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Kate McDonald - Israel December 2018

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Youth Unemployment & Gender-Based Violence in the Gaza Strip The Church of Scotland Delegation to Gaza, October 2018

I've now been to Gaza four times, three times this year alone. But no matter how often I'm there, nothing quite prepares me for the experience.

I get up early as the sun is rising, turn on lights which always work when I want them to, take a shower with plentiful hot clean water, make myself a strong coffee, and drive down the coast along the smoothly paved motorways of Israel to the Erez border crossing.

Permit papers in hand, we navigate Israeli passport control and walk the fifteen minutes through no-man's land to the Palestinian Authority entrance. There our passports and PA permissions are checked and our driver from the Near East Council of Churches meets us, taking us a couple hundred metres to the Hamas passport control. Again our passports and papers are recorded, and we make our way along the wide pot-holed road to Gaza City, passing carts filled with produce and goods, drawn by horses and donkeys. For the next 48 hours or so, I sit in meetings where lights flicker on and off as electricity fails and generators kick in, drink only bottled water (using it also to brush my teeth), and use hand-sanitiser even after washing my hands.

Such a short distance, yet I always feel as though I've entered another world.



On our visit in October, there were just four of us from the Church of Scotland and Methodist Church (UK), which meant that our schedule felt more spacious, and we were able to ask more questions and gather more information from our partner organisations.

One project we visited was the Women's Programme Centre in the Nuseirat Refugee Camp, one of UNRWA's gender initiative programmes. It provides vocational training to women, including sewing, embroidery and hairdressing. On site is a nursery for the children of the women who work there, and a kindergarten for the community. Though the centre aims to be self-sufficient in its funding, it still relies heavily on outside support, and recent UNRWA cuts have meant that eight people no longer receive a salary (\$400/month). Because unemployment in Gaza is so high (around 60-65% for young people and women) and job opportunities so rare, they have chosen to continue working for the centre on a voluntary basis. 'What else would they do,' Samah, the Programme Coordinator, asked. 'Sit at home and look at Facebook? They'd rather do something good for the community.'

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Many of the women's husbands are also unemployed, and in a conservative Muslim society, it's not uncommon to have five, six or seven children. 80% of families rely on food aid.



Some of the women in the sewing department showed us how they recycled textiles, cutting out beautifully embroidered dresses and repurposing them as detailed collars and sleeves for new abayas. The kindergarten was colourfully decorated, and fabric learning tools lined the walls, upcycled on site from old clothing and linens. The kindergarten used to have 50 students, but now only has 21. Families struggle to pay the fees of 200NIS (\$50)/4 months, so the centre subsidises many of the children who attend.

As we walked around the large building, we saw several closed doors. 'Those programmes have had to stop because we didn't have the funding,' Samah explained.

In 2006 UNRWA established a legal aid clinic at the centre as part of a job creation programme. However, three lawyers there have been working without pay since February because of the funding cuts. They remain committed to the centre and the women they assist, and by continuing their work, they maintain their professional qualifications and links within the legal community.

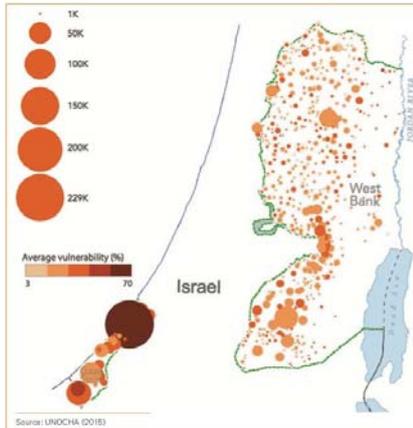
While we were speaking with them, a young woman with a baby came in seeking legal assistance. Her family is based in the West Bank, and following trouble with her husband and his family, she is now living with her uncle. Her husband is not paying maintenance for the child, and the centre is trying to solve the problem by mediation rather than taking him to court, partly because court fees of 50NIS (\$15) are prohibitive for both the centre and the young woman. Her's is sadly not an isolated case.

