

DISPOSSESSION OCCUPIED PALESTINE

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Palestinians have been subjected to various acts of violence, adversity, and trauma for nearly 60 years.

One major facet of adversity is **dispossession and domicile** (destruction of the home) which has serious effects on adults' and children's well-being. The **multiplicity of losses** experienced by children in the West Bank as a result of military occupation can lead to symptoms of **traumatic grief**.

The current research aims to study the **impact of dispossession on mental health from a child's perspective**. This study utilizes focus groups to explore children's understandings (a) of the reasons for dispossession; b) the impact of dispossession on their behaviour and well-being; and c) children's need and willingness to receive support.

The researcher spoke to **children aged 5-14 years** in groups of 10, from four areas of the West Bank, occupied Palestine; Bardallah village, Khan al Ahmar, Silwan (East Jerusalem), and Massafer Yatta (southern part of Hebron).

The children were asked about their **personal experiences of dispossession**, including their **thoughts, feelings, and behaviours**. They were asked about their **needs**, and whether they had spoke to anyone to **seek support** at the time. If they hadn't sought support, they were asked if they wanted support, and what had prevented them from seeking support.

Children described multiple forms of dispossession:

- House demolition
- Forced to destroy own home
- Separated from friends & family
- Change of school & loss of teachers
- Moved away from community and village
- Damage to clothes, books, and toys
- No water & toilet facilities
- Lost medicine
- Loss of friends, families, & pets
- Losing sense of self-worth
- No longer feeling safe
- Lack of justice for harm

"Thanks to my friend, I was allowed to go to their toilet."

"There was no one to look after me."

"My parents are unable to cope with such a shitty situation, they panicked, so we nearly lost all aspects of parental warmth."

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Children experienced negative shifts in their thoughts and emotions including **fear, uncertainty, and oppression**. They expressed mixed thoughts and feelings in trying to understand. Some **"blame Israel"** but **were confused about why this was happening**. They described enduring negative feelings that could be considered indicative of psychological conditions, including signs of **PTSD, complicated grief, depression, dissociation, anxiety, behaviour difficulties**, and thoughts of **self-harm**. Children described sensory triggers which left them feeling **fearful and overwhelmed**. Some perceived themselves as **worthless**. During the research, children **stopped speaking mid-sentence and stared into space**. Children were explicitly offered counselling support.

Children, especially those who reported the **most extreme distress**, had **not sought support** and did not want to be perceived as mentally ill. Some stated that they had not told anyone that they were struggling because they **did not have anyone to tell**. Some denied having any difficulties.

After the loss of their home or village, **children struggled in school**, attending late, asking to leave early out of fear for their families, and acting aggressively with classmates. They described **struggling to see the purpose** behind doing schoolwork. Children faced **increased aggression** in the family, and some had to **take on parental roles** after the death or imprisonment of their parents.

"I now have to look after younger siblings."

"I have to look after my younger brother now."

Girls were "more shy, hesitant to participate, and less likely to take a turn." They had "more difficulties in making meaningful sentences, and were less able to express themselves directly."

Girls described less help seeking, being the victim of more aggression from siblings, and were more likely to have taken on parental roles.

Girls reported a lack of hope for the future.

"I'm scared all the time since we lost our home, at home, at school."

"I keep thinking the solders are going to come again and take us away."

"I do not know what to do, I do not want to eat or drink or even talk to people. I feel weak and helpless to my family members."

"I have no body to take care of me as before, because they do not possess what is needed for caring."

