopf and A. Bleich (2004). In this study, men scored significantly higher on combined measures of personal exposures and personal injury, as well as exposure, injury, or death of a friend or a relative.

“preserve important mental resources” and therefore serve as an effective block against the pathological influences of stress (according to Solomon, Gelkopf and Bleich), they may also be interpreted as gross denial. Such denial, moreover, implies ignoring the overall needs of other family members, particularly children, aging parents, or previously traumatized members, for emotional containment and processing. Catering to these needs is the cultural role of women. As we have seen, women, in their capacity as dependency workers, contain, absorb and respond to the emotional needs not only of their children, but often also of their male partners. It is therefore plausible that the more the men deny their own stress, the more the women will end up containing it. Women's emotionally oriented coping strategies, in other words, should be considered as a crucial reaction that allows them and their close surrounding to cope with the stressful situation of mass violence in which they live.

5.2 Implications of Gender-Based Violence for Political Violence

Women's life in the shadow of the armed conflict cannot be separated from their actual or potential exposure to gender-based and sexual violence. The data from the *National Hotline for Battered Women* and the *Association for Rape Crisis Centers in Israel*, shows that between Oct. 2000 and Dec. 2004 there were 33,200 new calls from women who reported sexual assaults and 20,000 new calls regarding domestic violence.¹⁷ These figures represent an overall **increase** in the number of women seeking information, emotional support and legal advocacy regarding sexual, physical and emotional abuse. At the same time, the number of women who sought help was **consistently lowest** during the peaks of the political violence . For example, in March 2002, there were 10 suicide bombings inside Israel in which 77 civilians were killed.¹⁸

¹⁷ The figures regarding domestic violence reflect only the *National Hotline's* data. Other women's organizations operate similar hotlines around the country, from which data was not collected.

¹⁸ The total number of Israelis killed on March 2002 was 135, including soldiers and settlers.

During that month, the number of women who called the *Hotline for Battered Women* significantly dropped to 217, compared to a monthly average of 293 that year. Women living in the Jerusalem area, where five of the bombings occurred, called the least-- only 41, 17 less than the average.

As mentioned, 10.6% of the women, reported exposure to sexual assault or domestic violence (9% of the entire sample, if we consider the large number of those who avoided answering). Of them 6.9% reported domestic violence and 3.7% reported sexual assault. This figure is only slightly lower than national estimates, as brought by parallel sources. In the year 2000, JDC-Brookdale conducted a survey based on self-reporting of a nationally representative sample of women over twenty-two years old. That survey revealed that 2 percent of adult women in Israel had at some time been victims of rape, 4 percent were victims of sexual violence, and 8 percents were victims of physical violence. Similarly to our own qualifications (section 4.11) the researchers of this project too warn that their estimation is minimal.¹⁹ It is possible, moreover, that the sense of shame and de-legitimacy that hinders women from reporting gendered and sexual assaults is particularly great in times of national crisis. The consistent patterns reported by the hotlines, of periodical drops in women's appeals around the major holidays, on weekends or, as mentioned, in times of increased national violence, suggest a cultural diktat that women should always put the collective interests first.

Killings of women comprise another poignant link between gender-based and national violence. During the years 2001-2004, 90 Israeli women were **killed by family members**. Most of them were killed by their male-partner (husband, ex-husbands, or boyfriend) and some by other relatives (uncles, fathers, brothers or cousins). These figures include 'Honor Killings' of Israeli-Palestinian women who do

¹⁹ In Halperin-Kadari, Ruth (2004) *Women in Israel; A State of Their Own*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. P 192-3.

not appear in the formal police statistics of femicide. The number of women killed in their homes during the period of the *Intifada* was higher than the four years before 2001 (78 women).²⁰ We find it significant that 38 of them were murdered by firearms, (a licensed gun or a pistol in eleven of the cases), as opposed to other kinds of weapons. The circulation of weapons among men in Israel has indeed expanded during the last *Intifada*, as thousands have joined private security companies, which are in charge of the routine security checks in every public place throughout the country. Employment in these companies is not properly regulated to exclude men with violent or psychiatric histories, as can be learned from several murders of women that were perpetrated by security guards.

