



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

The Mehwar Centre

WOMEN AGENTS OF CHANGE

Testo italiano all'interno



Consiglio Generale d'Italia a Gerusalemme



Ministry of Social Affairs

2008 - 2012

The Mehwar Centre

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The photos are the production and courtesy of the women sheltered in the Mehwar Centre in June 2012 - trained and guided by Reema Essa (photographer and filmmaker).

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Acknowledgements

The development of this report is the fruit of the incessant and outstanding commitment and support of many governmental and non-governmental institutions as well as of Palestinian and international professionals and individuals.

This report attempts to portray a unique experience, shedding light on the tireless work that has allowed such experience to start, grow and become a reference for many institutions and individuals, not only locally but also internationally.

It is an impossible task to recall all persons and institutions that have positively contributed to the establishment, development and institutionalization of Mehwar Centre. Fully aware of this, UN Women, while apologizing for spelling out only some of the key institutions and organizations, extends its highest appreciation to all of those who have dedicated, throughout the years, time, expertise and resources to Mehwar Centre and to its women and children beneficiaries.

UN Women would like to start by deeply thanking all the “Mehwar women”, the former and current staff members who gave life to a completely new women’s support system in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), and who were hence able to be positive agents of change. Nothing of this all experience would have been possible without them.

UN Women expresses its sincere appreciation to the commitment of the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) and in particular to the Minister of Social Affairs, H.E. Majeda al Masri for the commitment and support provided, since the beginning of her institutional mandate, to the development of Mehwar Centre, and for her demonstrated capacity of dialogue and exchange with local and international counterparts.

Deep recognition is due to the Municipality of Bethlehem for having supported the Mehwar Centre project since the very beginning by donating the land on which the Centre has then been built.

Recognizing the importance of a wide range of institutions for the success of protection, empowerment and dignified reintegration into society of women victims of violence, UN Women extends its gratitude to all governmental institutions, and the individuals within, that have demonstrated their support to the mandate of Mehwar Centre. In particular, UN Women greatly thanks the Ministry of Interior and the Palestinian Civil Police, specifically commending its Family Protection Units; the High Judicial Council and the Palestinian judges; the Sharia’ courts judges; the Prosecutor Office and the Palestinian prosecutors. All these actors have contributed to increase women victims of violence access to security and justice and to related services. UN Women remains assured of the continued support offered by these institutions to make positive changes towards the achievement of gender justice.

Local and international women’s organizations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have greatly contributed to achieve the standards Mehwar Centre has reached at the end of this project phase. Among the others, UN Women would like to highlight its appreciation for and recognition of the committed support provided by the Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), SAWA (“All the women



together, today and tomorrow”) and the Palestinian Counselling Centre (PCC) through their valuable expertise in the field of combating violence against.

UN Women expresses recognition and appreciation for the commitment and expertise brought by Differenza Donna international NGO, since the establishment of Mehwar Centre and throughout the years. Differenza Donna’s extensive experience in Italy and abroad has greatly contributed to identifying international standards on sheltering services for women victims of violence.

Finally, UN Women would like to express special recognition and appreciation to the Government of Italy and the Italian Cooperation for its commitment to encourage and support excellence and innovation in service provision for women victims of violence in the occupied Palestinian territory. The “Mehwar Centre” project has been generously funded, since its inception in 2004 and up to date, by the Government of Italy. UN Women expresses sincere gratitude to the Government of Italy for the long-lasting support in the challenging establishment and institutionalization of the “Mehwar Centre”, first anti-violence centre in the occupied Palestinian territory complying with human rights standards of professionalism and setting up international good practices.

This Report “Mehwar Centre – Women Agents of Change” is dedicated to all the women and girls who have sought protection at Mehwar since its opening: they are a great example of struggle for life, dignity and rights, and their outstanding accomplishments provide inspiration and courage to all of us to continue supporting Mehwar Centre in its work.

Forward from Majeda Al-Masri

Minister of Social Affairs - Palestinian Authority

The Palestinian Authority is committed to the empowerment of women and to guaranteeing equal opportunities for all individuals, in order to strengthen families and communities within the territories of the Palestinian Authority. Equal opportunities for women and men, and the elimination of all forms of violence against women, are essential components of healthy and coherent families. It marks the foundation for mobilizing the full capacity of Palestinian society towards ending the Occupation and establishing an independent state that guarantees equality and social justice for all its citizens.

It is with great concern that the Palestinian Authority acknowledges the high prevalence of violence against women still affecting Palestinian society, as disclosed by the “Violence Survey in the Palestinian Society, 2011” published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. According to the survey, 37% of Palestinian women are exposed to violence by their husbands, while 51% of Palestinian children are abused physically and psychologically at home.

In the last decade, the Ministry of Social Affairs, in partnership with women and civil society organizations, has advocated for the establishment of specialized anti-violence centers offering qualified protection and empowerment services to women and children victims of violence. The Mehwar Centre project, operating under the overall supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs, represents a comprehensive and professional answer to the problem of violence against women in the territories of the Palestinian Authority. Comprehensive and professional answer to the problem of violence against women in the territories of the Palestinian Authority within the framework of a competent professional work and intervene to protect women victims of violence. In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs is committed to providing a legal environment and legislation to protect women victims of violence, through special strategies in the protection sector.

Thanks to the unique experience of Mehwar Centre in accompanying victims throughout all steps of protection and justice, Mehwar has also offered the ground for the development of innovative policies that ensure victims’ protection and safe reintegration into society. The contribution of the women protected at Mehwar to the development of the National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women 2011-2019, is an undeniable testimony to the success and innovation represented by the Mehwar Centre.

In its “2011 Business Strategy”, the Ministry of Social Affairs renewed and formalized its commitment to reducing the levels of family violence by empowering parents and enhancing family relationships. It has also committed to developing emergency accommodation, rehabilitation and reintegration services for women and children victims of violence. We will continue to offer our full support to the Mehwar Centre and advocate for shared responsibility in ensuring that all women and children in difficulty in the territories of the Palestinian Authority are able to enjoy a future of dignity free from violence.



Foreword from Giampaolo Cantini

Consul General of Italy in Jerusalem

This Report that I have the pleasure of presenting tells a unique story of cooperation, solidarity and friendship between Italian and Palestinian women and institutions. It is an experience that began more than ten years ago with the aim to protect Palestinian women and their families from gender-based violence.

Italy has a long history of supporting international aid. Our country is committed to supporting stable and just democracies and sees international aid as an essential part of achieving strong and sustainable global governance. Sharing responsibilities and fostering partnerships are the principles that drive our development cooperation. We strive towards strengthening democratic ownership in the countries we assist by promoting and providing direct support to institutions, civil society and women.

The Italian Cooperation's gender mainstreaming strategy within the occupied Palestinian territory is driven and underlined by Italy's cooperation principles that aid effectiveness is intimately linked to women's empowerment and gender equality.

During the last 20 years in the occupied Palestinian territory, the Italian Cooperation has invested more than 11 million Euros in programmes aimed at protecting women's rights and fostering women's empowerment and gender equality. The Mehwar Centre in Bethlehem, the programme WELOD (Women's Empowerment and Local Development) in the eleven West Bank Governorates, the three counselling centres "Zohra" in Hebron, along with numerous other projects implemented by Italian and Palestinian NGOs mainstreaming gender in the different development sectors, are part of the same strategy.

The Mehwar Centre is a success story we are particularly proud of. Not only has it shaped a dedicated space for abused women where gender-based violence is addressed comprehensively, combining protection, empowerment and advocacy. It has also become a role model for good practice in the provision of services for women victims of violence throughout the oPt. Mehwar played a pivotal role in the definition of national policies and procedures to run anti-violence centres in the oPt. It also deeply influenced the creation of the National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women 2011-2019, and the promotion of community education programmes. The contribution of qualified Italian, international and Palestinian expertise to this project, and the full support and participation of national and local institutions since the Mehwar Centre's establishment, are a guarantee for national ownership and future sustainability.

I would like to thank all those who have worked hard to make the Mehwar Centre one of the most qualified anti-violence centres in the Middle East region. I welcome this Report because it provides all of us with an insight into the women's experiences, and into the complexities involved in combating gender-based violence through cooperation, professional and specialized expertise.

Special gratitude goes to the Minister of Social Affairs and her staff, to the Governor of Bethlehem, to UN Women, to the Italian NGO Differenza Donna, to the Mehwar and Zohra centres' staff, to TAWASOL Network, and to the Palestinian CBOs and NGOs, for their support, contribution, and involvement throughout the years.

Foreword from Alia El Yassir

Special Representative – UN Women occupied Palestinian territory

Across the globe, women are expected to identify, and tirelessly respond to, the needs of all individuals within their families and communities, often with total disregard of their own needs and rights. Many women learn to work hard from a very young age, under some of the most difficult circumstances. Most often than not, they work without any form of social security and rights, whether in the formal or informal labour market, in order to provide for their families and serve their communities.

Regrettably, and in the words of UN Women Executive Director, Under-Secretary General Michelle Bachelet, “violence against women remains the most widespread human rights violation, yet the least prosecuted crime. Globally, 603 million women live in countries where domestic violence is not yet considered a crime. Sexual violence remains rampant in times of both peace and conflict. Femicide claims far too many women’s lives”.

The UN General Assembly has called on Member States to adopt a “zero tolerance” policy toward violence against women, and specifically to advocate for, and support, integrated services that provide protection and empowerment for victims, treat all forms of violence as a criminal offence, and remove all barriers to women’s access to justice. UN Women works globally to provide, in partnership with civil society and governmental institutions, suitable technical and financial support in achieving women’s empowerment and gender equality.

Throughout the last decade, despite the incommensurable challenges faced by the Palestinian people under occupation, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as civil society organizations, have achieved exceptional results in combating violence against women and advancing gender and social justice within their society.

The Mehwar Centre project in the occupied Palestinian territory is a unique example of how diversified efforts - governmental and non-governmental, national and international - have succeeded in realising services of excellence. The Mehwar Centre, to date, has saved the lives of more than 250 women and has deeply impacted institutions, organizations and communities. Additionally, it has succeeded in changing perceptions and systems, in advancing knowledge and understanding of violence, and of women’s needs and rights, and it has introduced good practices that can now be applied in the Arab Region and beyond.

This report “Mehwar Centre - Women Agents of Change” aims to share an exceptional story, celebrating all partners’ efforts, commending the work of the staff at Mehwar, as well as the wilful struggle of the many women and girls seeking protection at Mehwar in pursuit of a new life. It is the responsibility of each and every one to sustain this exceptional experience and make a life free of violence a reality for all women.



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List of Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
DD	Differenza Donna
FPU	Family Protection Units
GBV	Gender-based Violence
LoA	Letter of Agreement
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MoE	Ministry of Education and Higher Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
Mol	Ministry of Interior
MoRA	Ministry of Religious Affairs
MoSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
oPt	occupied Palestinian territory
PA	Palestinian Authority
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PCP	Palestinian Civil Police
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VAW	Violence against Women
WCLAC	Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling



INTRODUCTION

1. A story

“F”¹ is from Bethlehem. Along with her sister, she suffered years of systematic abuse by her father from a very young age. When she could not take it anymore, she tried to commit suicide, but failed. After her failed attempt, she went to a shelter in Nablus in September 2006, where she stayed for about six months, before arriving at the Mehwar Centre in May 2007. She and her sister stayed at Mehwar for two years. When they left in 2009, they initially stayed in a house rented by Mehwar nearby the Centre. At the end of 2009, “F” got married. She has since given birth to a son and is now eight months pregnant with her second child. As she and her husband are currently experiencing economic difficulties, Mehwar provides them with assistance.

Her experience highlights the difference made by the establishment of the Mehwar Centre:

“Before I came to Mehwar, there was nothing for me. There were no choices. The Nablus shelter was closed. My brothers threatened me, and my family told me that I should marry a disabled person because only he would have me. I was in another world from the one I live in now. I didn’t know anything. I was ignorant of my condition. I just knew that something was wrong, but I didn’t really understand what had happened to me, or the consequences of the years of abuse. Once I arrived at Mehwar, I felt more protected. Psychologically, I was more comfortable because I had people who were supporting me. I didn’t feel like a ‘case’. I felt like a woman. They treated me as a woman who was equal to them.”

Being sheltered at Mehwar allowed “F” to learn from other positive female role models about the range of human rights she had been deprived of for so long, about how to understand and process the effects that years of abuse had had on her psyche, and how to be independent and live and work in society.

She needed a lot of support from Mehwar counsellors and lawyers, and in the beginning it was difficult for her to talk about what had happened to her. It took about two months for her to find the courage to speak up.

“At first I was afraid to talk with people. Mehwar helped me with this. Mehwar gave me everything: psychological counselling sessions, legal advice and vocational training. Most importantly, they opened the way for me to see people in a new, positive light, and to work and deal with them. The support of social workers helped a lot.”

Mehwar lawyers continued to follow up on her case, even after she left the Centre. It took two to three years in court, but at the beginning of 2011, her father was convicted for the abuse he had perpetrated against her and her sister.

“F” also worked on a safety and reintegration plan with the Mehwar counsellors, who helped her recognise her talent in dress design, and enrolled her in courses to further develop her skills. She subsequently worked in a factory for sewing and embroidery.

1 Throughout this report, all references to real cases are referred to with a letter for reasons of confidentiality.

“My working relations with others were good; in college I was treated like any other person. It helped me to see how other women were successfully living their lives. I am very grateful to the Mehwar social workers who followed up on my situation in the workplace to make sure I was being treated well. Working with others allowed me to be independent and make friendships outside of my family.”

In early 2009, “F”, together with the Mehwar team, decided she was ready to leave the Centre. Mehwar helped pay for her accommodation until the end of 2009, and during this time she received regular visits from Mehwar social workers. At the end of 2009, she decided to marry.

