

Success Stories **&** **Lessons** Learned

As Part of
"MIFTAH's" Experience
with Imams, Preachers
and Community Leaders

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Success stories and lessons learned as part of MIFTAH's experience with imams,
preachers and community leaders.



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First : Executive summary

In line with MIFTAH's strategic goals in empowering effective leadership within all components of Palestinian society towards promoting democracy and good governance, raising public awareness of citizens' rights and responsibilities, creating change at the local and international level and contributing to formulating public policies that coincide with the public interests of Palestinian society, over the past three years 2015-2018, MIFTAH has targeted the sector of imams, female preachers and community leaders in order to impact their awareness and promote their knowledge of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). This stems from the MIFTAH's belief in the importance of the role of this sector in impacting and raising awareness given their access and outreach to a wide number of people. Over the past three years, MIFTAH carried out 400 awareness-raising sessions in various communities in different districts in the West Bank on issues of Gender-Based Violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights from which there were over 8,000 male and female beneficiaries. The meetings were carried out in accordance with the project goals and the awareness sessions' impact measured through several assessments surveys both pre and post the awareness interventions.

In many instances, people turn to imams and preachers to ask for guidance or advice on several issues and problems from their everyday or family lives. Some of these issues are specific and necessitate knowledge of the principles of reproductive and family health, including those linked to positions that could be generate a negative attitude such as domestic violence. Hence, given MIFTAH's conviction of the importance of raising awareness and advocating on reproductive health and violence, the organization turned to community leaders, imams and female preachers to raise their awareness, knowledge, skills and approaches to issues related to reproductive health and gender-based violence. The goal was to incorporate social protective discourse within the religious discourse so they could carry out their role in spreading awareness and promoting the protection of women against violence in addition to promoting public awareness on reproductive health rights and contributing to expanding women's choices in seeking out advice and professional support.

Second : The scope of the mission

MIFTAH began its capacity building program on gender-based violence and reproductive health rights since 2015 in the Nablus, Tulkarm, Jenin, Jericho, Hebron and Bethlehem districts, targeting 75 imams, preachers and community leaders. This was followed by expanded awareness-raising meetings that included male and female citizens from various West Bank districts. As of 2018, the organization has held 6,630 meetings. MIFTAH was keen on maintaining periodic communication with the clergymen, female preachers and community leaders through assessment meetings to shed light on the impacts, whether in terms of the imams, preachers and community leaders themselves or at the level of their target radius in terms of

beneficiaries, in addition to widen the scope of sharing experience and learning in order to advance their performance.

In order to document the experience, benefit from and build on it, MIFTAH has prepared this special report documenting the success stories, conclusions and lessons learned from conducting this type of intervention and targeting imams, preachers and community leaders.

Third : Methodology used for identifying lessons learned

The report is based on intensive meetings with groups of the targeted sectors of imams, preachers and community leaders and on reference to reports from the trainings, which reflected the level of benefit and impact on this sector of Palestinian society. It offers a brief explanation of the changes to the positions and viewpoints of the imams, preachers and community leaders during the period in which MIFTAH targeted them, with focus on issues pertaining to Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights and Gender-Based Violence; questionnaires were also used. The results of the group discussions and the survey answers were combined after which the outcomes were presented based on the pivot points included in the discussion groups and the contents of the questionnaires.

Four discussion groups were held in Bethlehem, Jericho, Nablus and Tulkarm with a total participation of 45 people. Discussions in these groups revolved around four main points:

- The issues and topics proposed by the imams, preachers (female and male) and community leaders in their sessions
- Success stories
- Problems and challenges they faced in their line of work
- Recommendations and suggestions for developing their work

A questionnaire was prepared for participants, which contained the following questions and points:

- Titles and contents of the subjects proposed in the meetings
- The number of participants in these meetings and the venue where they were held
- The sources used in preparing the awareness meetings
- The number of individual consultations provided and the number of cases referred to specialized institutions.
- Invitations for participating in other events pertaining to gender-based violence and reproductive health
- Other initiatives from the participants outside the framework of the planned program

Nablus	Bethlehem	Jericho	Tulkarm
9 questionnaires	10 questionnaires	6 questionnaires	10 questionnaires

