

Doaa Hammoudeh and [Ernestina Coast](#)
Age of despair or age of hope? Older
Palestinian women's perspectives on
menopause

Workshop Item

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Age of hope, power or despair?
Palestinian women's menopause narratives

Doaa Hammoudeh and Ernestina Coast

Thank yous

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Co-investigators

Rita Giacaman

David Lewis

Tiziana Leone

Yoke Rabaia

To understand how women in the West Bank of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) conceptualise, experience, and manage their midlife health.

Methodology

35 in-depth life-history interviews with women aged 40-55

Purposive sampling approach

- Residence (north, south and central West Bank)
- Residence type (rural, urban and camp)
- Socio-economic indicators (education, employment and marital status)

Field notes and transcripts

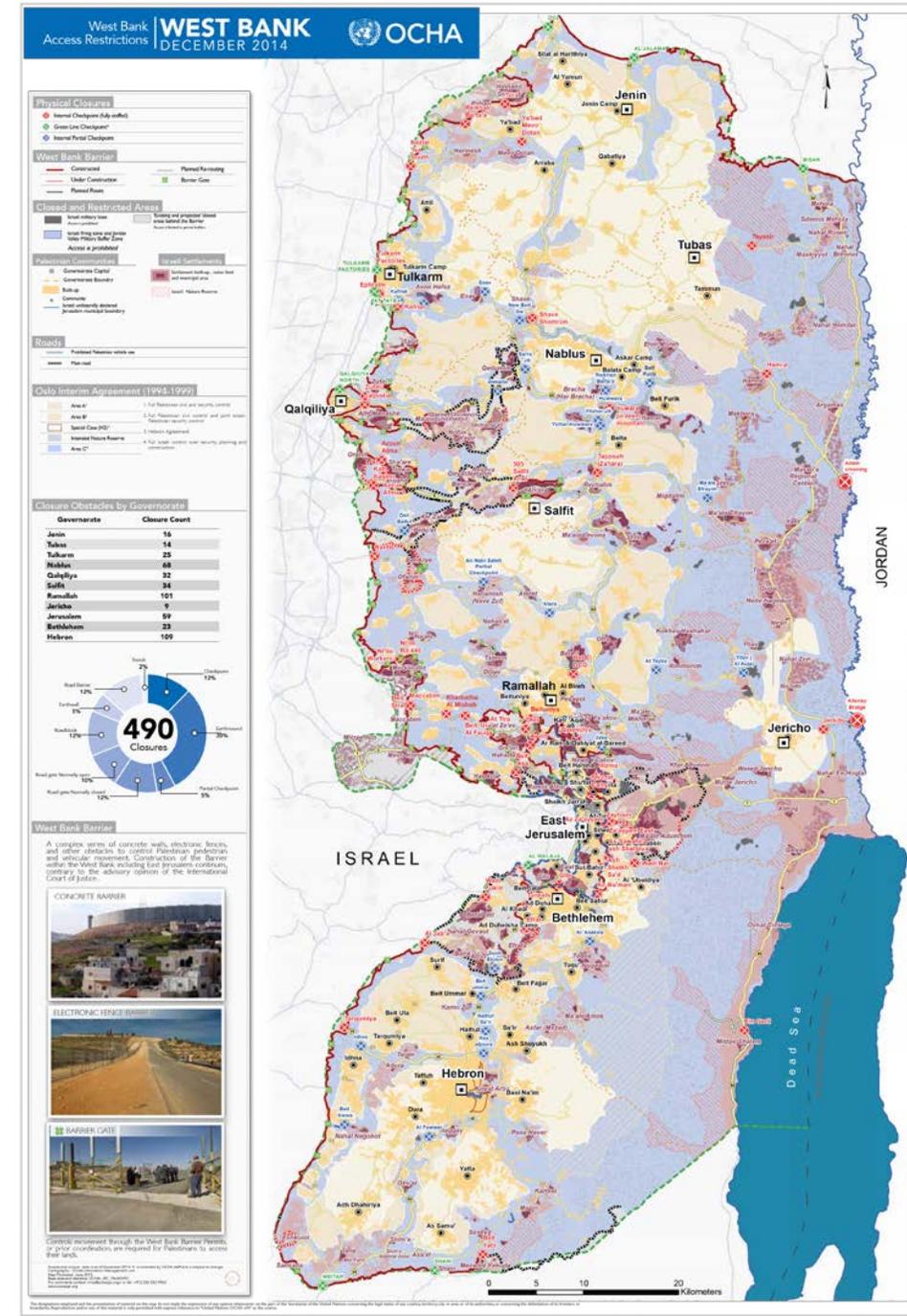
- to produce analytical memos detailing key emerging themes and sub-themes

Ethical approval from Birzeit University + London School of Economics

Context

Context

Socio-political context characterized by political violence; Israeli blockades restricting movement; deteriorating living conditions; resource constrained healthcare system



The problems with the military, Israel, affects psychological health. When you are afraid, you get shaken up, depressed from your life... The children are frightened, and the mothers feel helpless and unable to do anything.