Gender-based violence and domestic abuse are prevalent throughout Gaza (as can be seen in the shocking infographic from the UN Population Fund on the next page), and each centre we visited - from family health centres, psychosocial programmes, vocational training centres, and hospitals is trying to raise awareness and address both the violence itself and the underlying issues of unemployment and poverty which often lead to an increase in abuse. In the waiting room of one of the Near East Council of Churches' family health clinics, a woman was giving a lecture about GBV to the mothers who had brought their children for medical assessments.

One of the NECC workers explained the context: 'Imagine being a father who has no work, who feels worthless because he cannot support his family. And then to have his child or his wife ask for something, maybe something so basic — money for a small toy or for food — and he cannot provide it. The anger the men feel against themselves they then take out on the wife and children.' High levels of unemployment, severe poverty, an intractable political situation all lead to stress in the home which sadly results in violence.

The Vocational Training Programmes for young men run by the NECC offer psychosocial support as well as trade skills. Posters hang in the hallways raising awareness of the signs of domestic violence, and the psychosocial counsellor works with the boys on anger management and non-violent communication as well as trauma counselling. These efforts combined with the relatively high employment rate for their graduates are hoped to help break the cycle of violence.

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The Gaza Vocational Training Centre trains 14-17 year old boys, many of whom are school dropouts. It offers places to 25 boys a year to learn trades such as carpentry and metal-work. 75% of the boys being trained are from poor families in marginalised areas around Gaza City, and some of them walk up to 4km from their homes to the training centre because they cannot afford the shekel or two (\$0.25-0.50) for transportation.

They study six days a week from 7.30am until 2pm, and in addition to the trade, they also learn communication skills in order to be able to enter the workforce fully prepared to interact professionally with both employers and clients.

We were there at midday, and at 12.20, the electricity went off, casting the workshop into darkness. Less than a minute later, lights flickered on again, and work resumed. We walked upstairs to a classroom where twenty or so boys were sitting at desks, straining to hear the teacher over the noise of the generator outside the window, now powering the facility.

In another workshop, a group of boys were working on air-conditioning units, learning how to assemble and install them on site because there is no factory in Gaza. A classroom down the hall was filled with computers and new office equipment, still covered in plastic wrapping and recently donated. There the boys will learn computer skills and engineering CAD programmes.

The Qarara VTC focuses on electrical training, from wiring to aerial cabling to solar panel installation. Each year, it receives 300 applications for the 35 places it offers. The students pay 600NIS (\$160) a year, and the cost of the programme per student is \$2000; the difference is subsidised by the NECC and its funding organisations.

The employment rate for those who have completed a training programme through the NECC Vocational Training Centres is over 75%, which is impressive in a context where unemployment stands at a staggering 60-65% for those aged between 15 and 29.

Each time we go to Gaza, I wonder how things will ever improve.



Over and over we heard from our partners how they were trying to address the complex needs of their communities holistically, and I was deeply moved by their ability to do this with compassion and hope, despite their extremely limited resources in such a challenging context. Merely providing food or medicines or clothing would be a temporary relief but would not be a sustainable long-term solution. Because our partners are Gazans themselves, they can see clearly the way in which issues of health, sanitation, poverty, transportation, unemployment and violence intersect and intertwine.

Of course, many of these needs would be alleviated if there were radical change to the political situation, if borders were opened and both trade and people allowed to enter and exit more freely. Qatari aid and Egyptian negotiations are easing some of the pressure for now, but a more

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lasting solution must be found. The long-term tensions on the border between Gaza and Israel have made both sides feel vulnerable, and wariness and weariness are now entrenched.

Nevertheless, our partners persevere, doing what they can in the circumstances, and doing so with kindness, honesty, and a deep love for the people they live amongst and place they live in. The support of the Church of Scotland (through the Middle East Committee, congregations, and individuals) may seem but a small contribution, but we saw firsthand the good stewardship of our offering and the tangible ways it helps our partners and friends do invaluable work in their communities.

Rev Kate McDonald,
St Andrew's Galilee blog: www.imaginationofpeace.com

For more information on gender-based violence and the connection between poverty and domestic abuse in Gaza, UNOCHA and UNFPA have produced some excellent reports: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/addressing-gender-based-violence-gaza-strip>
<https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Tackling%20violence%20against%20women%20and%20girls%20in%20Gaza.pdf>

NOTE

You are receiving Kate McDonald's report along with John McCulloch's as they were written separately but both complement each other.