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Palestinian women join together to discuss an end to violence against women, as well as the enhancement of women's access to justice, April 7, 2016. (photo by FACEBOOK/UN Women Arabic)

Will new Palestinian agency be enough to stop violence against women?

RAMALLAH, West Bank — Violence against Palestinian women is being [reported more frequently](#), and women there are fighting back — but in a non-violent way.

One obstacle in the battle has been a lack of accurate statistics with which to influence politicians and increase public awareness. Now the Ministry of Women's Affairs plans to establish the [National Observatory on Violence Against Women](#). The ministry will collaborate with the Ministries of Social Affairs and Health, the police and a number of civil society institutions.

The observatory, which is expected to see the light in one year, will collect and document cases of violence against women to gauge the gravity and extent of the problem. The data will be analyzed to help develop public policies to confront the situation.

"The idea ... stems from the ministry's main purpose to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women," Amin Assi, general director of planning and policy in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, told Al-Monitor. "The idea was born during a conference [on developing a [national strategy to combat violence](#)] organized by the ministry in 2007," but languished until it was recently brought up again.

The Jerusalem-based [Italian Cooperation Development Unit](#) for the Palestinian territories is providing 250,000 euros (almost \$280,000) for the effort.

The observatory will help "form a clear picture of violence against women based on figures and facts in order to develop national policies to deal with such violations and to provide guidance and assistance," Assi said.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics' [last survey on violence](#), in 2011, about 37% of women who had been married were subjected to violence at the hands of their husbands. Of those, 58.6% had been verbally and mentally abused at least once; 55.1% had been subjected to [economic violence](#); 54.8% to social violence; 23.5% to physical violence; and 11.8% to sexual violence. Moreover, 65.3% of abused women preferred to remain silent about violence, while not more than 0.7% of them were referred to institutions or centers for social counseling.

"Establishing such an observatory will affirm that [Palestinian women](#) are being subjected to violence on a large scale, especially since some officials deny this widespread phenomenon," said Jalal Khoder, legal adviser to the [Sawa Organization](#) for combating violence against women and children, which has offices in Ramallah and Jerusalem. She told Al-Monitor, "The evidence and information that will be documented by the observatory will serve as a powerful and compelling tool for decision-makers to make changes in laws and policies to protect women."

Commenting on the degree of violence against women as documented by Sawa, Khoder said, "We cannot gauge exactly the scale of violence in the country. However, the [known] number of abused women is rising as they have more available means today to voice their views, such as centers and institutions that document cases of abuse, provide assistance and guidance as well as hotlines to receive complaints. This is seen as breaking social traditions [that say] abuse and violence ought to be kept secrets in the family, while we are seeking to involve the public opinion."

The observatory will also document cases of violence by Israeli soldiers against women, providing accurate and scientific statistics, said Amal Khreisheh, general director of the [Palestinian Working Women Society](#).

"Israeli soldiers practice direct forms of violence against women by storming into their houses, arresting and killing them. This is not to mention the violence against men who are beaten and arrested in front of their families," Khreisheh told Al-Monitor.

"Having accurate information on violence against women will allow us to build up support to pressure Israel at the international level. At the regional level, we could use such information to launch a systemic advocacy campaign to place pressure on decision-makers to amend laws and policies and ensure protection for women," she added.

Despite the importance of establishing the observatory, its advocates know that providing statistics is not enough to stop the phenomenon of violence. There is an urgent need to change outdated laws and align them with the [international conventions](#) in which Palestine has taken part, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of [Discrimination Against Women](#) of 2009. Even then, laws aren't always enough.

"One of the main challenges facing women in Palestine is the enormous gap between some of the legal texts and the reality of what is happening with women," Khreisheh said. "Although some legal and constitutional texts stress women's equality, this is not reflected in their rights in reality. This is

in addition to the fact that many laws need to be amended such as the personal status law and the [Jordanian Penal Code](#) of 1960, which are still in force" in the West Bank.

Legal expert Gandhi Amin also believes laws must be updated and enforced. The lawyer told Al-Monitor, "Palestinian criminal and penal legislation should be harmonized with international agreements so as to criminalize acts according to a clear constitutional text. This means that violence against women ought to become a criminal offense described in the law, which has yet to happen."

Commenting on the most prominent laws that need to be amended to limit violence against women, Amin said, "The Penal Code needs extensive amendments to include modern penal policy and to rescind old text. The family protection act ought to be passed, while the criminal procedure code ought to be amended."

The legal dilemma lies in the Jordanian Penal Code of 1960. Even when it is enforced, the code does not refer to the [Palestinian Basic Law](#), which stipulates, "Personal freedom is a natural right, shall be guaranteed and may not be violated." Experts say the penal code reinforces the subordination of women, treats them as individuals unable to make decisions and denies them their right of choice and the right to self-determination.

President Mahmoud Abbas [instructed the government](#) on March 6, 2014, to form a legal committee to comprehensively review all materials in various legislation that [discriminate against women](#), and to introduce the necessary legal amendments, which have yet to be implemented.