“At first, it was difficult. At first, I had a big problem being intimate with another human being. But again, Mehwar helped me with this. I learned how to establish my boundaries and to state my needs clearly. In my marriage, I am now happy to talk to my husband about what is bothering me. Without the counselling of Mehwar, this would not have been possible! Mehwar gave me everything.”

While her life has changed immeasurably since the day she first walked through the door at Mehwar, challenges remain for “F”. She and her husband, like many other Palestinians, are heavily affected by the prevailing poor economic climate. Her husband is often out of work and they have high rent and bills to pay. She has one young son and another child on the way, which means she is currently unable to work, while also needing to pay transportation costs to visit the doctor. In addition, her husband’s family often asks him for money. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, life for “F” before and after Mehwar is incomparable:

“Mehwar changed my life a lot. It’s not possible to compare Mehwar to anything else because it changed my life and supported me. Even now, more than two years after leaving, I can still call on them. If ever I find myself in a crisis, or if my son is sick, I can call Mehwar. I am in regular contact with social workers. Before I came to Mehwar, I was frustrated and felt desperate about life. After Mehwar, I am happy and feel empowered and confident in myself. If you compare it to before, I am very happy now and always remember the situation I was in before.”







BACKGROUND OF MEHWAR



1. Violence against women in the oPt

The phenomenon of VAW is, all over the world, a manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women, and the exercise of male control over women's lives. Culture, social norms and traditions in the oPt reinforce different roles for men and women, all of which are often used as a ground to justify discriminatory practices against women and girls. As a result, many women in the oPt are subjected to different forms of violence including sexual abuse, home imprisonment, forced marriage (sometimes at a very young age and sometimes to their rapists), death threats from close relatives, so-called "honour" killings, and illegal incarceration. Until the establishment of the Mehwar Centre, sexually abused girls and women were often sent to institutions for the elderly or mentally insane, placed under police custody, or forced into marriages. Many of these cases are now sent to Mehwar – a place where their aspirations are heard, and above all, where they learn to live a life in safety and dignity, with hope for the future.

Definition of Violence against Women (VAW)

"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."

United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women
UN General Assembly Resolution 48/104, 20 December 1993

As particularly vulnerable groups in Palestinian society, women and children are among the most affected by the prolonged Israeli occupation, resulting humanitarian crises, absence of a peace agreement, inter-factional fighting, political impasse, and poor economic conditions, including high unemployment.

The range and depth of societal pressures that have led to a rise in VAW in the oPt were documented in the "Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences" to the UN Economic and Social Council in February 2005. Following an official visit to the oPt, the Special Rapporteur concluded that "[d]ecades of Israeli occupation of the oPt, use of force and stringent security measures combined with the forms of resistance these provoke have contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of legitimised violence as a method of conflict resolution." She noted that "[t]he death, imprisonment or unemployment of many adult male members of the community, which affects all areas of the oPt, have increased poverty and social tensions that contribute to increased domestic violence." She further explained that "[p]arallel to this, the use of land, water, food, the demolition of homes and the destruction of the general economy as a weapon against the occupied population have resulted in a deterioration of the living conditions in the oPt," where "sixty per cent of the Palestinian population reportedly lives under the poverty line." As a result, "[a]t the intersection of occupation and patriarchy, women experience a multilayered discrimination and multiple forms of violence. Whilst accurate data and information on VAW in the oPt is scarce, the data that does exist suggests that VAW is a significant

problem, affecting women of all ages and classes. A recent study² by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) highlights that 37% of married women (29.9% in the West Bank and 51.1% in Gaza) reported experiencing violence by their husbands in the preceding 12 months. According to the same report, violence perpetrated against children is also a significant issue, as 51% of children were exposed to violence inside the household by a member of the household. Moreover, violence against the elderly is also an increasing concern, as 7.3% of those 65 and over reported suffering abuse within the family.

Women and children victims of VAW in the oPt face a range of challenges in accessing justice. Due to the cultural importance of family honour in Palestinian society, there is often strong pressure to “resolve” these issues privately, without recourse to legal action. Should women wish to pursue formal access to justice for VAW issues, their family and close community members might not support them, and may even accuse them of “provoking” the violence themselves. Women victims of violence in the oPt often face social ostracism and the deterioration of their social networks.

With regard to community trust in institutions, the Palestinian Civil Police (PCP) is still a relatively new institution. While community trust in the PCP is increasing and progress has been made in improving gender awareness within the police and making police stations more women- and family-friendly, much remains to be done in these areas.

At the legal level, the oPt is governed by a patchwork of legal frameworks, including the Egyptian Penal Code (Gaza), the Israeli legal system (East Jerusalem), and the Jordanian Penal Code of 1960 (West Bank), many of which do not support women victims of violence in accessing justice. In fact, among these various legal sources, there are currently no laws directly addressing VAW, nor is there a personal status law based on gender equality. The absence of specific laws for addressing VAW has contributed to significant discrimination against women in the legal sphere. For example, while charges can be filed for general assault, more serious abuse against a woman does not qualify as a “public crime” unless her injuries persist for 10 days or more, as determined by a doctor in a public hospital³. Furthermore, rape within marriage is not considered illegal. Courthouses are typically not “gender-friendly” places: judges, prosecutors, and court administrative staff are generally male, and the infrastructure is usually not tailored to suit women and children victims of violence. At the same time, prosecutors and judges often lack the legal framework and capacity to provide effective support to victims of VAW, and need to “compensate” those gaps with a large degree of discretion. Though this discretionary power has, in several cases, been in favour of women, specifically where women’s advocates sensitized judicial

2 “Violence survey in the Palestinian Society, 2011.”

3 Public crime: While a case generally can be defined as the right to claim through the Court, a crime can result in more than one case, resulting in public right case. The latest can be defined as a claim to the Court on behalf of the community against the perpetrator, since the crime affected the security of the society resulting in general damage against it, and thus the society demands the justice system in punishment of the perpetrator by the General prosecutor.

General assault: Special damage could rise from the crime affecting individuals in themselves, or their properties, etc., and then the affected individuals have the right to proceed in requesting compensation, through the civil rights case, which is defined as the right resort to the justice system to be compensated for each injury or damage as a result of crime.



officials on issues of VAW, we are still far from having in place a reliable judicial system mainstreaming women’s protection without leaving it to the personal discretion of the judge. As such, many cases are handled through parallel justice system mechanisms, relying on tribal laws. Though often discriminatory towards women, this system appears to some victims as more effective in providing them with protection and tangible economic benefits as compensation for the violence they suffered.

There are also significant economic costs associated with pursuing legal redress for VAW issues, such as court fees and medical fees related to mandatory examinations at any public hospital⁴. However, many of the women victims have limited economic means; they are usually very young and are not financially independent, particularly if they have been ostracised by their families and communities.

Women also face challenges in accessing services, as there is a general lack of specialized legal aid as well as psychosocial and medical services for women victims of violence in the oPt. Moreover, those services that do exist are weakly coordinated with each other. As a result, many women, particularly those in rural areas, may not be aware of the services that exist, have limited social and economic means to access them, and face multiple restrictions on their mobility.

“Prior to the establishment of Mehwar, we could not provide protection services to women victims of violence. The only available alternative to protect women was to place them in female prisons, mental hospitals, institutions that have protected hostels, or to temporarily place them with host families. The Mehwar Centre was instrumental in providing the necessary means for protection”.

MoSA official

The lack of specialized protection services for women victims of VAW has also hindered women’s access to protection. Women’s organizations have attempted to establish shelters in the past, yet lack of specialized expertise available, sufficient funding, and ineffective coordination with, and support by, local and national authorities, hindered their success. Women victims of VAW seeking protection continued then

to remain, in most of the cases, unsafe or were placed, “for their own protection”, in unsuitable and/or stigmatizing institutions, such as mental hospitals and prisons.

The range of interrelated challenges faced by women in responding to VAW in the oPt necessitates a multi-dimensional response that incorporates legal, social and economic mechanisms for restoring rights to women victims of violence.

⁴ With ‘serious physical injury’ defined in the Jordanian Penal Code as injuries that take 10 days or more to heal, victims are required to obtain a medical report from an accredited doctor from a public hospital. These reports cost between 100-150 shekels, depending on the district. Without the report, the court will dismiss the case.

2. Establishment of the Mehwar Centre

“The Mehwar Centre is recognized to be the most functional shelter in the oPt, given that other shelters’ operations and services were interrupted at certain times due to funding and sometimes management issues. Mehwar was able to continuously provide services to women victims of violence”.

**Majeda Al-Masri,
Minister of Social Affairs**

The Mehwar Centre shelters women and their children who are seeking refuge from violence. Mehwar, in Arabic, means “the core” reflecting the central role that women play in Palestinian society. The idea for establishing the Centre originated collectively amongst individuals in a number of Palestinian NGOs working to

combat violence against women in the oPt and within the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), with special involvement of the MoSA district office in Bethlehem area, whose director was particularly sensitive to the issue. Through long and sorrowful experiences working with women victims of violence throughout the 1990s and before, these stakeholders concluded that their ability to successfully address VAW in the oPt was seriously impeded by the lack of a safe and secure facility, appropriately staffed with specialised personnel to empower women victims of violence.

In 2001, the Italian Cooperation commissioned a group of Palestinian academic specialists from the Universities of Jerusalem (Al Quds) and Bethlehem to undertake a feasibility study, which confirmed the need and demand for such a centre. In response, a multi-stakeholder consultation process established a joint strategy for the establishment of the first specialised anti-violence centre in the oPt. In order to ensure the success of the Centre and the support of the community in the difficult social context into which it would be embedded, the strategy proposed establishing two sections: the internal section, which would serve as a shelter for women and children victims of violence, and the external section, which would provide various community services. Following the multi-stakeholder consultation process, the Government of Italy agreed to donate an initial fund of approximately three million dollars, allocated through the World Bank for the construction and implementation of a “Counselling Centre for Women in Difficult Circumstances” in the Bethlehem Governorate, on land donated by the Bethlehem Municipality. The project was executed from 2004 to 2007 by the Palestinian Welfare Organisation, later renamed the NGO Development Centre (NDC). It was entrusted by the World Bank, and implemented by the Palestinian NGO, Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), and Differenza Donna (DD), a specialist Italian NGO with extensive experience running and managing anti-violence centres in Italy. NDC was responsible for constructing the building and administrating the project’s funds, while WCLAC and DD were responsible for technical matters such as stakeholder sensitization, policy development, staff recruitment, training, and supervision, in cooperation and under the auspices of MoSA. The project established a pilot anti-violence centre of 1,800 square metres, built specifically to suit the goals of protecting and empowering women, preventing violence, and raising community awareness about issues related to VAW. The Mehwar Centre was formally inaugurated on 27 February 2007. To staff the Centre, a group of 25 women were locally recruited and received intensive theoretical and practical training, both locally and in Italy, beginning in October 2006. Key stakeholders from the Palestinian police, governmental



ministries and courts also received training in VAW issues and a campaign to raise awareness about the Mehwar Centre and its services was conducted in cities and villages throughout the West Bank prior the Centre's inauguration. Following this phase, with the aim to consolidate the Mehwar Centre experience and use it as model for the development of national women's protection policies and services, UN Women, in partnership with MoSA, and with additional funding from the Italian Cooperation and technical assistance from Differenza Donna, launched a 36-month project called the "Mehwar Centre for the Protection and Empowerment of Women and Families" in September 2008.

2.1 What is the Mehwar Centre, and what is its target group?

Mehwar is the first centre of its kind in the oPt in seeking to provide integrated services for victims of violence. The focus of the Centre is to combine prevention, protection, empowerment, and community awareness activities, thereby offering a holistic approach to restoring and safeguarding the rights of women and children victims of violence.

The Mehwar Centre's facilities comprise a shelter for women (with their children) and girls who have been victims of violence, with bedrooms for around 35 persons, as well as a counselling centre, which provides social, psychological and legal counselling, in addition to professional counselling on parenthood and childhood for families in distress. The Centre's facilities also include a small nursery for both the children of the women sheltered at Mehwar and those of women in the surrounding community. There are also nursing and medical counselling facilities at Mehwar; a multipurpose hall for prevention programmes and various community activities that has around 100 seats and is equipped with a screen, a projector, stereos, computers, a portable stage, chairs and tables; a small gym for women from the community; a cafeteria; and administrative offices.

"You have to understand something. Women don't leave their homes easily or because they want to. They do so only because they have no choice, when they cannot take it anymore, and after years of abuse. Women arrive here with a deep sense of guilt, shame and very low self-esteem."

Mehwar staff

The Mehwar target group includes women and girls who suffer from physical, psychological and sexual violence leading to physical and psychological damage, and whose lives are, or may be, under threat. Its target group also includes children who have witnessed violence committed against their mothers, as well as children and families in distress. Mehwar's prevention programmes target school

students and key civil society stakeholders who are able to assist in advocacy initiatives, including community leaders, religious leaders, academia, teachers, and volunteers.

2.2 The objectives of the Mehwar Centre

1. To prevent VAW through partnerships with multi-stakeholder networks;
2. To protect and safely reintegrate women and children victims of violence into society;

3. To empower victims of VAW through counselling, legal aid, medical support, educational and vocational training, and employment assistance;
4. To support the families by strengthening positive, non-violent relationships based on recognition and respect of each individual within the family;
5. To increase awareness of VAW and the human rights of women and children within Palestinian society.

2.3 The Mehwar Centre's principles and characteristics

Mehwar's principles are grounded in human rights concepts, including the right of all individuals to lead safe and secure lives, the right to protection, the right of family members to live safe and healthy lives within a family environment based on mutual respect and the rejection of violence, and the right of women and children to lead full and healthy lives with the potential for full human development.

Mehwar promotes the idea that any service dealing with victims of VAW should be based on actual experience dealing with VAW cases, as well as specialized training in, and understanding of, the subject matter. Understanding gender dynamics within a specific cultural and social context is also crucial when providing support and specialized services in this area.