Fourth : Positions and approaches of imams before participating in training

It was apparent from the interviews and meetings prior to the training interventions that the role of imams and preachers was mostly focused on the method of sermonizing, based on the Quranic verse: (And it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you). This is attributed to their meagre knowledge, approaches and skills on issues of reproductive health and domestic violence in addition to the influence of predominant ideas in regards to gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health. It was clear that the approaches revolved mostly around pressing those who sought guidance and advice to accept these ideas and convictions and live with the oppression rather than confront domestic violence. These include the idea that men should be obeyed and the role and function of a woman is to meet the needs of her husband. Many of the imams and preachers used Quranic verses and sayings from the Prophet Mohammed and subjected them to their own interpretations to support their ideas.

Among the most prominent positions and quotes mentioned by the imams and preachers prior to their participation in the training were as follows:

One imam in one of the regions refused to interact with the female trainer, saying:

"I did not listen to anything today since you do not wear a head covering and since you are speaking about issues that do not concern us nor have any significance."

Another participant said:

"Our society is fine and does not need these concepts to be brought in or these issues proposed; we live in a society of morals and values and these topics are foreign to it"

Another said:

"We should not bring up such issues so as not to open the eyes of young men and women to them"

Another participant said:

"Why do you want to imitate the West and limit early marriage? Why shouldn't girls marry if that is their destiny? Our mothers and grandmothers married at an early age and they are just fine."

Others said it was not their role as preachers to intervene in these issues because they were private.

Fifth : Presentation of results

Social sectors targeted in the awareness sessions

- The imams, preachers and community leaders were able to reach various sectors of society, including youth (both girls and boys) and men and women of all ages, whether inside or outside of the mosque in coordination with local and grassroots institutions. They also targeted high schools in their districts in addition to Palestinian prisoners through coordination with NGOs and government institutions.
- In addition, they informally posed and discussed these issues with family members, neighbors, friends and relatives and resorted to mediation between families and married couples, which many times the mediation was at the expense of women's rights.

The parties coordinated with to hold the sessions

- Throughout the project, coordination took place with grassroots institutions, youth clubs, prisons, schools, and social and community organizations. There was also coordination with international institutions such as Médecins du Monde and key coordination with the Palestinian Ministry of Waqf.

The subjects broached during the discussion sessions

There were a variety of issues broached, based on the needs of the targeted sector, which were as follows:

- The concept and components of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
- Women's rights through the various stages of a woman's life
- The definition, forms, repercussions and justifications for Gender Based Violence, ways of minimizing it and their role in confronting it.
- Methods of family planning and the need for spacing between children
- Child-raising methods
- Methods for communicating with children, teenagers in particular
- Subjects related to couples about to be married, in particular communication, problem-solving and decision-making sharing
- Early marriage
- Safe ways of dealing with social media networks and protection
- Cyber crimes

The methods used for discussing topics:

- Brainstorming and discussions
- Sharing real stories
- Presenting and discussing case studies
- Using computers for some presentations
- Distribution of educational material after the sessions

Number of participants (male and female) in the awareness-raising sessions

- Twenty-one respondents in the survey said the number of participants in the awareness sessions were over 20 people, while 14 of the respondents said the number of participants ranged between 10 and 20.
- In terms of the duration of the sessions, 18 of the respondents to the surveys said each session was over an hour while 14 others said sessions were around an hour while only two said they were less than one hour.
- The responses in general indicated that the time allotted for the sessions was enough and allowed for in-depth and detailed discussions on the topics; they also said the sessions gave ample opportunity for the participants to discuss and ask questions.

Issues the participants intervened in and contributed to solving

Results indicated that the imams, preachers and community leaders became reference points in their communities; people were resorting to them for help in resolving their problems and personal and family issues. They were able to intervene in dozens of issues through coordination, cooperation and networking with local organizations and service providers and their interventions were based on respect for people's rights, especially women. They were considerate of their privacy and respected their freedom to choose and also their right to make decisions for the individuals who turned to them for guidance and intervention. These acquired skills were the result of the intensive training given to them by MIFTAH and other institutions on how to deal with victims of violence.