[46 years, no formal schooling, housewife, married, 6 births]

This kind of anxiety is one that I constantly think about ... I do not cross any checkpoints, because I do not go far. That experience [Second Intifada] really impacted me, so I cannot imagine the people that cross checkpoints everyday, and suffer on a regular basis, the humiliation...If I were one of those people, I would look 20 years older... You either keep in the anger and suppress it, or you want to scream. And either way, you are impacting your health negatively.

[50 years, married, employed, 7 births, Master's level education, urban]

Palestinian women's understandings of mid-life health

Combining indigenous + biomedical knowledge

- Psychological health (*raha nafsiyeh and hadat el bal*)
- Ease of movement
- Physical appearance and complexion

Idioms of health

- *hamm*
- *za'al*
- *nakad*

Constructions of the menopause

Age of...

...despair (*sin el yaas*)

...hope (*sin al amal*),

...the 40s

...power

...security (*sin al amman*).

Ageing as a natural process

Any person is like the seed of the plant, it slowly develops, reaches a peak with blossoming and then slowly starts to deteriorate. Humans are also like this and must accept this is a matter of life.

[47 years, married housewife, primary education, 4 births, rural]

It's not despair, hope, safety or anything, it is just a phase like any other phase in life such as adolescence, or adulthood and it has its own issues and concerns. I don't like to live through it, but I deal with it and I don't think about it as a negative thing—this is my age and this is the phase that I am living with.

[50 years, married housewife, secondary education, 6 births, urban]

Age of security:

Practically speaking, women during this time do not get pregnant and do not have young children, so there is peace of mind and relaxation in that sense. She can live her life for herself, before that, her life is not hers. It is for her family, her children and her husband

[42 years, married, working, college diploma, 3 births, Central WB, rural]

Ridiculing 'age of despair'

I heard women say the 'age of despair.' Our generation says the 'age of despair' but those before us just used to say that "after 50, it [her period] split from her".

[53 years, married, previously employed, secondary education and vocational training, 3 births, South WB, urban]

I don't know why it's called 'age of despair,' the end of menses does not mean that life is over

[48 years, married housewife, secondary education, 4 births, Central WB, rural]

How can it be called the 'age of despair' when this is the age of power and control? The woman becomes a mother-in-law, and a grandmother. She is the head of the house!

[41 years, married, employed, post-secondary education, 5 births, South WB, urban]

For never-married / childless women:

It is really the age of despair, you feel physically exhausted and you feel you cannot continue. But for me, what made me despair was that I no longer have a future with the possibility of marriage and children.

[50 years, never married, employed, secondary education, 0 births, North WB, rural]

A woman continues having some faith and hope that she may get married and bear children, but when her period ends, that's it. It would be a sad time.

[50 years, married, working, Master's degree, 7 births, Central WB, urban]

Managing midlife health

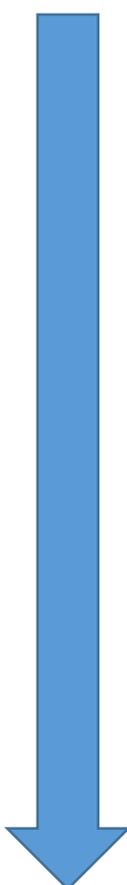
Women deploy a range of strategies “preventive pluralism” to maintain health and avoid formal care:

- Physical activity
- Good diet
- Avoidance of *harm*
- Engagement with faith, spirituality and *tawakul* (reliance on God—while taking personal responsibility)

Health is from God, and illness is from God. One must take precautions and seek treatment when needed. I diet and I take my precautions. It's true that it is all from God at the end, but you still have to stay away from what is harmful to you.

[54 years, married, unemployed, primary education, 6 births, Camp]

Preventive pluralism



Pluralistic approaches to health

Beginning with self-care

using a mix of biomedical and traditional
medicine

Resorting to formal services only when deemed
absolutely necessary

Midlife as a lens:

Political context in relation to health

Increased social power, especially for mothers

“Age of despair” used by (mainly) male medical professionals, influencing normative use

Bricolage

Article in SS+M

“Age of despair or age of hope? Palestinian women's perspectives on midlife health”

Hammoudeh, Coast, Lewis, Rabaia, Leone, Giacaman

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