The Mehwar Centre employs an innovative and, in the context of the oPt, unique approach to addressing the issue of VAW. This approach focuses on developing international and national partnerships and on engaging government and civil society in activities that focus on the prevention of violence, the protection of victims and their rights, and the promotion of women's empowerment. The Centre focuses on building women-to-women relationships with, and among, violence survivors. The presence of a women's support network strengthens women's self-awareness and activates empowerment mechanism. The Centre also works on constructing personalised approaches for intervention by integrating specific professional tools for each woman survivor according to her needs and aspirations.

Mehwar aims to incorporate international best practices in the area of operating anti-violence centres. This entails prioritising victims and other individuals who may be indirectly affected by violence. Mehwar also recognises the importance of the family unit and believes that, where at all possible, the aim should be to reintegrate victims within a safe, protected home environment. However, the Centre rejects the idea that victims should be immediately returned to their families. For all women sheltered at Mehwar, a thorough risk assessment is carried out by the staff in cooperation with key stakeholders as needed. Women victims' needs are always taken into consideration before deciding on any reintegration plan. Mehwar also strives to abide by the highest standards of confidentiality, accountability and transparency in handling cases. Also, Mehwar supports the principle of community ownership of the problem and the solution to VAW, by fostering a spirit of volunteerism and through the recruitment of volunteers to work at the Centre. Mehwar also recognises the complementary services provided by other stakeholders, and the importance of coordinating effectively with these actors.



3. The Mehwar Centre's partners

“Mehwar has also motivated other partners to do more on the issue of VAW. For the first time, there has been a “visible caseload” of women – visible, because they are sheltered 24/7 at Mehwar. Partners are now better able to see the issues and to carry out their responsibilities.”

Mehwar staff

UN Women has been the executing agency of the Mehwar Centre project since September 2008. UN Women has been at the forefront of the global struggle to address VAW, in particular through the support of women's shelters in conflict-affected countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. This experience strongly positions them to provide advice on

the future development of the Mehwar Centre in the oPt. In the oPt specifically, UN Women has been working for 10 years at both policy and operational levels to provide advocacy for legal reform, promote gender equality at the national level and among advocates, and conduct interventions at the grassroots level to protect and empower Palestinian women. These efforts have allowed UN Women to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among NGOs, governmental organizations, and international agencies on the advancement of women's human rights and human security.

The Government of Italy is the donor of the Mehwar Centre project, having provided more than six million dollars in financial support since its establishment. Gender equality and women's empowerment are given priority within the individual sectors and country strategies of the Italian Cooperation, which is manifested in the front-line efforts to address VAW in the oPt. UN Women and the Italian Government share a long history of collaboration in different parts of the world, working together towards the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly the third MDG to “promote gender equality and empower women.”

At the operational level, Mehwar relies on a number of key partners in its efforts to provide integrated solutions to victims of VAW.

MoSA is the governmental body responsible for delivering social services to the Palestinian population, and as such is the institution mandated to oversee shelters in the oPt. In February 2009, MoSA signed a Letter of Agreement (LoA) with UN Women, setting out its responsibilities towards developing policies for the Mehwar Centre in line with national laws and international human rights treaties and standards to which the PA has committed. MoSA is also the Deputy Chair of the “National Committee to Combat Violence against Women”. Chaired by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), the Committee was established by the Cabinet in 2008 to develop national-level policies aimed at combating VAW. As such, it oversees the implementation of the “National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women,” of which the implementation of anti-violence shelters is an integral component. The Mehwar Centre, therefore, falls under the institutional umbrella and overall supervision of MoSA, which provides the shelter with governmental support.

Differenza Donna has provided technical assistance to the staff of the Mehwar Centre. The Italian NGO has extensive experience in setting up and managing anti-violence centres for abused women and children in Italy. In addition, it has been involved since 2004 in the planning, development and implementation of the Mehwar Centre

“While protection of women and children from violence is part of MoSA’s mandate, we lacked the necessary means for it. Mehwar Centre has provided the tools and the physical premises for the implementation of protecting female victims of violence.

The Palestinian government has the responsibility to provide protection to women; there is now a political will – at the national level – to continue these efforts of protecting women from violence. Mehwar Centre was instrumental in providing the necessary means for this”.

**Majeda Al-Masri,
Minister of Social Affairs**

project, and has provided practical experience through the presence of one of its staff working onsite at the Centre to assist in project implementation, and organising training and study visits. Intensive work to develop suitable tools to address the psychological well-being of women victims of violence in the oPt has been conducted under the technical guidance of Differenza Donna’s senior psychologist. As cooperation with existing governmental and NGO institutions operating in the area of mental health continues

to develop, Differenza Donna has worked hard to build the capacity of Mehwar staff in understanding and addressing the correlation between VAW and women’s mental health.

Building partnerships with key stakeholders and enhancing coordination has been a feature of the 2008-2012 period for Mehwar. Working with partners, UN Women has taken the technical lead in several professional development processes, such as the development of case studies and documentation systems, staff evaluation and recruitment guidelines, case risk assessment and women’s access to justice, and the review of women’s protection policies and procedures, including reintegration guidelines. In doing so, it has significantly enhanced Mehwar’s partnerships with MoSA, MoWA, the Ministry of Interior (MoI), the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), and the High Judiciary Council (HJC), as well as with national human rights experts and activists. During this period, UN Women has also provided technical leadership while working in partnership with MoWA on the development of the first “National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women” in the oPt, which is the first such national strategy in the Middle East region. At the same time, partnerships with women’s organisations and civil society have been strengthened, benefitting from the Centre’s cooperation with the Tawasol Network of local NGOs for women’s empowerment. Established with funding from the Italian Cooperation, the network’s mandate is to implement women’s reintegration programmes.

The 2011-12 period saw a significant increase in the commitment and involvement of Palestinian senior professionals and academics in support of the Mehwar Centre. A number of highly qualified experts assumed leading roles in providing the Mehwar team with clinical supervision; in developing Mehwar’s practice and policy guidelines; in assessing Mehwar’s legal situation and studying options for the Centre’s final legal status; and in promoting Mehwar’s specialised expertise within MoSA departments and among the Centre’s other key partners, thereby supporting a broader adoption of best practices based on Mehwar’s progressive experience. These achievements are a clear sign of the Mehwar Centre’s growing professional image and acknowledgement within Palestinian society.



Mehwar in the Words of Partners



“There has been a big change in attitudes since the establishment of Mehwar. We consider the staff there as specialists. They know more about the individual cases and their backgrounds because they are with them 24/7. Their evaluations and recommendations on cases are very important and highly regarded by my office. There is no doubt that prosecutors have become more specialised after the creation of Mehwar, and in cases of domestic violence I now appoint specialised staff to work on these issues.

“Another important achievement has been Mehwar’s contribution to the better handling of legal cases. The number of cases has risen in the last two years as people have begun to have more trust in the legal process.

“The establishment of Mehwar means that there is a safe place for women to go where they can be protected and find a solution to their problems. At Mehwar they find professional counselling and legal aid staff who can open communication channels with their families and see if resolution and reintegration are possible. Through its psychological and counselling work with victims, Mehwar has also helped prepare women for interviews and talking about their cases, which allows us to prepare better evidence briefs. In cases outside of Mehwar, we definitely see the difference.

“The relationship with Mehwar has gotten better over the years, in particular through legal clinics and workshops that have helped clarify a number of issues. In the beginning, there was a strong perception that these were ‘bad women’ and that many of them were criminals. Over the years, the perception has shifted and they are now acknowledged as victims.” Bethlehem prosecutor



“I worked for many years in the PCP investigation department and there were a lot of problems regarding cases of family abuse. The difference before and after Mehwar is significant. The victim used to keep silent about her case and would usually go back to a life of abuse, while the police would use their tribal connections and support to try to guarantee her safety. Now, when there is a case, she is given protection and services through Mehwar, which allows us to collect her testimony as part of the evidence brief, and together with partners we work on a risk assessment and risk management plan. We then check up on cases and follow up with site visits, in which FPU, MoSA and Mehwar staff collect information, and women are given numbers for contacting the police. Mehwar’s role in analysing cases is vital. The introduction of the case management system in 2010 was very important; it was an important step because it has clarified roles and responsibilities and led to decisions being group decisions. Many organisations participate in these case conferences, including MoSA, the House of Girls, FPU, Mehwar, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoE) and the Prosecutor’s Office. Partnerships with other organisations have also improved. Before, there were organisations working on this issue, but we all worked very individually. Now, there is a clear referral system for cases.” FPU staff

“Mehwar’s increased partnerships with stakeholders are a great achievement. At the beginning, there were a lot of problems; different stakeholders were unsure of their roles. Now there is more coordination, and everyone knows their role. A lot of training programmes have been carried out, particularly with the police, on law, women’s rights, human rights, domestic violence, and other issues. Slowly, opinions began to change...but we still need to do more work with some institutions.”

Mehwar staff

Another key partner for Mehwar is the Family Protection Unit (FPU) of the Palestinian Civil Police (PCP), which is mandated to deal with cases of domestic violence in the West Bank. The establishment of the FPU programme in October 2008 was a direct response to the growing problem of domestic violence and child abuse cases in the West Bank, which was highlighted in part because of the formation of Mehwar and the visibility of its hosted beneficiaries.

The PCP had previously responded to cases of VAW and child abuse in an informal manner, since there were no specialised personnel or protocols that clearly outlined professional means to respond to domestic violence cases. The formation of the FPU illustrates the PCP’s growing recognition of the issue of VAW and domestic violence in the oPt. It is also clear that the establishment of Mehwar and the development of a cadre of staff experts on VAW has had a positive effect on the attitudes of the FPU and other partners’ staff.

Differenza Donna Interview, 30 May 2012

Excerpts from an interview with Differenza Donna staff members Emanuela Moroli (president) and Irene Agnello (psychologist)

What do you see as being the primary achievements of Mehwar in the 2008-12 period? E.: One key achievement is Mehwar’s sustainability. During this period, Mehwar became an important part of the protection system under the umbrella of MoSA, whereas before 2008, there was no integrated system for the protection of women in the oPt. I.: Another good achievement in these years is the formation of a mental health working group. In the last two to three years, Differenza Donna really pushed for this, as many of the women in Mehwar have come from the mental hospital. Only a team can solve cases of violence, not an individual. All of the competencies need to be shared.

What did Mehwar do differently compared to other actors in the areas of counselling and legal aid? E.: Mehwar hosted victims for long periods in a safe, comfortable homelike environment. Such places did not exist before. This was a pilot project that provided free support, legal aid, counselling, cultural activities, health services, and vocational training. For the first time in the oPt, a centre offered comprehensive services for victims of VAW. [...] Being sheltered at Mehwar allows women to have the necessary time to rebuild their self-confidence and dignity, and to restore the rights that have been destroyed over years of abuse. They learn the value of personal and financial independence.



What services existed for victims of violence before Mehwar was established, and what services exist since its establishment? E.: The difference is that, for the first time, these services are comprehensive. Before Mehwar, women were often referred to prisons and while they might have been supported by women's organisations, they didn't receive protection. The training of staff in a range of services made a big difference in changing the attitude of staff in dealing with victims of violence. The case conference system is another important tool, but this is the last step in a long process; by the time a case conference is called, a lot of work in empowering the woman has already taken place. For the first time, women discovered that they have rights, choices, and value. This is very complex work that requires highly skilled personnel, as well as time, space and focused effort. Only excellent women's shelters can perform such work, and Mehwar was the first such shelter in the Middle East.

How effective do you think the following Mehwar project components have been?

Prevention

I.: Effective, especially when compared to the services that were available before.

Protection

I.: Effective, especially when compared to the services that were available before.

Empowerment

I.: Not bad, especially when compared to the weak economic possibilities generally available for people in oPt. Mehwar can help women look for a path, develop specialisations, and present themselves in a respectable way. However, Mehwar cannot be accountable for the poor economic climate. Not all of the burden should fall on Mehwar. Civil society also has to provide support in this area.

Community awareness

I. and E.: Mehwar has had a huge impact in this area, particularly in the beginning. When Mehwar first started, there were many on-going projects to raise awareness about VAW in the community. However, the most powerful form of awareness-raising comes from listening to someone who works directly with these women; when they talk about women's stories as real bodies and souls who are asking for more dignity, it is extremely powerful.

How effective has Mehwar been in reintegrating women and following up on their cases after they have left the Centre? E.: It must be recognized that it is not usually possible to reintegrate women within a family where there has been sexual violence. In these cases, reintegration within the extended family might be possible, if there are family members who are supportive of the victim.

What did your staff learn from working with Mehwar? Did working to develop Mehwar influence how your staff view the issue of violence against women? Have attitudes changed amongst staff members? E.: Working in the oPt has confirmed the conviction that VAW is always the same worldwide, although there are of course cultural differences. This realization has been important for Differenza Donna, as it made us realize we could work in other countries.



**CHRONOLOGY OF NATIONAL
LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY
RESPONSES TO VAW ISSUES,
AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
THE MEHWAR CENTRE**

“UN Women will track the contribution of the United Nations system to supporting countries, at their request, to introduce national legislation, develop multi-sectoral national action plans and expand the range and outreach of “one stop” services, increase responsiveness of the justice system, and adopt minimum standards for the service delivery.”

UN Women Strategic Plan 2011-2013

2000: Discussions among key civil society actors and MoSA occurred on the need for an anti-violence centre in the oPt. MoSA proposed the idea for a specialized centre addressing the phenomenon of gender-based violence to the Government of Italy.

2001: The Government of Italy commissioned a team of specialised Palestinian academics and professionals to conduct a feasibility study for the project. The results of the study confirmed the need for a national, specialized and multi-purpose anti-violence centre.