For example, some of the subjects in which they intervened involved women who came to them because they were subjected to various forms of domestic violence; this includes the violence some women endure because their husbands or other male members of the family are drug addicts or alcoholics. They also intervened with women who were subjected to physical, psychological, economic and sexual violence, whether from inside the family or outside of it. Other issues included interventions revolving around sexual orientation. In some cases, women sought consultation for economic violence such as deprivation from inheritance or from child or family alimony, the lack of economic responsibility or contribution towards the family. In other cases, the participants said they intervened with women who had been deprived of their monthly salaries because their husbands took it and spent it. Others intervened in domestic disputes that could otherwise have led to divorce.

Success stories:

One female preacher said she was able to intervene with a family with a child with special needs. She said one of the women in the family complained to her that her husband always made her feel responsible for having a disabled child. The preacher sat down with both the mother and father and tried to benefit from the information she learned during training on domestic violence. After meeting with the couple, the preacher maintained there had been progress in how the husband treated his wife and that there was a change in how they viewed one another, which positively

impacted the mental stability of the family and the husband's awareness about not reprimanding his wife for bearing a child with special needs, over which she had no control. The preacher encouraged the husband to stand beside and support his wife.

Success story about a woman who suffered from depression

One female preacher said she dealt with a woman who suffered from postpartum depression. The preacher communicated with a health educator for consultation and then referred the woman to a psychiatrist. The preacher later found out that the woman had been molested as a child and that this was the first time she had ever confided in anyone about the violence she endured. She continued to help her until the woman was convinced of seeing her psychiatrist and regularly taking medication.

Gaining inheritance rights

An imam intervened in solving the problem of an elderly and handicapped woman who lives in a village and whose sons had cut her out of her inheritance. She turned to her village's imam for help. After several meetings with her sons, he convinced them to give their mother her share of the inheritance. After this incident, in both individual discussions and group lessons, much time and effort in the village was put into discussing the need to give females their right to their inheritance. The imam said after he began broaching this issue, many women in the village obtained their right to their inheritance.

In their meetings with people, both male and female preachers focused on raising awareness on the disadvantages of early marriage. This is because in many cases, young girls are married to young men so they could get permits to work in the '48 areas (inside the Green Line). Then after they get permits, problems arise and violence is used against the women, sometimes leading to divorce.

One participant said he intervened in six cases including beatings, economic deprivation and some cases involving cyber-crimes. He said he cooperated with the Ministry of Social Development and in some cases turned to the Family Protection Department and the Cyber Crimes Unit. He also said he cooperated in some of the cases with institutions such as the Political and National Guidance Commission, the police and the mufti.

Sixth : The most prominent successes

- The preachers and community leaders were able to speak about Sexual and Reproductive Health issues with consideration for the professional ethics needed when intervening with women who have suffered from violence. These include values such as confidentiality, respect for privacy and opinion, listening, analyzing the problem and providing integrated services.
- Their belief in the idea and the importance of continuously talking about these issues and benefiting from all occasions. There is a high-level of conviction among the imams, preachers and community leaders of their role and the

need to broach these subjects and reach out to all areas. Their work is not limited to mosques but has branched out to youth centers, institutions, prisons, schools and groups; they feel a great sense of responsibility, the importance of intervention and offering help in cases of violence that come to them.

- They are trusted by their communities, which became clear during their interventions in very sensitive matters such as sexual assault, cyber-crimes, being cut off from inheritance and physical, economic and psychological violence.
- The imams, preachers and community leaders now have a prominent role in finding solutions to social issues pertaining to the various types of family violence, cyber-crimes, deprivation from inheritance and other family problems. Hence, it is imperative to provide them with the necessary support, tools and information that promote positive intervention in such matters and to offer guidance, counseling and referrals to specialists based on rights based approach.
- Their knowledge of the competent institutions and their ability to communicate, network and cooperate with them regarding special cases in need of intervention such as the police, Ministry of Social Development and other institutions, and health and medical centers, thus providing protection and support for the targeted sectors.
- Their understanding of the importance of working with men; they mentioned the male, dominating mentality and the need to work with males and raise their awareness on these issues.