Lastly, it is well established that psychological and emotional injuries following exposure to political violence are magnified by past traumas.²¹ For the female civilian population, past exposure to gender-based or sexual violence is an important source of trauma that needs to be taken into account. In certain cases a trauma caused by political violence can trigger an older trauma, resulting in a much more severe and complex mental state. A recent case reported by one of the rape crisis centers tells of a woman who, in the aftermath of a suicide bombing to which she was exposed, got her first flashback of incest while she was being treated in the hospital for trauma. This woman was then referred to the support group of the rape crisis center. As we show in diagram 6, women who had been victims of gendered or sexual violence were the most depressed. This finding, at the least, suggests that such women are particularly vulnerable to the political violence.

²⁰ Data received from Shevy Barzilai, Private Data on *Femicide in Israel 1990-2004*.

²¹ For example, Solomon, Z. (1989) "The war after the war: The influence of soldiers' PTSD on their family members" *Hevra Urvaha* 10: 110-119. (Hebrew); Neria et al (1998).

5.3 Disempowered or marginalized backgrounds and vulnerability to political violence

Our findings indicate that large numbers of women suffer the daily consequences of the economic crisis, a situation which we interpreted above as resulting from their lower earning power and primary responsibility for the functioning of households. A study that tested the sense of personal safety among residents in West Jerusalem reaffirms the relevance of the economic factor. It reports a significant and positive link between sense of personal safety and income level.²² Within the categorical economic disempowerment of women in Israel, those who are of lower socio-economic status are clearly more vulnerable. We noted the depression and lower satisfaction of wellbeing among women living in poverty. Several additional connections can be made in this respect.

First, of the women who expressed anxiety that they may lose their homes, the primary reasons were economic distress and racial discrimination. This is different from popular representations in Israeli media, which highlights the anticipated traumatic loss of homes following the evacuation of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip and potentially from other parts of the West Bank.²³ Second, men from marginalized groups in Israeli society are over-represented among those injured and killed in active combat. Consequentially, women from these groups are more susceptible to bereavement as well as to economic and social loss.²⁴ Third, the transportation choices of poor women are limited, making them easy targets to suicide

²² Yanay Uri, Emuna Bar-David and Keren Shayte (2004) "Sense of personal safety among residents of neighborhoods in Jerusalem" *Hevra U-Revaha* 24 (2): 201-218. (Hebrew)

²³ Only 2% are afraid that they may lose their homes as a result of settlements' evacuations as opposed to 13% who reported fear that was based on economic reasons.

²⁴ Most of the soldiers killed during the last 4 years came from the lower socio-economic echelons, including a high percentage of Mizrahi Jews, new immigrants and Israeli-Palestinians (mostly Druze and Bedouin). From: Yagil Levi, "The war of the remote", *Haaretz*, 4, February, 2005

bombings in busses. Fourthly, in some new conflict regions the high exposure of residents to armed attacks is combined with long-standing poverty, unemployment, and marginalization. The southern peripheral town of Sderot is a clear example.

In the town of Sderot, where half of the women reported that they are unemployed and 35% mentioned that their economic situation has deteriorated, the levels of personal, national and gender wellbeing were significantly low. This group which has been exposed to rocket shootings from Gaza in the last year, is also comprised of Mizrahi, religious and new immigrant Jews, mainly from a low socio-economic background.