2003: The Palestinian Basic Law (2003) was amended to codify the commitment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to respect basic rights and liberties, providing for equality before the law without discrimination on the basis of sex.

2003: MoWA was established.

2005: Police officers, previously trained within the framework of the Mehwar anti-violence Centre project, received the mandate from the PCP to work on cases of VAW. Their experience and expertise will serve as the basis for the creation of the FPU.

2006: The initial corpus of Mehwar policies and procedures was developed by WCLAC, DD and MoSA, in consultation with a wide range of Palestinian stakeholders, as well as national and international experts.

February 2007: The Mehwar Centre was officially inaugurated as the first specialized anti-violence centre for victims of VAW in the oPt.

September 2008: The National Committee to Combat VAW was established. Led by MoWA and co-chaired by MoSA, it comprises a wide-ranging membership, including governmental and non-governmental organisations and is responsible for the development of a national strategic plan to combat VAW.

7 October 2008: The MoI/PCP introduced the FPU throughout the West Bank. As specialist police units, they are mandated to deal with cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

8 March 2009: The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by Presidential Decree No. 19.

September-October 2009: A National Committee for women’s protection centres in the oPt was established. It is chaired by MoSA, with MoWA serving as the deputy chair. Other members include key national NGOs working on VAW issues, academia, governorates and FPU.

October 2009-July 2011: Palestinian judges met with Italian judges and prosecutors to discuss best judicial practices in addressing VAW cases, and to identify steps for pursuing VAW specialization of judicial cadres in the oPt.

Beginning of 2009: Efforts to develop a national referral system for VAW cases prioritizing women's needs and rights began through a national consultation process involving governmental and non-governmental institutions (the "Takamol" Project), and produced a first draft of national referral system which is currently under testing and review.

December 2010: Mehwar Centre staff received a "human rights defenders" award issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

11 January 2011: The Palestinian Cabinet of Ministries endorsed the "National Strategic Plan for Combating Violence against Women (2011-2019)," prepared by MoWA in consultation with all national governmental and non-governmental actors working on VAW, and with the technical support of UN Women. UN Women ensured, through the Mehwar project, that VAW victims sheltered at Mehwar were involved in the national consultation process for developing the Strategy. The PA also developed the "2011-2013 Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy," which considers violence as one of its main themes.

February 2011: A national committee for coordinating anti-violence shelters, called the "Shelters' Technical Committee" was established with the coordination of MoSA and technical support from UN Women, along with the participation of the Mehwar Centre and NGO-run shelters in Nablus and Jericho. The Committee's main aim is to promote the development of common standards for running anti-violence centres in the oPt.

May 2011: PA President Mahmoud Abbas ordered an amendment to the existing "honour killing law," which now states that perpetrators of crimes "in defense of family honour" should no longer receive lenient sentences.

June 2011: UN Women published a report containing the findings and recommendations of an independent review of Mehwar policies and procedures. The report confirms the solid human rights-based vision and approach adopted by the Mehwar Centre, while identifying gaps in the codification of best practices, as well as in their implementation. For future revision and improvement, five areas were identified by the external evaluator for prioritisation in the short- and medium-term: 1) centre governance, 2) management, administration and communication, 3) case-management, 4) outreach, and 5) staffing. The findings and recommendations were endorsed by MoSA, which agreed to use them as the basis for the development of Mehwar Centre "Practice and Policy Guidelines," with the aim to promote the Centre as the first national reference for setting human rights-based anti-violence centres standards.

July 2011: The Palestinian Cabinet of Ministries approved an accreditation policy document for anti-violence centres, developed by MoSA in an effort to capitalize on the advanced experience of the Mehwar Centre. The document represents a first attempt to regulate and homogenize the work of anti-violence service providers in the oPt, while setting quality standards.



2011-2019 National Strategy to Combat VAW

VISION

Towards a Palestinian Society that is free from all forms of discrimination against women, where women enjoy equal rights and opportunities to participate in the economic, political, social and cultural development and to equally benefit from its outcomes.












GOAL

To promote the principle of the rule of law based on respect for women's rights and improving institutional mechanisms in Palestinian society in order to protect and support abused women and allow them to live in a society free from all forms of discrimination, and based on equality, dignity and respect for human rights.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

1. Promote protection and empowerment mechanisms for women subjected to violence resulting from Israeli occupation
2. Promote a legal framework and institutional mechanisms to protect women from violence
3. Improve social protection and social support offered to women victims of violence
4. Improve health services in dealing with cases of VAW
5. Improve protection, jurisdiction, shari'a and defence systems to protect women from violence based on women's rights-based approach
6. Promote the principle of violence prevention as part of the strategic direction of institutions working on protection of women's rights
7. Build a monitoring, follow-up and evaluation system involving both governmental and non-governmental institutions

GENERAL PRINCIPLES GOVERNING THE STRATEGY

-  A belief that women's rights are human rights
-  Government commitment to combat VAW
-  The use of the term "women" rather than "woman" to point to women as individuals in society in various life stages and of various social status and age groups, rather than labelling the entire group with the characteristics of one woman with certain features, standards, class, affiliation, etc.
-  Responding to the needs of all women in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip without discrimination
-  Adopting the principle of criminalizing the offenders and using the philosophy of rehabilitating perpetrators of violence
-  Adopting the principle of empowerment and reintegration of women survivors of violence in society
-  Involving women themselves in the development of their vision within the National Strategy to Combat VAW
-  Involving men and boys in a central manner in the process of combating VAW
-  Promoting the role of research and documentation to provide the essential references for the process of combating VAW
-  Promoting the principle of partnership between governmental institutions, NGOs and the private sector in the process of combating VAW
-  Activating and creating mechanisms at the government level for monitoring and follow-up of the process of combating VAW



**MEHWAR'S APPROACH
TO SUPPORTING
AND EMPOWERING WOMEN
VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE**

1. Linking women’s needs to the identification of national priorities

Since its inception, the Mehwar Centre has been placed at the core of national discussions aimed to identify strategic priorities to protect and empower women within the Palestinian context. The combination of services addressing women victims of VAW and services targeting families in distress and the community at large, was realized based on a recommendations made by national governmental and non-governmental parties taking into consideration the specificity of the Palestinian society. At the same time, since Mehwar started to provide services, in 2007, they have been consistently keen in amplifying the voices of women to influence decision and policy making processes which concerns ending VAW in the oPt.

On 11 January 2011, the Palestinian Cabinet endorsed the first, comprehensive “National Strategic Plan to Combat VAW” in the Middle East region. For the first time, an important national policy document has been developed upon the direct feedback

“The Mehwar Centre directly corresponds with the objectives of current national priorities and strategies that focus on combating violence against Palestinian women. The Mehwar Centre project is being implemented within the framework of the nine-year National Strategic Plan – prepared by MoWA – to Combat Violence against Palestinian Women. It directly corresponds to the second and third strategic goals of the national plan.”

MoSA staff

of women who represent the main beneficiaries of the intended policy action: women victims of VAW. This has been possible thanks to the existence of Mehwar, and benefitted from the Centre’s direct affiliation to MoSA and from the technical support provided by UN Women with the aim to place the Centre’s experience at the core of a national, human rights -based women’s protection system.

2. The women-to-women approach

Mehwar usually receives the most extreme cases of sexual and physical abuse. Victims often arrive at the Centre in a state of shock, fearful for their lives, unable to articulate the unspeakable violence they have suffered, confused about concepts of sexuality and intimacy, and unable to trust others. In order to address these multiple, reinforcing factors, Mehwar employs a “women-to-women” approach that is culturally and practically appropriate, in which specialised legal, counselling, medical and shelter personnel work closely with the victim, providing caring attention and positive role modelling. This approach helps each woman understand that she is now in a safe place, where she will be protected and assisted in rebuilding her life and building on her own resources. By establishing a women’s self-help community within the shelter setting, Mehwar helps victims understand that not only are they not to blame for the violence that they have endured, but that any woman, whether Palestinian or from other parts of the world, rich or poor, living in urban or rural areas, can also be victim of VAW. The use of the self-help oriented women-to-women approach enables victims to free themselves from feelings of guilt and blame, and process what has happened to them. At the same time, their experience is linked to the broader phenomenon of VAW, thus de-personalizing it. Consequently, it helps victims to understand and strengthen

“In cases of extreme abuse, very often the abuse has been going on since childhood. Women often arrive at the Centre in a state of shock and trauma, unable to speak about their experience, often for a period of months or even years. The use of a women-to-women approach is culturally appropriate in Palestine and enables Mehwar to break down the walls of silence that have been built up through years of abuse. As women, we are able to win their trust, persuade them that we understand their needs, and come up with an intervention plan for them.”

Mehwar staff

their own “self,” to comprehend the range of human rights they have been denied, but are entitled to claim, to feel safe and secure, and to envision a future free from violence. Mehwar counsellors work on establishing trust with the victim, and on establishing a personalised plan of action which incorporates safety arrangements, professional legal and counselling services, and empowerment activities that take into account the skills and aspirations of the victim and give her hope for the future.

3. Engaging communities and families

One of the key pillars of Mehwar’s approach to preventing the occurrence of VAW, protecting and empowering women victims of VAW, and enhancing community awareness, lies in its direct engagement with families and communities. Mehwar, as a pioneering pilot anti-violence centre in the oPt, has a significant role in enhancing community awareness around issues of VAW, particularly on the rights of all individuals to lead secure lives free from violence; the rights of women and children to be protected; the right of family members to live in a safe and healthy family environment based on mutual respect and rejection of all forms of violence; and the right of women to live dignified lives free from violence.

“In the beginning, the community had a big problem in accepting Mehwar because they believed that it encouraged girls to leave their houses, and that it corrupted them. Step by step, families began to recognise the importance of Mehwar and accept the role of the Centre in providing services to support both women and families.”

Bethlehem police officer

With regard to community awareness, it is important to recognise that the achievements of the 2008-12 period rest on the solid groundwork that was laid in the years leading up.

In the initial stages of the establishment of the Centre, there was a perception amongst some members of the community that Mehwar would be a place that would “damage” or “corrupt” the family. Through extensive awareness-raising sessions, the Mehwar team, with assistance from key partners, has endeavoured to convince people of the importance of Mehwar, to explain the purpose of the Centre, and to emphasise that all members of the family should be protected, particularly the most vulnerable, including women and children. The decision to make Mehwar an “open” and “transparent” place with a strong outreach programme and services that could be used and enjoyed by the community contributed to increasing understanding and acceptance on the part of the community.



“Opening up the facilities such as the gym, café, and multi-purpose hall to the community really helped. In the beginning, some of the women from the community were surprised to interact with victims of VAW. When they began to get to know them, they saw that these women were really no different from them. A lot of activities have involved women from inside and outside the shelter.”

Mehwar staff

In the lead up to and shortly after the inception of Mehwar, the Centre launched awareness campaigns in various villages and districts, advertising the Centre’s telephone number and address. While Mehwar staff acknowledge that this campaign had a significant impact, they also recognize that further advocacy work is needed with the media to promote Mehwar and its successes, to focus on prevention and to combat

traditional stigmas, in particular by working more closely and actively with teenagers and students.

The three main pillars of the Centre’s outreach programme focus on increasing community awareness about VAW and its impact on the family; changing stereotypical perceptions in the community about women and their role in the family and society (especially targeting youth); and building networks with women’s organisations, social institutions, governmental partners and NGOs to support Mehwar’s mission and activities, as well as spreading Mehwar’s knowledge and expertise amongst professionals in different sectors.

Crucial to Mehwar’s advocacy successes have been the capacity-building efforts of Differenza Donna, who in 2008-11 undertook various awareness-raising and capacity development activities to build the staff’s knowledge on topics such as child abuse, mother-child support, and the symptoms and features of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). UN Women has also contributed to these advocacy efforts by organising team-building retreats between Mehwar Centre staff and partner representatives, where both roles and responsibilities, as well as the vision and mission of the Centre were outlined for partners. A number of successful community awareness activities have also been organised. For example, to commemorate International Women’s Day on 8 March 2009, the Mehwar Centre organised a hip-hop concert targeting youth from the Bethlehem area. The aim was to solicit involvement and support of youth in ending VAW, while showcasing the work of the Centre.

One of the fundamental principles and practices of Mehwar is to involve the sheltered women in these cultural, advocacy, and recreational activities, so as to build understanding, friendship and solidarity between the women in Mehwar and the community at large.

Engaging with the families of victims of violence is a more challenging assignment. At all stages of intervention, Mehwar’s staff has sought to protect and empower victims, and prevent further violence. One important principle is that Mehwar staff will provide various options to beneficiaries, and then respect their choices. This can often cause conflict with a victim’s family, particularly in cases where a victim refuses to talk with or see her family, and/or when case management deems the family to still

“When we came to know she was at Mehwar, it had already been six months without us knowing where she was! We were surprised when we went to visit her. The first case conference with Mehwar staff to discuss my daughter’s situation was in August 2011, however, our daughter refused to attend our first four visits.”

Father of a successfully reintegrated girl

constitute a source of risk. In such cases, Mehwar staff have to meet the family for counselling sessions without the victim.

The Mehwar Centre recognises that in the Palestinian context, the family is the most important framework in any individual’s life. This fact compounds the tragedy of domestic violence, as the supposedly protective and nurturing cell of the

family has instead become a source of abuse and threat for the victim. Furthermore, the family and society’s practice of “blaming” and “ostracising” the victim for the violence weakens her social networks and her ability to seek help. In light of these powerful cultural factors, Mehwar invests significant amounts of time counselling and working with families, to encourage them to recognise the rights of all family members to live full lives free from violence. Where possible, Mehwar will try to reintegrate victims within families where supportive and powerful members are available, and where case workers from Mehwar, MoSA and FPU officers decide it is safe for her to return.