Seventh Lessons learned

- The importance of continuing to work with imams, preachers and community leaders; to hold advanced training on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights and Gender Based Violence given they are now a reliable reference on these issues. They now have the necessary information and skills to discuss issues with targeted groups. The importance of continuing coordination with the Ministry of Education to hold awareness lectures in high schools given the importance of working with this sector and also because schools do not educate students in these issues with the depth and comprehensiveness they should. There are also cases where students (both male and female) are subjected to violence or exploitation but did not have the courage to speak out. In these cases, imams and preachers in particular could constitute a refuge for their protection.
- The need to expand the network of their relationship with the various official parties and to sign official agreements with these parties so services could be provided in a more qualitative, integrated and comprehensive manner; in particular, this calls for building a solid and trustworthy relationship with family counseling departments in the various districts given the importance of their role.
- Training a group of them to become trainers on reproductive health and gender-based violence, given there is a group willing to undergo this and which has the basic knowledge and information in this regard. Furthermore, this group is the fastest in spreading awareness and impacting the various social sectors.

- To continue to merge community leaders with imams and preachers so they can exchange experiences and expertise and also to guarantee diversity within the group so it can present a rights-based narrative as opposed to other biased or narrow narratives.
- Transporting and expanding the experience and broadening its scope in other districts given that their work has had such a positive impact on their communities. In addition, it is still important to access some areas more aggressively because of the lack of awareness regarding women's issues and their rights and the many societal problems in these areas. They particularly mentioned areas such as Balata, Beit Dajan, Beit Fourik, Salem and Azmout and also remote villages in the Bethlehem and Hebron regions.
- The need to continue raising awareness and educating on subjects regarding sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence; the importance of raising awareness in particular on topics pertaining to marital counseling and holding special courses on this subject to youths and couples about to be married. This is especially important because there is an increase in the number of cases of violence among young couples and also a high divorce rate. Every opportunity should be seized to talk about these issues regardless of whether there is a plan or project in place.
- Increasing work with men to raise their awareness on reproductive health issues and combating gender-based violence.

Eighth : Problems and challenges

- There were some objections from social sectors in some locations to discussing issues such as early marriage
- Sometimes, there were people who would intervene to solve problems but would not continue with the cases for fear of becoming involved in other problems given that they are not protected like the imams.
- Some faced difficulties in certain villages in broaching violence-related issues; some social sectors believe these issues should not be discussed and consider these interventions as involvement in private matters.

Ninth : Recommendations from imams and preachers

- The need to document the number of interventions
- Providing imams, preachers and community leaders with pamphlets, booklets and educational material from MIFTAH to distribute them at awareness sessions; producing awareness-raising materials and videos on issues of reproductive health and violence to be published and broadcast on the internet in order to reach the largest possible number of people

- To give imams, preachers and community leaders training in other subjects related to reproductive health, foremost marital counseling.
- To hold trainings for imams, preachers and community leaders in conjunction with various sectors such the police and male and female teachers in order to exchange expertise and experiences.
- To invite imams, preachers and community leaders to continuously participate in activities and events on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights and Gender Based Violence on the premise that participation and interaction will offer them a broader perspective on new subjects in addition to providing them with knowledge and expertise in this field.

**An imam and female preacher tell
their success stories after participating
in MIFTAH trainings as part of its
“Communicate for GBV” Project**

Ramallah – Sheikh Barakat Ziad Hijazi Tamimi, Imam of the Khaled Bin Walid Mosque in Hebron says he is now able to include issues and problems that strike at the core of his community in his daily and weekly lessons and Friday sermons, issues mostly avoided by imams and preachers given their social sensitivity. In particular, these issues pertain to disputes or problems between men and women.

He says the shift came after recently participating in a number of training courses conducted by MIFTAH in the field of health and reproductive rights and gender-based violence, which targeted imams and female preachers in various districts, including Hebron. The courses were part of MIFTAH's UNFPA-funded "Communicate for GBV" project.

Female preacher Sajeda Omar Shurafa had a similar experience. Shurafa is a preacher in the Waqf Directorate in Nablus who also participated in MIFTAH's training courses. She says the courses offered her broader knowledge and skills in broaching and raising awareness on social issues related to marital and family relationships in a way that guarantees family stability and social security and reduces violence.

Tamimi said while his participation reaped many benefits, one of the most important of these is that it broadened his sphere of knowledge and information in the field of health and reproductive rights, especially women's rights and gender-based violence and the importance of renouncing and combatting it. "It created considerable interaction between us and our target audiences. We hope the circle widens even further so we can target even more sectors and not confine them to lessons in the mosque; we want to branch out to other institutions, clubs, associations, and youth centers so as many people as possible can benefit."

