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Age of despair or age of hope?

Older Palestinian women's perspectives on health in midlife

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Background

Globally, women's experiences and understanding of health in the transition from reproductive to post-reproductive ages are understudied. Evidence is focused on high income settings, and little is known about women's perspectives in the Palestinian context. This knowledge gap is reinforced by quantitative data collection efforts, which tend to focus on women of reproductive age. This study adds to our understanding of Palestinian women's midlife experiences, looking beyond reproduction and childbearing. It focuses on the ways in which older Palestinian women understand, explain and manage their midlife health.

Methods

35 women aged 40-55 were interviewed in-depth using a life-history approach. Participants were sampled purposively to maximise heterogeneity. They include women living in the north, south and central West Bank, and women living in rural, urban and camp settings with diverse economic and social conditions. Ethical approval was obtained from Birzeit University and the London School of Economics. We analysed women's verbatim narratives to identify key themes and subthemes.

Findings

Many women articulated a positive view about ageing and midlife as a natural process. Perspectives were often linked with their own mothers' experiences, the main source of knowledge about the menopause. Women reported a combination of indigenous and biomedical knowledge and practice, often beginning with popularized medical practices and herbal remedies. While most women recognize faith and *tawakul* (reliance on God) as ways of coping with ill health, they also emphasize the need for physical activity and nutritious *baladi* (locally grown, native, organic, chemical-free) food, often romanticised as part of a generational past.

Good health was conceptualized as a combination of physical well-being, indicated by effortless movement and a relaxed psychological state of mind (*raha nafsiyeh, hadat al-bal*). In times of hardship, health issues were often connected to life events, and for those women with children they appeared to provide a protective effect in coping. Local idioms of health, including *hamm* (worry, disquiet, upset, uneasy, grief, anxiety, sorrow, affliction), *za'aal* (a combination of feelings including anger, distress, frustration, grief, incapacitation, worry, and sorrow), *nakad* (distemper, bitterness, disturbing, troubling and somber), and *istislam* (resignation, giving in) characterized women's descriptions of ill health. Exposure to political violence, living in fear and

economic hardship were widely understood as impacting mental and physical health.

Discourses surrounding women's experience of this transition included 'age of despair', 'age of hope' and 'age of power'. Some women referred to this period as literally the cessation of menstruation (the menstrual cycle as having '*split from her*') or that 'aging has entered' (*el-kabar 'abar*). While value laden, it is important to recognize that not all women feel as the words indicate. 'Age of despair' was often ridiculed but still used by women for ease of reference.

Interpretation

Despite wide variation in circumstances (place of residence, marital and socio-economic status), women's narratives are underpinned by consistent perspectives as to what good health entails. Our analyses reveal the pluralistic approaches that older Palestinian women take towards health, and the need to better understand women's health outside of their reproductive years.

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