Mehwar staff and the staff of Differenza Donna highlight that security threats to staff almost always emanate from the family of the victim. By engaging directly with families, Mehwar staff are able to develop a clearer picture of the sources of threat, and indeed protection, within each family. The approach Mehwar takes is to empower women within the family. While acknowledging the prevailing cultural norms, Mehwar attempts to recognise the importance of family unity and highlight the importance of healthy family values such as care, protection, love and support in contributing to the family unit. They also emphasise to family leaders that protecting women is in keeping with cultural and religious traditions of Palestinian society. Ninety percent of women hosted at Mehwar are reintegrated into nuclear or extended family networks. The most challenging cases are those who are reintegrated outside of the family network. It must be recognised that, in comparison to the family unit, other networks are, by definition, weak. In these cases, women rely heavily on the supportive networks and contacts that they have built up through the Mehwar experience, but it should be acknowledged that these networks are, in terms of cultural strength, no match for the strength of the family.

4. Enabling an atmosphere of healing

The Mehwar Centre aims to create a comfortable, “homelike” atmosphere for beneficiaries, in order to allow them the time, space, comfort, and professional expertise to recover from their ordeal. The premises of the Mehwar Centre, and in particular of the Shelter, were built and furnished in compliance with gender sensitive



architecture and design. The space of an anti-violence centre is a powerful tool for healing. It is a place that allows victims to distance themselves from negative feelings of guilt, loneliness, and feeling useless and dirty. The choice of colours, lights and furniture, and the balance between outdoor and indoor, as well as private and common spaces, collectively influence the well-being of the women hosted. The “beauty” and quality of the premises also say something about their guests, that they are worthy and precious.

A key principle that Mehwar abides by in its approach to casework is the victim’s right to choose options that are best for her. In a homelike atmosphere and in a participatory manner, Mehwar staff help victims make their own decisions by providing a sympathetic ear, advice on possible options, and qualified expertise in the areas of legal aid, psychosocial counselling, vocational training and, when appropriate and feasible, employment options.

5. A microcosm of experts in the field

Since its inception, the Mehwar Centre has aimed to adopt a holistic approach in delivering its services. The word “holistic” in relation to addressing cases of VAW refers to a systemic and multi-sectoral approach that is based on an in-depth understanding of violence against women as a multifaceted phenomenon involving cultural, social, legal, health and economic dimensions. Within the framework of this holistic approach, institutions and organizations integrate various expertise in the social, health, legal and economic fields, combining a variety of actions such as training, research, prevention, intervention and networking. This approach has proven not only successful by international standards, as an effective response to the complex nature of violence against women. It appears to be particularly necessary in the Palestinian context - an environment that is characterized by extreme geographical, political and social fragmentation.

“Staff are the real richness of Mehwar. [...] When we started training the staff, we asked them all to sleep over at night in the Centre. It is at night that you hear stories you don’t know. To understand consequences of violence, you have to stay with the women.”

Differenza Donna

Based on this understanding, the Mehwar Centre has tirelessly worked to engage and mobilize competent resources within different sectors dealing with VAW cases. In addition, the Centre continues to support partner institutions and professionals in their effort to better understand of the complex set of dynamics, gaps, and needs within the VAW context.

Thanks to the rich exchange of experiences and cooperation between Mehwar and other institutions, the Centre became a microcosm of experts in the field of VAW, as well as a central hub for specialised services and a source from which government and NGO staff draw expertise.

Interview with the Mehwar Team as human rights defenders

At the time of the interviews, the Mehwar Team was composed of Maysoon Ramadan, Amina Al-Helou, Linda Jarayseh, Saeda Al-Atrash, Thuraya Habet, Kifah Abu Ayyash, Hanadi Ramadan, Reema Abu Zoulof, Amani Faraj, Hala Najajreh, Samar Darwish, Fathme Taqatqah, Basema Jabareen, Leila Zahran, Lama Qumsieh, Rihab Shakarneh, Fatima Sharia, Sawsan Khair, Hana Janazreh, Ibtisam She'abat, Ghassan Fararjeh, Hatem Hmedan, Raed Jubran, Ramzi Nassar, Maher Shweiki, Bisharah Musalam, Yosef Hamdan, and Mona Rishmawi⁵.

What motivated you to defend people who are discriminated against? Our humanity! Our understanding that everyone has the right to live in safety and dignity. As human beings, we are driven by our feelings of empathy towards other people and we put a great deal of emphasis on the “human” side of our work. Indeed, each one of us brings our own life experience to our work at Mehwar, particularly our personal experience in overcoming hardships. We consider this fundamental when working with survivors of gender-based violence. We are also women ourselves, so this helps us understand what women feel when they are discriminated against, as well as what they need and hope for in their lives.

What does it take to be a human rights defender? You must have a vision of social justice that makes you understand how human rights are embodied in people’s lives. When working with women, you come to comprehend just how far their rights can be denied, and the suffering this can cause in their daily lives. At Mehwar, we realize that women are not aware of their rights, which prevents them from fully understanding what they are experiencing, even though they usually sense that something is wrong. It is also crucial to be perseverant and to work on yourself as well. Indeed, you have to embark on a path of self-awareness and self-empowerment, driven by your vision, belief in yourself and your capacity to make a change. Our life achievements are in our work; it’s a great source of strength and inspiration.

How do you defend people’s human rights? Can you give us an example of the work you do as a human rights defender? Knowledge is key to end violence against women. In our work, we help women victims and survivors of violence boost their self-esteem, to make them understand that they did not do anything wrong, as they often perceive. We support them towards the self-recognition of their values and capacities, and we help them access education and obtain job opportunities. We also raise their awareness about their rights, so that they are able to claim them. As well, we work with the community at large to dispel false perceptions, clichés and stereotypes about women.

What aspect of anti-discrimination do you champion? As we said, we defend women victims and survivors of violence. As such, our main battle is to show the community and the women themselves that they have the same value, as human beings, and

5 Individual Mehwar staff were interviewed in December 2010 on the occasion of International Human Rights Day. These staff also participated in the Human Rights Defenders competition launched by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and were awarded the Human Rights Defenders prize.



therefore the same rights as men. Nobody is entitled to take a woman's rights away, under no circumstances. We undertake this battle by making women's voices and stories heard, in their own words, and also by working hard with the people in their communities to make them realize, acknowledge and appreciate women's achievements. This approach has proven to be very effective within the community for bringing about the recognition that these women are victims of violence.

What has been your most memorable time as a human rights defender? Without a doubt, the opening of the Mehwar Centre. Back then, many people were sceptical about it, claiming that there was no violence in our communities, and thus no need for such a centre. Mehwar's opening was a revolution, in the sense that for the first time in the Palestinian context, women's stories of violence and discrimination were "materialised" in a physical place. It shed light on the unsaid, unwitnessed and un-denounced, in a Palestinian society where such issues are still considered taboo. Mehwar sends the message that the time has come for families, ordinary people and institutions to acknowledge their responsibilities in defending women's human rights.

Would you encourage others to champion human rights? Definitely! Defending human rights is a long-term commitment and we need people to join us! It gives great meaning to your life, as an agent of change for sustainable development and social justice. One should start first from his or her own life before being able to influence other people's lives. Change is part of a self-discovery; it goes to the heart of humanity. It helps you understand who you are and what you can achieve, along with your strengths and weaknesses. One should not be afraid of working hard, witnessing human suffering and bearing responsibilities. But above all, being a human rights defender is first and foremost a contribution to the people, to support them in getting their chance to fully and freely express their potential within society.

6. Case management and "case conferences"

6.1 Case management

"As a first step in all of these cases, we want to ensure that the victim is secure, as such victims are often in danger from family members who want to kill them... While we want women victims of violence to get their lives back, in the first instance, we have a responsibility to keep them alive."

Bethlehem police officer

Victims of VAW are mostly referred to Mehwar by the police, MoSA district officers, and NGOs. When a woman comes to Mehwar, an initial meeting takes place with technical staff such as counsellors and lawyers, in which a case management plan is developed, including a risk assessment. In this regard, Mehwar works closely with the district FPU and MoSA officers, who have good knowledge of their

respective geographical areas, on assessing risks to the case. The Mehwar Centre receives some of the most difficult cases of VAW, including women who have been

subjected to incest, sexual harassment and rape during childhood, and who often suffer from extreme feelings of guilt, shame, distrust and fear. In many cases, this has led to a vicious cycle of abusive and exploitative relationships during adolescence, putting their lives at greater risk. Other cases include women who were forced to marry at a very young age (sometimes between the ages of 13-15), who were subsequently subjected to physical, sexual, psychological and verbal abuse within marriage. This systemic abuse leaves physical and mental scars that can take a lifetime to heal. Victims often arrive at Mehwar in a heightened state of confusion and trauma, due to the fact that the most sacred and protected environment that Palestinian society can provide, the family, has for them become a source of abuse, shame, trauma and a nightmarish existence. Women understandably arrive at Mehwar with extremely confused concepts of their own self-worth, sexuality, personal relationships, and family honour.

“When they reach the Centre, they are barely able to speak about what happened to them. They generally have sleeping problems, display high levels of anxiety, aggression or total passiveness, and/or show signs of dependency. They are incapable of establishing trust and fair relationships, or of interacting positively with the other girls.” (Mehwar Annual Report, 2007)

The Mehwar approach to casework starts with the understanding that the key to overcoming the effects of violence lies in addressing the sense of powerlessness that this violence causes. Women come to Mehwar firstly, to seek support in arresting the cycle of violence; secondly, to seek services that will allow them to gradually rebuild their lives free from further violence.

The Mehwar approach to casework is to first ensure the protection of the client. Over the course of five years of working with hundreds of victims of VAW, the Centre has learned that women victims of violence are especially vulnerable to the pressures and interventions of family members in the initial one to two months after coming to the Centre. Family visits are, therefore, not allowed in the first month, during which time case workers, in close coordination with social workers from MoSA, the staff of the FPU, and other key actors investigate the case. This includes determining the sources of threat, ensuring that the victim has access to counselling, medical care, legal aid, and social support. In addition, based on the assessment of the woman’s needs, economic resources, and aspirations, the staff work with her on short and long term plans for her safe reintegration into society. In this crucial period, the staff work intensively to provide the victim with a full range of services, and they coach and mentor her on her options. Weekly staff meetings are conducted in order to discuss and analyse the specifics of each case. Therefore, the first stage in the recovery process is to protect the victim; to work to ensure she is comfortable and stable within the Centre itself; to provide her services in the area of legal aid, counselling, and medical support; and to begin to understand what happened to her and to help her process these events. Mehwar staff then begin to work with her on a “recovery plan,” which entails identifying skills and talents, training and capacity-building options, and areas of potential work opportunities in the future.



Over the course of the 2008-12 period, Mehwar has been able to strengthen its tools and practices aimed at supporting victims in the early stages of recovery from the trauma of VAW. This has enhanced victims' awareness, capabilities and opportunities, and has helped to solidify the mechanisms needed to ensure women's sustainable access to legal rights, thereby setting the premises for an overall higher standard of life. During this period, special efforts were made to upgrade the provision of specialised psychological support to VAW victims, by combining specialization in mental health with the Mehwar Centre's specialized expertise and leadership in the management of VAW cases.

An independent evaluation of the policies and procedures of Mehwar conducted in 2010 found that "staff members at Mehwar are skilled in identifying the risks faced by women victims of violence. They assess these risks at the intake stage as well as at various other stages and meetings throughout a woman's contact with the Mehwar Centre." However, Mehwar management has also identified important improvements that are needed in the Centre's case file management system. As the first step in making such improvements, an electronic case file management system is currently being established at the Mehwar Centre.

6.2 Case conferences

During the 2008-12 period, the process for managing cases was increasingly formalised and developed. As part of this process, Mehwar initiated the practice of holding "case conferences," which are meetings with key governmental and non-governmental actors involved in particular cases to discuss the case specifics and the next steps to be taken in order to prevent further violence, and to protect and empower the victim. These meetings are convened "as needed," and therefore usually occur more regularly in the early days and weeks of a given case, in order to discuss the case specifics, and at the end, during the woman's reintegration phase. Partner stakeholders usually include representatives from Mehwar, social workers from MoSA, staff of the FPU, and psychologists. They sometimes also include governors, prosecutors, representatives from the local municipality, or important civil society stakeholders and influential family members, who are able to mobilise community resources for the woman's economic and social reintegration. Ultimately, all of these partners are responsible for providing long-term safety for women victims of violence, as well as employment and empowerment opportunities once they leave the Centre. Most importantly, the

victim herself is also part of these case conferences.

"Community awareness about the importance of shelters and protecting women from violence has gone through several stages, and there is more acceptance than before. However, our culture is still conservative, and stereotypes of sheltered women continue to exist, which complicates their reintegration in society. This needs more systematic efforts and coordination among stakeholders."

MoSA staff

Case conferences will, at different stages of a case, discuss the development of a risk management plan for each woman victim. They will also address each victim's psychosocial, health, economic and legal aid needs; potential training and work options; and eventually, the possibility of reintegrating her within the family.

The formalisation and development of the case conference system has increased the sense of responsibility and accountability among partner institutions, whilst simultaneously exposing these institutions to the innovative approach of Mehwar. The case conference mechanism promotes the exchange of experience and expertise between Mehwar and the other concerned parties involved in case management, and enables joint monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes of intervention plans. At the beginning of 2010, Mehwar introduced a “parties’ agreement” to be signed by the various institutions involved in the implementation of the identified intervention plans, so as to further underline their responsibility and accountability.

All in all, the formalisation and development of the case management system has contributed to more efficient case management. As a result, standard sheltering periods have been successfully reduced to between 6-12 months. There are now fewer cases of clients staying at Mehwar for years, which, previously, could reduce their ability to successfully reintegrate into society.

