

Palestinian Childhoods Conference 8/9 March 2019

Co-organised by Birkbeck University and UK-Palestine Mental Health Network

Reflections on some themes from the conference

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What do Palestinian children say about their lives under occupation, under siege and under attack? What images of children and childhood are most prevalent - within Palestinian communities and in the discourses employed by the occupying power? How do Palestinian children process and reflect on their own experiences? How do they express their hopes and dreams and how does their resistance and their struggle for justice sit alongside their desire to develop 'normal' lives. Within contexts of oppression, fear and suffering, what ways do Palestinian children and their families find to maintain hope and solidarity? These are some of the questions addressed at the Palestinian Childhoods Conference held at Birkbeck University on 8 and 9 March 2019. The principles adopted by the conference organisers were to place children's mental health clearly within the context of political oppression and human rights abuses, to highlight children's agency and their modes of resistance and to primarily feature Palestinian academics, researchers, clinicians and activists as keynote speakers and workshop leaders. Understanding the full impact of oppression involves an in depth exploration of its psychological effects, especially on the youngest citizens. Thus psychological states are seen as inextricably linked to the political context.

The conference explored childhood at many levels, from personal testimonies to academic and clinical reflections, privileging the voices of Palestinian children themselves. On Friday evening the film *Surviving Childhood*, was screened; this is a compilation of footage from feature films, documentaries, news items and filmed testimonies, all of which specifically focus on children. The idea behind the film was to present a montage of scenes depicting childhood experiences both within and outside Palestine - from Gaza, West Bank Palestine and Lebanon. The film included harrowing images of violence both to the body and in the destruction of the physical environment and the appalling extent to which Palestinian children grow up in fear and face grief and loss in their everyday lives. It also emphasised the desire young Palestinians have to be seen for what they are: ordinary people living in the most abnormal of circumstances. They described their hope and dreams, their anger at the oppression they experience, their determination to resist and to ensure the world takes account of what is happening to them.

The film was followed by a panel chaired by Mohammed Mukhaimer in which personal narratives of childhood were shared. Six Palestinian citizens of different ages from eighty years to sixteen and from Jerusalem, Gaza, Lebanon and cities in the West Bank, recounted their personal stories of dispossession and oppression from 1948 to the present. They traced their own or their families histories of expulsion from their homes and the destruction of their villages. Even the youngest members of the panel could speak vividly about their family experiences of expulsion. Thus, as well as hearing individual stories of loss, privation and suffering we were able to access collective experiences and collective memory. These moving personal accounts do not lose their power to shock but we also learnt about the sources of strength and resilience that different speakers described; most prominent among

them being collective qualities of determination, solidarity and the sense that the will to resist is undiminished from generation to generation.

On Saturday, the themes of power, oppression, racism and their effects on the lives of children and families were explored at diverse levels by the keynote speakers. Effects included the constraints on children in their physical, spatial and emotional worlds, the possibilities for them to claim agency and the expectations that others place on them. Palestinian children's participation in political struggle was also compared by Victoria Brittain in her opening address to South African children's roles in the liberation of their country, with the consequence in each context that deliberate attempts were made by the governments to destroy their future.

This powerful theme – of children being a threat precisely because they do represent the future was highlighted in different ways by Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian and Samah Jabr as they spoke about how Palestinian children's lives are saturated with death; as Nadera put it their lives are “embedded in the possibility of death”. This extends not only to the obvious ever-present experiences of death and mutilation but also to the desire on the part of their oppressors that they disappear, that their very existence constitutes a threat and to the processes of elimination that are enacted at so many levels. For many young people participation in acts of resistance, however much they risk death, are at the same time, as many speakers commented, acts of reclaiming life.

In coping with the trauma of violation, injury or of witnessing killings, children often re-enact these experiences through play, but as Samah Jabr vividly illustrated in her account of young people playing a game of “Who gets to die the next martyr?” these trauma responses are often taken up by the colonisers as propaganda, claiming an ‘inherent’ predisposition to violence or a manipulation by political leaders. This links to the ways that Palestinian children so often have to assert their identities *against* those conferred on them by their oppressors – as Reem Yaghi, one of the teenage participants felt the need to assert: “We are not terrorists”. Both Nadera and Samah referred to this narrowing of identity positions which accompanies extreme oppression and power imbalance where young people so easily find themselves caught between rigid positions of, for example, victim and avenger. Both speakers also referred to the deprivation of physical space which echoes this shrinking of psychic space. Among all the other severe human rights violations such as the violent penetration of the home, children and young people's lack of access to safe outdoor space is perhaps not mentioned enough. However Nadera and Samah referred to young peoples' own vivid testimonies about the oppressive presence of soldiers, settlers and road blocks which prevent them from exercising their right to claim even the environment around their own homes, restricting any possibility of moving safely within a colonised urban neighbourhood such as Hebron.

Against the severity of physical restrictions, the exercise of imagination as an act of resistance in itself was highlighted. This is currently most powerfully demonstrated in the Gazan ‘Great March of Return’ which, as well as being driven by desperation at being imprisoned in an environment where it is impossible to live, is also a great imaginary vision of return to those places of childhood that were lost but are constantly being reimagined, as Nadera illustrated. The dangers, aspirations and dilemmas for young people participating in the Great March of Return were also the theme of the workshop given by the Palestine

Trauma Centre in the afternoon. The psychological toll taken by the utterly dire situation in Gaza on children and their families as well as on those who provide mental health support was also vividly described by Marwan Diab in his workshop.

The question of how children, as the most vulnerable citizens and whose suffering urgently needs to be heard by the outside world, can still develop a sense of agency within conditions of such oppression permeated the conference. Reem Yaghi and Meran Zahran, the two teenagers from Jericho and Ramallah, provided an inspiring example in their workshop of how children take roles as 'Young Researchers', investigating human rights abuses and acting as representatives in Children's Councils. Zeina Amro presented the experiences and coping mechanisms of children whose fathers were held in long term detention in Israeli prisons.

The audience bore witness to narratives of such extreme injustice and suffering visited upon children that no resort to the language of 'resilience' can soften; conditions of life that Nadera refers to as '*unchilding*'. In this context it is unsurprising that children's own voices are often so uncompromising, only wishing to be rid of the presence of their colonisers. Ahed Tamimi said at the final panel that the important thing was for children to lose their fear and her plea was for parents to allow their children to resist.

The conference presenters captured the complexity of Palestinian children's positions. On the one hand, they suffer the adverse mental health effects of repeated experiences of violence, fear, insecurity and deprivation, witnessing their parents' inability to protect them and faced with the deliberate destruction of their right to lead a free and fulfilled life. On the other hand many young people such as Reem, Meran and Ahed, who are representatives of the future, have developed strengths, coping skills and, above all, compelling and persuasive voices with which to confront a world that colludes with their oppression. Our hope is that the conference audience will, as well as feel intensely moved by the psychological and physical injuries perpetrated on Palestinian children, find ways to amplify their voices and their calls for our solidarity.