Tamimi continues that while there were those who were convinced of their message and connected with them, others had reservations. "Still, at least there were discussions and acceptance of what we proposed in terms of social issues and awareness on subjects that affect the daily lives of Palestinian families, especially women and children." He said he hoped MIFTAH would also expand on the issues for discussion, which were posed by the target audience who responded positively to the training.

Sajeda Shurafa, had a similar experience in regards to the impact of the training. "Now we broach many subjects, most importantly, violence and women's health and reproductive rights," adding that these subjects built on previous rounds of training in 2016. "Today, we are more professional and accurate in our message during our sermons and interact with a large sector of society, women. We also hope for more participation from men because their contribution will help create solutions to many of the problems and will give families a more solid ground which will in turn give them more self-confidence."

Sajeda believes working on the ground would be more effective. "We need to integrate and become more involved in our society's problems and try to find solutions to them because this will contribute to a more stable society and regulated family life," she said. Therefore, she continued, "Our role is no longer confined to mosques; our message does not stop there but has spread to schools

and organizations and to any place we can reach." Sajeda maintained that MIFTAH's training boosted their ability to broach and interact with problems more efficiently and to contribute to finding solutions to them. "Today we are confronting these challenges head-on and are working to overcome them right away or through coordination with the relevant parties to provide the necessary support for families, women and children."

**Community leader Jalal Obeido on
MIFTAH's impact: knowledge about
reproductive health strengthens and
protects society**

Ramallah: Jalal Obeido, activist and employee at the Agricultural Directorate's Planning Department in Hebron says MIFTAH's impact on his experience as a community leader and activist was an important turning point in his education and awareness on citizens' rights, reproductive health and gender-based violence. He added that his knowledge on these subjects has increased along with many skills he did not previously have in his long years in the field of social work.

Obeido was one of a group of community leaders who took part in several training workshops organized by MIFTAH for male and female activists. The workshops were part of its UNFPA-funded "Support Women Protection" Project.

Obeido said of his participation in the last training workshop on reproductive health rights and gender-based violence, "I gained skills and education on these subjects, including my information on the laws and international treaties on reproductive health rights and GBV and the agreements on combatting violence and discrimination against women. The training helped mold my experience and character as a community leader and bolstered my belief in the importance of being knowledgeable about reproductive health in terms of its importance and protection of society."

He continued, "Since I participate in many meetings, I always try to speak about this topic even though the people I encounter do not have a comprehensive idea about reproductive health. On the contrary, violence is often perpetrated at this level. For example, women give birth with very short periods of time between them, without any consideration to how important it is to space these births because of the negative affect it has on women's health. In this regard, there must be family planning in a way that protects women and their physical and mental health. This was emphasized in the last training MIFTAH held and it is my duty as a community leader to explain this to the people I encounter, especially regarding early marriage and the negative affects it has on society."

The experience and information Obeido acquired from these trainings prompted him to volunteer with several institutions. He said the trainings revealed how interested the participants were in the subject but how little information they had on the topic of reproductive health and gender-based violence and its devastating consequences. He said they were convinced of the need for more training so they could also help to spread awareness on this topic, adding that they wanted trainings to mostly target young people and on mothers and women in their homes. Obeido said it was imperative for those working in the social fields to bring attention to closing the gap between generations of parents and children. To this effect, he makes sure in all of his own trainings that target the youth sector, to focus on their problems in this regard and on how to deal with them. He maintained that he devotes the largest part of the training to discussing the youths' issues in order to help minimize the problems they face today "especially with the widespread popularity of games such as PUBG and others," Obeido said.

Obeido confirmed the importance of MIFTAH's role in affording more attention to youth and women and to supporting women's rights. He maintained that every group targeted in these trainings will leave an important impact on the lives of the targeted sectors, which will then impact others and so on and so forth. "I hope

MIFTAH will offer ongoing trainings such as these and involve all social sectors in them. They should not be limited to one or another sector because these courses have proven to leave positive impacts on everything pertaining to rights and to changing some perceptions, which is the goal we all seek to achieve.”