While the practice of case conferences has achieved many successes, it nevertheless continues to present a number of challenges. Particularly, it does not fully address the need for Mehwar, as the specialised institution with the most in-depth and up-to-date knowledge on cases, to retain autonomy over professional decisions regarding cases. Secondly, at times the wishes of the victim conflict with the consensus of the case

“One of the achievements of the case conference system is that it has extended partnerships with key government and civil society actors. Before we established this system, Mehwar used to do everything itself: risk assessment, development of workplans for clients, counselling with the family. There was a feeling that other partners were not contributing adequately. A lot of our clients were also staying at Mehwar for four to five years, and we were not having much success in reintegrating them within the community.

Now we design the intervention plans side-by-side with partners and make sure we get their feedback through the case conference meetings. Most importantly, the women themselves are part of these case conferences.”

Mehwar staff

conference. Where the victim is deemed by qualified personnel to be in a fit mental state and able to make decisions about her future, and where she has been provided full and comprehensive information about the choices available to her, then her choice to either leave or remain at Mehwar, or to choose a different environment in which she wishes to be reintegrated, should be respected, regardless of whether this decision may, in the consensus of the case conference, have the potential to endanger her life. In some cases, a woman may prefer to take such a risk rather than continue to live in institutions, or under the guardianship of family members who may restrict her freedom to seek empowerment and attain a better social status.

“C” is only 17. When she came to Mehwar, she had been raped by a boy in the local area who had harassed her for months and eventually took advantage of her by drugging a drink that he gave to her. As a result of this rape, she became pregnant. The local FPU referred her to Mehwar, but because of her young age,



Mehwar had to first consult with MoSA as to whether the Centre could accept her. MoSA made the decision to refer the girl to Mehwar and the following day a case conference was organized with MoSA social workers, Mehwar staff, the FPU and “C” herself to discuss her case. During the course of five months, a total of around ten case conferences were organized to discuss her case. As a Mehwar staff member recalls:

“We told her we would try to help in whatever way we could. We expanded the case conferences to include representatives from the Bethlehem Mental Hospital, the prosecutor, and Creche – a local institution that takes care of troubled children – all of which agreed to take custody of her child. We met with her father, mother, and brothers to encourage them to accept her back into the family.”

Once she gave birth, the baby was taken to the Creche, and “C” wanted to go home. At the time of writing this report, however, the case conference participants were not convinced that the conditions at home were conducive for a safe return. “C” seemed confused, initially not wanting to see her child, but now wanting to be with her baby. Psychologists from the mental hospital were still assessing her condition. Meanwhile, the man who raped her is now in jail on multiple offences, including the rape of “C”.

6.3 The reintegration stage

The “reintegration” stage is extremely complicated and delicate, as it requires determining what is in the “best interest” of the victim, which may or may not involve returning to her family. The decision to return to the family is typically influenced by three scenarios.

One: intensive violence inside the family persists, and relatives within the family are colluding in the violence by “protecting” or “shielding” the perpetrator, while blaming

the victim. In this case, the perpetrator often remains with the family, whilst relatives blame the victim and spread malicious rumours about her. This environment is obviously not a safe place for the victim to return. Often in this situation, Mehwar and MoSA staff face significant pressure to “return” the victim to her family.

“We come up with a short-term plan and a long-term plan. The short-term plan focuses on how to get the woman to express herself, to share with us what happened, and to help her restore some of her confidence and self-worth. The long-term plan centres on how to move on and get beyond her tragedy. Women often have to relive their entire ordeals in order to come to terms with them. Sometimes women know what they want and help to direct their case management plans. On other occasions, they need more help in directing their plans.”

Mehwar staff

Two: the abused woman receives support from her immediate family, but faces threats from her wider family or tribal members. In this scenario, again, it is unsafe for the victim to return to her home environment.

Three: the situation at home is stable enough that, with the support of Mehwar and her family, the abused woman can safely return to her home, if she so chooses.

Mehwar has worked hard to change community attitudes towards women victims of violence, and to develop innovative solutions through building wide and diverse partnerships with public and private stakeholders and community leaders. Mehwar assists women by providing them with study opportunities, training and/or internships, and, in cases where return to their families is not possible, in finding independent, safe accommodation and work opportunities.

7. Advocating for the establishment of a forensic clinic at Mehwar

In cases of lawsuits against of sexual violence, courts in the oPt require a forensic test to be conducted by a qualified specialist. Currently, there are only three doctors in the West Bank who are qualified to perform forensic testing of victims of sexual violence. These tests are often highly intrusive and are held in public hospitals, which lack confidentiality and privacy for victims. Generally, the medical and paramedical staff are unprepared and unable to deal with the victims in a sensitive way, and they may act in a stigmatizing manner. In response to these challenges, key partners have agreed to the concept of establishing a Forensic Clinic at the Mehwar Centre, so that victims can undertake these tests in a protected, confidential and professional environment. The Ministry of Social Affairs, together with UN Women, have welcomed the idea, and a proposal is currently under development.







MEHWAR'S SERVICES

1. Before and after the establishment of the Mehwar Centre

The General Assembly urges States to continue to develop their national strategy, translating it into concrete programmes and actions, and a more systematic, comprehensive, multisectoral and sustained approach, aimed at eliminating all forms of violence against women (as to ensure the optimal use of available instruments, by, for example (...) establishing or supporting integrated centres through which shelter, legal, health, psychological, counselling and other services are provided to victims of all forms of violence against women.

UN Resolution 65/187 on the “Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women”

Before the establishment of the Mehwar Centre, women and children victims of violence had no safe place to go to protect themselves from the violence. The establishment of Mehwar meant that for the first time in the oPt there was a free, confidential and professional 24/7 service for women victims of violence, and where the response mechanism was contained within one place. Between 2008 and July 2012, Mehwar provided integrated services for more than 150 sheltered victims of VAW. Prior to the formation of Mehwar, available services, including legal aid and counselling, were provided in a piecemeal and uncoordinated manner, and lacked the essential ingredient of protection for women in a safe and secure environment.

Mehwar in the words of its own staff:



“The most important service Mehwar provides is, first and foremost, protection. Before Mehwar, in cases of VAW, a local tribal leader might be contacted and asked to ‘resolve’ the issue. There was very little coordination between agencies. Really, women had nowhere to go, and the focus was to keep a girl in the house at any cost. Sometimes they ended up married to perpetrators. Today there is more focus on rule of law and the role of police. The establishment of Mehwar means there is a place women can go to escape violence. This has opened the door for the community to discuss issues of VAW.”



“When victims come here they are very low and have little self-esteem. We work to develop both their skills and their self-esteem; they complete courses, workshops, and meet other women who have rebuilt their lives.”



“There is now an address for women victims of violence. Before, rape was not considered a crime. Now the community has changed its attitude. Before Mehwar, there was no institution providing these types of services. Throughout the years, the government began to see the important role played by Mehwar. Now it recognizes Mehwar’s importance.”

The services that Mehwar provides to beneficiaries include temporary sheltering⁷ for women and children victims of violence; legal counselling for the victims and their families from specialised lawyers, including follow-up in the courts; and services for improving women’s psychological and physical health. To promote physical


“Before Mehwar, a woman in my situation had no choices...she would have to go on with a life of abuse. She had no rights and could not do anything. It was like the reaction I got from my family when I first reported my abuse. They told me I should “bear my fate” and go on with my life as though nothing had happened.”


Testimony of a woman successfully reintegrated with her family after spending one year at Mehwar

health, Mehwar offers access to a gymnasium and, through cooperation with qualified health providers, to preventive and general health and gynaecological care. For psychological health, it provides victims of violence with access to psychological counselling as well as individual and group therapy, including the opportunity to participate in self-help groups. The Mehwar Centre also provides vocational training for its beneficiaries, helps them strengthen

their social networks, and supports them in gaining financial independence. In addition, Mehwar conducts prevention and awareness-raising outreach programmes in order to encourage positive gender roles within the family and society, and to educate the community about gender-based violence and human rights, particularly women and children’s rights.

The provision of services is a means to facilitate the reintegration of VAW victims back into society, which Mehwar has successfully accomplished in a number of cases. The strategy Mehwar employs to achieve this objective is twofold. On the one hand, Mehwar staff work to build up the woman’s self-respect, self-worth and self-confidence by empowering her socially, legally and economically. On the other hand, Mehwar engages with the victim’s family in order to advocate for the restoration of her rights and the cessation of all forms of violence emanating from within the family. Thus far, women victims of violence have used their time at Mehwar to study to become nurses, teachers, secretaries and accountants. In one case, a girl who

 *“There was no safe house. The only place to go was the street, to become a prostitute, or go to prison.”*

 *“I was abused by all forms of violence and tried to escape many times, my brothers and sisters would beat me and treated me like I was in prison. They prevented me from going to the doctor. But now I am happy because I am at Mehwar.”*

Mehwar beneficiaries

had been abused by her father for years, came to Mehwar, completed her studies, and now works in the Bethlehem Governorate. While at Mehwar, women often enrol in different training courses. Some of these courses focus on general life skills, while others teach more technical skills such as English language, computer literacy, and first aid. Several women have enrolled in vocational training courses, such as photography, sewing, arts and craft, secretary training, and nursing. Other women

have taken the opportunity to continue their high school education, while others have continued their undergraduate studies and diploma work in a range of different fields.

7 The Centre can accommodate a maximum of 35 beneficiaries at any given time.



“E” suffered years of systematic abuse and isolation from her family. Upon arrival at Mehwar, she was withdrawn, traumatised and would not divulge any details as to what had happened to her. After two and a half years of integrated interventions, with patient counselling and support from the Mehwar team, she was finally able to open up about her experience. During her time at Mehwar, she learned English language skills, yoga, and craftwork and she attended a course for secretary. She is now working as a medical secretary in a public hospital.

At the legal level, Mehwar staff are acutely aware of the limitations inherent in the prevailing legal framework. Thus, they perform important work in advocating for legal reform that is more supportive of women’s rights.

“Before Mehwar, cadres within MoSA or the Police might try to coordinate with tribal elders in ‘resolving’ cases of domestic violence. However, this always focused on a strategy of ‘keeping the girl in the house,’ no matter what the situation, which was obviously not a strategy in the best interests of the victim. For example, sometimes victims of violence suffered further abuse; sometimes they were killed or married off to their rapist against their will. Today, partly through the creation of Mehwar, there is more emphasis on the rule of law and the role of the police.”

Mehwar staff

Mehwar’s holistic approach to service delivery achieves striking results. Mehwar legal staff have observed a strong correlation between better legal outcomes for women and the positive effects of legal aid, counselling, medical care and economic empowerment. Mehwar legal advocates are able to present the judge with a positive example of the effect of Mehwar, which more often than not encourages the judge to make rulings in favour of the victim. Likewise, Mehwar has found that a woman who has received proper medical care for the injuries she has sustained is in a better position

to benefit from legal aid and counselling services. The regenerative and rejuvenating effects of these holistic services also bolster the Centre’s advocacy efforts within the community, as they demonstrate the success of the Centre’s efforts.

2. Legal aid

The aim of the Mehwar legal counselling service is to support and protect women by offering legal counselling and, if requested, accompaniment to and representation in court. Mehwar’s legal team has facilitated positive legal interventions for many beneficiaries, successfully enabling their access to justice. In general, a large portion of lawsuits related to VAW are filed by women while they are living under the safety and protection of Mehwar and receiving support from Mehwar’s counselling programme, as taking such a step while outside of Mehwar’s protective environment could expose a victim to serious threats against her life.

The Mehwar legal team fights for a range of women’s rights, including rights to custody of children, divorce, alimony and registration of children. Cases represented

in the civil (criminal) courts include cases of sexual abuse, domestic violence, incest, mistreatment (physical violence), attempted murder, adultery, theft, and beggary. The last three categories of crimes refer to lawsuits taken against the victims. They are generally filed by the perpetrator(s) in order to lessen a victim's credibility, and often in order to conceal a history of violence against the victim. Most of the women who have been sheltered at Mehwar have been accused by their perpetrators, and many have had files of some sort pending against them in court. However, Mehwar lawyers have succeeded in closing many of these case files through positive cooperation with prosecutors and judges, who tend to attribute significant weight to Mehwar case reports in making their decisions. Cases represented in the religious courts (Shari'a Courts), generally concern issues of divorce, custody of children, alimony, and compensation in cases of divorce without just reason. With regards to custody of children, victims' efforts to obtain custody by demonstrating the abusive nature of the father are often hindered by the length of the criminal justice procedures, which can last from three to five years. Nevertheless, there have been a number of cases in which Mehwar legal

"We often need to work a lot with the victims before they go before the judge. Getting them to tell their story and then appear in court to testify is the most difficult stage. In one case, for example, we worked extensively with the victim, and it took around two years before she was able to speak about her case before the judge."

Mehwar staff

staff have managed to persuade judges to use their discretionary powers in favour of the mother.

While Mehwar's legal team has been able to set important legal precedents, which will undoubtedly have important consequences on women's access to justice in the future, it also faces a number of challenges in its work to provide effective legal aid services for VAW victims. In the West Bank, the laws

applicable to cases of family and sexual violence consist of a mixture of old Jordanian laws and laws passed by the PLC or by Presidential Decree. This mixture is further set against the backdrop of prevailing international standards. The Jordanian Penal Code in effect in the West Bank only offers vague definitions of VAW and domestic violence, and is discriminatory towards women. It places an inordinate burden of proof upon the victim and only stipulates weak punishments. For example, rape within marriage is not a crime, and harassment, rape or molestation cases require a range of verbal and written procedures and witnesses. In cases of extreme "physical violence," courts require a doctor's examination, which usually costs between 100-150 NIS (depending on the district). Cases of sexual violence require a special examination from a forensic doctor, which involves a highly intrusive procedure in an environment that does not respect the required standards of privacy and confidentiality. In addition, courts are generally not child or women-friendly spaces, which again reinforces the overall mistrust of women in the judiciary system and contributes to heightened feelings of stigma and discrimination on the part of the victim. Women who pursue legal action against perpetrators of domestic violence often come under strong pressure from community members to drop the case. In some cases, the victim is forced to marry the perpetrator as a way of resolving the issue and preserving the family's honour.



