

The issues of sexual and domestic violence are not openly discussed in Palestinian society; stereotypes and myths abound, and victims may be wholly or partly blamed by their families, communities, and by the authorities. Palestinian society's tendency to blame the victim in cases of sexual or domestic violence erects a barrier of shame and fear; many women who are sexually assaulted do not tell anyone about their traumatic experience and do not turn to any official bodies for help, and younger women and children tend to feel isolated and embarrassed and do not know where to seek help. Of the hundreds of women who turn to Sawa's Hotline for help each year, 70% do so anonymously and only 20% then file a complaint with the police and/or turn to welfare services for further assistance. Sawa has therefore recognized that an urgent message of outreach and empowerment needs to be rapidly spread to those who are most vulnerable with regard to sexual and domestic violence about where and how to seek help. In particular, in view of the Palestinian legal system, which is part of a wider infrastructure that remains unfinished and fragmented due to ongoing violence and regional instability, it remains all the more important that Palestinian women know that they have a "port in the storm" when the Rule of Law appears on many occasions to be de-prioritized behind regional violence and national infighting. Law enforcement are all too often willing to view cases of violence against women and children as private-sphere disturbances rather than public-sphere crimes. The project "Promoting Gender Equality Among Palestinian Lawmakers" seeks to promote the rights of victims of gender-based, sexual, and domestic violence to obtain compassionate care and meaningful legal redress.

Our project is a part of Sawa's broader mission to encourage public awareness and discussion of these matters, creating a social environment where victims are unafraid to seek psychological help and legal justice. Thus, our project includes education for both legal authorities and members of the public. During the project period, police officers and public prosecutors chosen by the Palestinian Ministry of the Interior participated in training courses designed to challenge their prejudices about sexual and domestic violence, help them shape new perspectives, and teach them effective methods of investigating and prosecuting these crimes. Coursework emphasizes treating victims as victims rather than participants in the crime, explains typical characteristics of abusers, and offers methods of safely interviewing them to gather information. The course is based on similar courses given elsewhere in the world, adapted for the Palestinian context. In 2009, 82 officers and 15 prosecutors have received training. Participants have indicated that the course brought them new information, changed stereotypes they had previously held, and benefited them professionally. However, some expressed the wish for a longer training course.

Trainings are held in hotel conference facilities over 3-day periods. Follow-up meetings are held some months after the conclusion of each training cycle. The processes are fully evaluated, including questionnaires for participants. The training process aims to create a cadre of law-enforcement and legal professionals who are both equipped and committed to deal with the issues surrounding violence against women in Palestinian society, as well as spearheading the movement to end it via legal practices. Sawa hopes that they can reshape institutional policies and practices to be allies to advocates in

improving safety for battered women. This component helps to facilitate application of existing law. It is part of a longer-term effort by Sawa and other organizations to ensure that laws protect victims at all times, which also includes campaigning for changes in the law when necessary.

The second component of the project is Women's Empowerment Groups, intensive long-term workshops for women. In 2009, thirty sessions took place for 49 participants in and around Bethlehem and East Jerusalem. Guided by a Sawa facilitator, participants discuss ice-breaking introductory topics such as their preconceptions on gender and violence, their families, relationships, and health, and their body images. When the women feel comfortable with each other and the facilitator, they are able to delve into more sensitive matters such as the different forms of violence, trauma and post-trauma, and an examination of gender-based violence case studies. These workshops aim to increase women's awareness of their rights, to educate them regarding sexuality, sexual health, domestic violence and gender role stereotypes, and to help them learn creative ways to cope with their lives as women, wives, and mothers. Sawa facilitators work hard to foster a confidential and non-judgmental environment in which participants can feel safe and speak freely. Participants are informed of Sawa's call center telephone counseling services and reassured that there is assistance available should they experience violence of any type. In addition to the Hotline, Sawa offers face-to-face counseling, referrals, and accompaniment to police or medical services. Sawa's workshops create small but significant changes in the lives of individual women in the short term.

Changes in public policy and social attitudes may take decades; the benefits reach women only slowly. Our counseling and accompaniment services assist people in acute distress, preserving mental health and even saving lives. A consistent and aggressive advertising campaign is necessary to ensure community awareness of Sawa's services and of the legitimacy of seeking help in the event of violence. Sawa advertises its services regularly in various media. This project included a budget for newspaper advertisements and radio spots. Ads appear in popular national newspapers and spots are broadcast on stations that reach all parts of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza. These ads explain Sawa's services to the public and give our call center contact information. Many callers mention our advertising efforts as their catalyst for calling us.

This project is only one portion of a wider cooperative effort by Palestinian women's rights and anti-violence groups to shed light on abuses endured by vulnerable populations, and to offer appropriate protection and care for victims as well as meaningful deterrents for perpetrators. We hope to continue our partnership with the Open Society Institute and to offer similar training courses in the future. We also hope that Sawa's cooperation with the Palestinian Authority on law enforcement training will continue for many years to come. Changing attitudes among those in authority will help to lay the groundwork for future policy change.