Lastly, Palestinian women citizens of Israel, as a distinctly marginalized and multiply disempowered group, were also found to be particularly harshly affected by the conflict. In addition to their vulnerability because they are over represented among the poor and lower-middle class, they are often caught in a double bind when facing political violence. As Israelis, they are as exposed as others to random suicide bombings and shooting attacks. Yet as Palestinians they are also at risk of becoming the targets of mob's rage after each attack, in addition to their routine exposure to racism. 13.7% of our Palestinian respondents reported having suffered injury on a racist background and 7.8% reported suffering offense at the hands of the armed forces. Several women traced their anxiety and despair to the racist atmosphere and expressed pessimism with respect to the future. As reported, Palestinian women were significantly more depressed than Jewish women and expressed a lower sense of satisfaction from their national wellbeing. Yet their personal sense of wellbeing was actually higher, and they were overall much less anxious than Jewish women. This somewhat surprising finding may be partially attributed to different self-expectations and more restrained norms of expressing and evaluating personal feelings.

6. Conclusions

“I think that women can influence our society very, very much, and the solidarity of women can influence the most- because women have more power than men. This is reflected in the fact that women bare children and raise them and also work outside and inside the home, in short, they work full time. This is why women have more power to influence, because they understand each other. I have many, many things to add, and am sorry the page is short and the time is out. May they be many researches like this is Israel!” (Written by a woman from Sderot)

The purpose of this report is to break the silence that has been imposed upon women as part of the Jewish-Israeli discourse on national security. By presenting the different voices of Israeli women we also wish to challenge the political reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is male-dominated, patriarchal and gender blind.

At the back of the questionnaire we asked the women whether they had something to add that wasn't mentioned beforehand. Many women chose to tell us about the way they see the role of women in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and revealed their full understanding of the marginalization of women's experiences. Others chose to share their belief in women's power and potential, being those who maintain society and take care of children, husbands and communities. Their hopes for the future are connected to a wide range of issues, from their love of children, family and friends, through employment and economical safety, to belief in God and sense of national security. Women's concerns, in other words, are inextricably connected to their position in the family and in society.

A few points ought to be emphasized in conclusion:

A. The effects of political violence on women are potentially intensified by their roles as emotional and physical care-takers of children, men, and the elderly, by their susceptibility to gender-based and sexual violence, and by their economic disempowerment.

B. Despite their high level of mental distress and emotional fatigue, women do not tend to reach out for professional help, possibly because available programs are not appropriately adjusted to their realistic needs. While they do tend to appeal to friends and family for support, this general social solidarity does not necessarily suffice in cases of acute injuries, as was exemplified in the discussion.

C. Women from marginalized groups, namely those living in poor socio-economic conditions, Palestinian women, and many new immigrants and Mizrahi women are particularly prone to suffer the effects of the conflict, through economic deterioration, loss of family members in military confrontations, and in specific areas also increased exposure to attacks on civilians.

D. Despite their persistent silencing within the hegemonic discourse on national security, women in Israel have a political voice. Their knowledge bears crucial contribution to the management of the conflict and to its solution.

Appendix

Description of main socio-economic characteristics of the sample

Mother tongue	Hebrew 74.3%	Arabic 20%	Other 5.7%
Religious affiliation	Jewish 79.3%	Muslim 13.9% Druze 2%	Christian 3.9%
Levels of religiosity	Non-religious 52.5%	Observant 28%	Religious 19%
Place of Birth	Israel 77%	Other 23%	
Age	Mean 38 years	Range 18-91	
Marital status	Married/living with partner 57%	Never married 26%	Divorced 13% Widowed 3%
Children	65% have children	Average number of children per woman was 3	
Education	Average 14 years	Range 0-26	
Employment	Employed 74%	Retired, unemployed or outside the work force 26%	
Class (self-definition)	Low 8.4% Middle-low 17.4%	Middle 48.6% Upper-middle 21.1%	Upper- 2%
Economic situation since October 2000	Worsened 39%	Remained the same 52%	Improved 8.4%
Breadwinners	Sole 24%	One of two 41% Secondary 10%	Not supporting 23%
Afraid of losing their homes	18.7%		
Of these	For economic reasons 13.1%	For settlements evacuations 2%	For anti-Arab measures 2.4%