“Mehwar has helped foster the debate around issues of VAW. Before its establishment, the legal community did not discuss these issues, whereas now they have discovered that VAW is a huge issue in society. The fact that there is now an ‘address’ for victims to go to where they can receive holistic services also helps judges make more proactive and positive judgments in favour of victims, because they are able to see a viable solution to the issue rather than only problems. In the past, victims would very often be placed in prisons. In one case, a brother who suspected his sister of committing adultery filed a case against her and she went to prison. After some months, the Director of Mehwar went to court to vouch for the girl and she was taken to Mehwar. Since then, she has spent many years here at Mehwar. Mehwar legal staff eventually convinced the brother to drop the case and the judge dismissed it.”

Mehwar lawyer

continue to represent sheltered women in courts, as they play a key role in supporting women victims’ access to justice.

In another type of challenge, judges and prosecutors who possess a high degree of discretion in deciding the outcomes of cases, lack training and knowledge about gender-based violence and the needs of victims. On the basis of this, women are often denied justice and can even be criminalised for speaking out about VAW. They are regularly subjected to acts that violate their right to privacy and personal dignity, such as undergoing forced “virginity tests” and being detained “for their own protection” without evidence or trial.

Despite these challenges, the pioneering work of Mehwar in securing access to justice for victims of VAW has brought the issue to the attention of the legal community in the oPt, including courts, and propelled it to the forefront of many important legal discussions.

3. Counselling

Addressing the mental health needs of victims of violence is one of the most challenging areas of service provision for any anti-violence centre. Upon arrival at Mehwar, women receive a minimum of two counselling sessions per week from a social worker and social counsellor. Women also receive on-going support from the Centre’s staff, and collective meetings are held on a weekly basis to discuss women’s needs and any problems they face. The aim of the counselling is to improve beneficiaries’ ability to analyse their

Mehwar lawyers also face a number of other challenges in carrying out their work. For instance, many face severe mobility restrictions. As West Bank ID card holders, they may not be able to enter Israeli courts. Even within the West Bank, many do not possess the proper religious certificates needed to practice in the various religious denominational courts (Sha’ria and Christian), which have autonomy over domestic violence issues. Moreover, now that Mehwar’s legal staff are government employees, they can no longer legally represent clients in court themselves. In order to ensure qualified legal representation of women sheltered at, or assisted by, Mehwar, UN Women is facilitating coordination and cooperation with the Palestinian Bar Association. UN Women and MoSA are currently discussing ways in which Mehwar lawyers can also

experiences of violence, to develop positive and mutually beneficial relationships with other women in the shelter, and to enhance personal resources that have been eroded through years of systematic abuse. Community counselling and group discussions are conducted on a weekly basis and address a wide range of sensitive topics such as self-esteem and self perception; positive family relationships; love; the distinction between mutual sexual relationships and sexual abuse; positive parenting; personal boundaries; and respect. Between September 2008 and July 2012, more than 150 sheltered beneficiaries received counselling support. Mehwar beneficiaries have described these sessions as helping to “reconstruct and develop my personality,” “increase my confidence,” and “resolve anger and heal without the need to take revenge.”

What makes Mehwar unique is its integrated approach to working with victims. Staff recognise that violence is often compounded by poor economic circumstances and women’s dependence on their husbands. Such factors make it particularly important to integrate economic empowerment and social counselling (to improve self-esteem) into the Centre’s programming. Working with women to process and understand cycles of violence and the complex impact it has had on them can also help them fully articulate their experience. This, in turn, provides strength to the women in their pursuit of legal action against their perpetrators.

Mehwar’s intensive experience with VAW cases and the gradual involvement of national



“I’m able to talk about everything, to see the situation I am in.”



“I used to act before thinking, now I think more before I act.”

Mehwar beneficiaries

mental health practitioners on a case-by-case basis, has contributed to improved cooperation between Mehwar and the mental health facilities in the oPt. In addition, until recently, an expert clinical psychologist from Differenza Donna supported, through short-term missions, Mehwar staff in dealing with severe mental health cases mission. She also succeeded in facilitating

the establishment of a local network of sensitized mental health professionals. Over the course of the project implementation (2008-2012), Mehwar staff and management identified the crucial importance of mental health interventions and noted the lack of a university faculty of psychology in the oPt, as well as specialization in psychiatry at the School of Medicine – both critical gaps in need of filling. In response, Mehwar reached out to explore partnership opportunities with local mental health institutions such as the Palestinian Counselling Centre (PCC), the Guidance and Training Centre (GTC) and the government Mental Hospital in Bethlehem governorate. Between 2010 and 2011, the GTC provided clinical psychological support for some of Mehwar’s cases in cooperation with, and through specialized technical support from Differenza Donna. Starting in October 2011, the PCC began to provide clinical psychological support to some of the Centre’s beneficiaries, and also clinical supervision to Mehwar Social Counselling and Social Work Team. Referred children now benefit from joining GTC play-therapy sessions and mother-child support groups. In addition, PCC has provided analytical support and clinical tools to Mehwar counsellors, which are specifically geared towards addressing children’s needs. In July 2011, Mehwar recruited a clinical supervisor to provide specialised psychological support to the beneficiaries as part of the Mehwar team.



4. Medical support


The devastating effects of VAW are exacerbated when women victims are prevented from seeking medical attention. In the experience of Mehwar staff, women's medical needs tend to be most urgent in the first two months of their stay in the shelter. All sheltered women are enrolled in the public health system, and the Bethlehem district health office grants sheltered women access to medication and general medical care, in addition to conducting eye tests and workshops on personal hygiene. Mehwar's cooperation with private health institutions has also allowed sheltered women to fulfil their medical needs. Through agreements with local clinics, the Centre is able to provide women with health services in various fields, in particular, gynaecology, dentistry, ophthalmology, orthopaedics and dermatology.


5. Economic empowerment


One of the key elements of helping victims of VAW to recover from their experience is to promote their economic and social independence. However, finding work for Mehwar beneficiaries is complicated by a number of factors, including the poor economic climate in the OPT and high unemployment rates, particularly among women. The task is further complicated by the fact that victims of VAW are often at risk when they leave the Centre, and are also vulnerable to exploitation, such as low pay.


In spite of the many challenges, the Mehwar Centre has been able to improve the employment prospects of a number of sheltered women by offering them vocational training courses. Some sheltered women, through Mehwar outreach efforts, have secured jobs as cooks, nursery assistants, cafeteria operators, secretaries, nurses, and factory and shop workers. Mehwar is also looking to expand the employment options available to women who are unable to leave the Centre due to security concerns. Potential areas include cash-for-work projects, such as growing and selling produce, selling ice cream and traditional Palestinian dishes, and making and selling handicrafts. Mehwar is also exploring future opportunities for women in the areas of food processing, domestic agriculture, home gardening, and laundry services.

"A" came to Mehwar in early 2007. For more than a year, she was unable to open up about her story, which entailed systematic abuse by her brother and, subsequently, her community. This abuse caused long-term emotional damage and, at first, "A" had problems with concentration and self-discipline. She was emotionally unstable and psychologically unbalanced. Gradually, through the love and support of the Mehwar team and other women at the Centre, she was encouraged to attend a one-year course for medical secretaries. She also began to work in a shop to earn money. Extensive counselling sessions were conducted with her father to persuade him of the importance of her attaining an education and securing a qualified job. He agreed to let her enroll in a nursing course in Bethlehem, and to let her live in a student house under Mehwar supervision. During the two years of the course, Mehwar offered her financial and emotional support in order to complete her studies. On 29 July 2010, "A" graduated as a nurse, in a ceremony attended by her father and sisters.

 *"I went out of the house to search for a new life. I took courses in English and computer, and also took courses in sewing and embroidery."*

 *"I now have more self-confidence. I have a new life."*

 *"I work on special events, such as weddings, graduations, baptisms, birthdays, etc."*

 *"I took courses in beauty treatments, and am now volunteering with a hair dresser."*

Mehwar beneficiaries

The Mehwar team continues to provide extensive follow-up to women who have been reintegrated into society. A support group has been set up under the guidance of Mehwar counsellors for women who study and work off-site. Mehwar staff also follow up with women who work outside the Centre, ensuring that they have proper contracts with the hiring institutions, and that their rights within the workplace are respected.

6. The shelter

The shelter services provided by Mehwar perform two key functions. Firstly, and crucially, they provide a safe haven for women victims of violence. Secondly, by providing a safe and protected environment for victims, the sheltering services enable other important activities to take place, including legal aid, counselling, vocational training, and employment.

7. The nursery

"When I first started bringing my boy to the nursery, I was a little nervous and afraid of the other women. I wondered whether it would harm my boy to spend time with children of these women. After a while, though, I realized that the children were no different from my child, and that these women were no different from me."

Community member

Mehwar operates a nursery that is open from 7:30 until 15:00 daily, except Fridays and Sundays. The Mehwar nursery section has been very successful in facilitating links with the local community, and in promoting a positive image of the Centre. Many women from the local community who bring their children to the nursery initially express reservations about doing so. In time, however, they begin to see the victims' children and the

victims themselves as no different from them and their own children. The nursery offers subsidised places for local children and is quite popular. It usually operates at maximum capacity, with the majority of children coming from the local community. However, Mehwar employees and sheltered women also bring their children here. Children follow a daily programme of basic education, including cognitive and mental skills development.



8. The gymnasium

Providing adequate space for the sheltered women to exercise represents an integral part of the recovery from trauma and shock related to VAW. Clients of Mehwar and the staff itself can also benefit from yoga and relaxation sessions taking place in the gym. In addition, by opening gym classes to women from the community, the gymnasium, like the nursery, is another way that Mehwar reaches out and gains the acceptance of the local community.

9. Events and activities

Women who enter Mehwar often do so very much as a last resort. Their network of family and close friends has, for a time at least, been disrupted. In the first weeks following their arrival, focus is placed on emotional and physical recovery, in which case they may not have the energy to study or work. In some cases, physical threat from the community prevents them from leaving the Centre. There is, therefore, a lot of “spare time” that needs to be filled. Many of the Centre’s beneficiaries cite the vocational training, physical exercise and organised entertainment activities as some of the highlights of their time at Mehwar. As one beneficiary noted during a focus group discussion, physical activity allows “to change our lives, to break up our routine, and to feel that we are living an ordinary life, not like a prison”. Over the course of 2008-12, women beneficiaries at the Centre have learned a range of new skills, including sewing, hairdressing, computer literacy, embroidery, English and French language, and craftwork. The Centre also organises physical activities, such as aerobics and yoga sessions, a number of extracurricular events to celebrate birthdays and national holidays such as Ramadan, Christmas and New Year’s Eve, picnics, visits to other organisations and cities within the West Bank, as well as outings to parks, clubs, restaurants and concerts. Mehwar staff are responsive to the needs of the beneficiaries, often making extensive efforts to arrange classes of interest identified by the women.



**MEHWAR CENTRE:
A LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

“Mehwar has caused a change in attitude in many of our [PCP and FPU] staff. In my case, for example, when I first visited Mehwar, I had a very different viewpoint than I do now. I usually judged abused women and blamed them for what had happened to them. I suspected them of being “bad” women. Gradually, through working with Mehwar staff, I started to change my opinion and to see that these women were victims. I was also jealous of the Mehwar staff, of their professionalism and abilities, and of the fact that they spent so much time with the cases and therefore knew them so well! This inspired me to develop my own capacities in addressing issues of violence against women and children.”

FPU staff

Through the experience of intensive daily casework carried out over a period of five years, Mehwar has developed a holistic understanding of all stages in a victim’s recovery from VAW. The staff are therefore equipped with a unique body of knowledge when responding to VAW issues in the oPt. As the first anti-violence shelter for victims of VAW, Mehwar has played a vital role in advancing norms, standards and knowledge around VAW issues in the oPt.

In the 2010-12 period, Mehwar can point to a number of achievements in this area. Mehwar staff have been increasingly asked to share their knowledge and expertise through

training sessions, workshops and study tours with other partners, including the police and MoSA, as well as other civil society stakeholders such as schools and universities. Mehwar has also contributed to improving national coordination mechanisms and in setting standards for regulating the management of VAW cases. It has also played an integral role in the establishment of the Shelters’ Technical Committee and in multi-stakeholder case conferences.

With regard to capacity building, one of the remarkable initiatives in the 2008-11 period was a series of two workshops hosted by Mehwar: one in November 2009 and one in June 2011, both of which provided the opportunity for an exchange of experiences and expertise between Palestinian judges, and Italian judges, prosecutors and lawyers. The series was led by Differenza Donna, who, in cooperation with MoSA and UN Women, planned, organized and implemented the workshops. They identified one Italian judge, two prosecutors and one lawyer - all specializing in VAW - and coordinated the participation of six Palestinian judges. The main focus of the workshops was to share knowledge and encourage Palestinian judges to recognise the damage suffered by many victims of VAW, as well as their legal rights and needs within the justice system. It particularly highlighted the importance of this issue in the oPt, where victims of violence, especially young women, are often scared and reluctant to give testimony in court. As a result of the workshops, Palestinian magistrates declared their readiness to receive testimonies at Mehwar in order to better accommodate victims’ needs.

Another key achievement in the area of advancing norms, standards and knowledge for addressing VAW in the oPt has come from the capacity of Mehwar and its key partners to constantly re-evaluate and revise the way the Centre operates. In 2010, UN Women commissioned an independent evaluation of Mehwar policies and procedures, which was carried out and finalized at the end of 2010, beginning 2011. This evaluation

illustrated that the Mehwar team grounds its work in human rights principles, despite conflicting visions and positions held by society and stakeholders, which in some cases may not prioritize women's human rights. The on-going development of practice and policy guidelines for running the Mehwar Centre will address the difficulties, obstacles and gaps highlighted in the 2010 evaluation, and will also play a crucial role in standardising best practices, thus protecting the most advanced work of the Centre.

Mehwar is well on the way towards contributing to MoSA's establishment of a multi-sectoral national protection system for victims of VAW, founded on human rights principles and placing the unique specialisation of anti-violence services at its core. Key initiatives in this area include:

- The development of Mehwar Centre "practice and policy guidelines" as per the revision of Mehwar's initial corpus of policies and procedures. This document will serve as a model for other anti-violence centres, as well as a basis for the development of national standards for operating anti-violence centres.
- The establishment of a mental health/VAW working group comprising all mental health professionals currently working with the Mehwar Centre, who have thus developed expertise in offering psychological support to women victims of violence. The group is working towards sharing mental health knowledge applied to the field of VAW in the oPt and developing common good practices for the provision of psychological assistance to women victims of violence, while enhancing cooperation and coordination among mental health institutions and Mehwar.
- Finalisation of the Mehwar Centre's forms and templates in order to standardise forms and enhance comprehensive data collection, so as to better document and support the work and achievements accomplished by the Centre, and to serve as a basis for the future development of an electronic database.
- The establishment of a national Shelters' Technical Committee in February 2011 with the coordination of MoSA and the technical support of UN Women to promote the development of common standards for running anti-violence centres in the oPt, thus facilitating coordination and cooperation among shelters.
- The development of an accreditation policy document for anti-violence centres by MoSA, which was endorsed by the Palestinian Cabinet of Ministries in July 2011 in an effort to homogenise shelters' professional standards, while capitalising on the advanced experience of the Mehwar Centre.
- The selection of the Mehwar team to provide training to the staff of the newly established Hayat anti-violence centre in the Gaza Strip. The new staff was also hired using Mehwar's staff recruitment guidelines, for which a good practice publication has been developed and made available for wider use.
- The participation of Mehwar staff in a number of working sessions with MoSA district offices to standardise the vision and protocols for intervention in VAW cases.
- The increasing accreditation of the Mehwar Centre as an institution for professional internships and the continuation of its cooperation with universities such as Abu Dis University, Bethlehem University and Al Quds Open University between 2008-2012.



- Mehwar’s provision of both theoretical and practical training during 2011-2012 to senior university students in social work, in addition to lectures for junior students in which Mehwar staff presented the Centre’s services, work methodology and case-management practices.
- The awarding of Mehwar Centre staff with a “human rights defenders” award issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in December 2010.
- The participation of Mehwar’s Shelter Responsible in an exchange programme designed to share good practices on sheltering services for women with a team working in a Moroccan safe home.
- The support of MoSA for the re-opening of a safe home in Nablus, including the provision of initial financial resources, with the request that Mehwar carry out a basic, initial training programme for its staff.



**THE MEHWAR VEHICLE:
STRENGTHENING NATIONAL
SYSTEMS AND POLICY**

“The staff is the wealth of this place. This is what distinguishes Mehwar from other institutions. Just yesterday, I received a call from someone who was at Mehwar a few years back, asking for my advice about an issue. Victims have confidence and trust in us and believe that we can help them. The truth is that the oPt has many victims of violence, despite the fact that it has remained hidden for so long. Mehwar opened the door for the discussion around these issues.”

Mehwar staff

In the 2008-12 period Mehwar took important steps towards institutionalising its work and ensuring its sustainability. A key achievement has been the consolidation of its professional staff expertise. Mehwar staff are increasingly asked to conduct training sessions for other organisations, and their sound, professional methodology is now widely recognised and acknowledged. Thus, the initial period involving the training, technical assistance, nationalisation and capacity-building of Mehwar staff has paid off, as staff are now able to advocate effectively on behalf of the Centre.

A particular area of achievement for Mehwar is that of recruitment. In early 2009, a number of staff positions lay vacant, and even by March 2010, Mehwar was operating at around 25% of its full staff capacity.⁹ On 1 April 2010, the Centre’s director, the shelter responsible, the outreach programme coordinator and two social workers were recruited. By March 2011, Mehwar was operating at full staff capacity, with a total of 28 staff members.¹⁰ Mehwar staff recruitment policies and procedures were introduced and, today, provide a reference for staff selection in other anti-violence shelters throughout the oPt.

One of the most significant achievements of Mehwar regarding its sustainability has been the inclusion of most of its staff (22 out of 28 staff) on the MoSA payroll. This testifies to the commitment of the PA towards institutionalising the work of Mehwar, supporting its continued development and progress, and assuming responsibility for ensuring the existence of anti-violence centres in the oPt.

Mehwar staff now participates in regular staff evaluation processes, with the methodology defined and developed in cooperation with MoSA and independent human resources experts. As part of this process, a staff evaluation report was developed, which identified the main training needs of Mehwar staff, and made recommendations on their professional advancement. Mechanisms to provide regular guidance and management support to staff were institutionalised, including clinical supervision, annual staff retreats and regular management follow-up. These measures have helped reduce stress, avoid burnout and ensure constant professional growth.

Mehwar staff were also provided with access to increasingly systematised and standardised training programmes. For example, new Mehwar staff now participate in

9 Out of a full capacity of 28 staff, Mehwar was lacking seven staff members: two social workers, the shelter responsible, the gym coordinator, a nursery teacher, the outreach programmes coordinator, and one lawyer.

10 These include five social counsellors, four social workers, the Center director, the shelter responsible, the outreach programmes coordinator, the gym coordinator, two nursery teachers, two cleaners, one driver, five guards, one maintenance staff, the accountant, the responsible for administration, and two lawyers.

a one-week training programme in the anti-violence shelters run by Differenza Donna in Italy, with the aim of standardising the knowledge levels of newly recruited staff and staff who have worked at Mehwar since the beginning in 2007.

In October 2010, PCC, as contracted by MoSA, started providing clinical supervision to Mehwar staff on two levels: firstly, on the overall staff level, by addressing team dynamics and well-being; secondly, specifically with the shelter team, by addressing case-management issues and supporting the beneficiary-helper relationship.

In 2011, the Mehwar team requested the support of a local psychotherapist, who had previously developed a very positive collaborative relationship with the Centre while offering psychological support for some of its cases. Upon this request, from July 2011 onwards, the therapist started to provide technical supervision to the shelter team on a weekly basis (replacing PCC). This shelter supervision focused on case management, the development of intervention plans, and the analysis of psychological dynamics and relationships between sheltered women and staff.







THE WAY FORWARD

Having just celebrated its fifth birthday, the Mehwar Centre can be proud of some noteworthy achievements. As the first shelter for women and children victims of violence in the oPt and the Middle East, the Mehwar Centre and its staff are courageous and brave pioneers. They have fought to help women victims of violence achieve their right to lead full and healthy lives, to live their lives free from violence, to develop their full potential, and to have access to health, education and employment opportunities. Through its innovative, creative and integrated approach to service delivery, Mehwar has directly impacted the lives of hundreds of Palestinian women, as well as their families. Through its advocacy activities in schools, clubs, mosques and through the use of the media, Mehwar has succeeded in disseminating key messages about VAW: that violence is wrong; that women victims of violence are victims, not criminals; that they have rights that should be protected; that everyone has the right to full development opportunities within safe and protected families; and that each and every Palestinian in his or her community plays a role in ending VAW.

“W” is 23 and from Khalil (Hebron) in the West Bank. She was forced by her family to marry at an early age. Her husband was an Israeli permit holder, so she moved to Jerusalem, and they soon had two children. However, shortly after the marriage, he began to abuse her physically, withheld money from her, and refused to apply for an Israeli permit for her and her children, thereby limiting her movement and employment options. When she complained to her family in Khalil, they advised her to “put up with the abuse.” After the abuse became intolerable, she fled to a shelter within Israel, and for around nine months her family in Khalil had no idea where she was. For a time she resided there, but due to the fact that she has a West Bank ID, she was transferred to Mehwar. At Mehwar, she received counselling on her situation, legal aid which helped her to secure a divorce from her husband, and training on how to make gold and silver jewellery. The legal aid process was complicated by the fact that Mehwar lawyers do not have permits to work in Israeli courts, so lawyers from another organisation were contacted to provide these services. In the initial months of her arrival at Mehwar, “W” didn’t want to interact with her family. However, after a number of counselling sessions, she agreed that Mehwar social workers could begin to open a channel of communication with her family. A number of sessions were conducted at Mehwar and at their house in Khalil. The family eventually agreed that she should return home to Khalil with her children. At the time of writing, she had spent two months back at home. Months of counselling and personal intervention by Mehwar staff have resulted in cordial and civil interaction between family members. However, the tension of the past years is never far from the surface, and entrenched cultural norms and traditions that are biased against women often burst through the seams. As her father commented, “in general, Mehwar is a very important centre, a place to keep these women secure and make sure they don’t do bad things. However, what was a catastrophe for me was not knowing what had happened to my daughter for nine months. If she fled our family home because she wanted to protect her children, then that is acceptable. However, if she fled for other reasons, then I would kill her.”

Her father also refuses the possibility of “W” remarrying. She has not yet been able to secure Israeli ID permits for her children, and may not be able to continue her course in jewellery-making because of the high transportation costs to and from Bethlehem. However, Mehwar staff is working to look into a solution to this issue.

When asked what her hopes and dreams for the future are, “W” replied, “nothing is clear to me at the moment. I am not yet sure in what ways my life has changed, and I am a little lost.”

The case of “W” provides a poignant insight into the legal, cultural, social and economic challenges that Mehwar beneficiaries, staff and all other actors in the field face when tackling the issue of VAW and domestic violence in the oPt. It also displays the immense courage and commitment needed to break through these barriers. Staff were able to successfully secure “W’s” safety by developing an effective risk assessment plan in coordination with MoSA, the Bethlehem and Khalil Family Protection Units, and other organisations. They opened up a communication channel with “W”, and later with her family, so that she was eventually able to return home. They also helped to secure her divorce and custody of her children. They further provided her with training and economic opportunities, a strong social network through the Mehwar community, and reintegration possibilities within her family.

Nevertheless, at the time of writing, challenges remain: “W” is currently adjusting to her new life in Khalil, learning to live with her family again after the trauma of the last few years and doing her best to bring up her two young children in a manner that will allow them to forget their early years of abuse. She strives to continue with her vocational training and hopes that her family will accept her ambition to live and love again. Mehwar staff continue to counsel the family and diplomatically encourage them to recognise their daughter’s rights and their duty to protect her rights.

Mehwar has also been able to enhance partnerships between institutions working on VAW issues. Indeed, the presence of Mehwar and the attention it has brought to the problem of VAW has opened the debate around these issues and has encouraged various stakeholders to further develop their roles and responsibilities.

As highlighted throughout this Report, Mehwar staff face significant obstacles. These include a legal framework that does little to protect victims of VAW and a cultural context that prioritizes “family honour” over individual rights, in which victims are often blamed and stigmatised for the violence perpetrated against them. They face a poor economic climate characterized by high unemployment and low salaries, especially among women. Finally, they confront the cumulative effects of over 40 years of military occupation and the humiliation and frustration that it continues to cause within Palestinian society.



In light of these challenges, the way forward for Mehwar in the next two to three years will focus on the following themes:

1. More focus needs to be placed on the reintegration phase for victims of VAW. Specifically, on how to empower women socially, culturally, and economically. In cases where women cannot go back to the family, they need to be able to integrate into society and have opportunities while remaining protected. In cases of extreme sexual abuse and incest, women need free psychological counselling for many years, as well as general help and support.
2. Mehwar would benefit from having a full-time professional psychologist working on-site.
3. Mehwar staff need continuous supervision and counselling in their day-to-day management of cases.
4. Mehwar staff should continue to develop partnerships with key stakeholders, and continue to regularly interact with VAW specialists.
5. More training in VAW issues is needed for FPU and MoSA field workers, as well as heads and directors of these institutions, to sensitise them to these issues and encourage them to increasingly fulfil their mandated role in support of vulnerable women and children victims of violence.
6. UN Women should continue to play a role in connecting Mehwar to the national protection system in order to sustain the work of key partners performing their respective roles in ensuring restorative justice, protection and support for women victims violence.
7. Mehwar should continue to influence and build the capacity of other institutions in carrying out their mandated roles in the chain of response to VAW issues.
8. Mehwar should maintain its professional independence in case management, and should retain independence in making decisions on cases. The final decision on a case should be made by the Mehwar social workers and the VAW victim herself.
9. The development of Mehwar guidelines should inform and be the basis for national VAW protection standards. Minimum and optimum standards for shelters should also be developed.
10. Advocacy tools should be further developed and community awareness activities expanded.
11. Mehwar should also look to further engage with the private sector. More sensitization campaigns are needed with the Ministry of Labour and private sector actors in order to enhance their commitment to reintegrating women in society.
12. Specialised facilities such as half-way houses need to be established in order to provide specialised services for women to be reintegrated within society.
13. There should be a free Mehwar hotline for women victims of violence to call.

14. Mehwar staff would benefit from further staff recreational, development and team-building activities.
15. Mehwar staff should have individual capacity-building plans in order to further their own professional development.

"I always tell my colleagues, 'let us go back and see what we achieved with the most difficult cases of abuse and beatings.' I remember one girl who came here blue. Now she is studying and wants to work. We succeeded in many cases, and when I am stressed I always go back to our successes and see how we have managed to change lives. This is the commitment; these women consider us as role models. We give them something to aspire to... it is all worth it when I see the women are happy."

Mehwar staff

16. Mehwar should develop a website to promote its background, vision, objectives, services, contact details, and to provide resources for staff working in the field of VAW.

Despite the challenges faced by Mehwar, its great strength lies in the passion, determination and integrity of its staff, for which the success of seeing one life changed for the better is enough to sustain them through the most difficult of times.



