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Masters Program in Community Mental Health



**Thesis Approval**

**Exploration of the experience of ex-political  
Palestinian children detainees in Ramallah district**




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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The Palestinian people have been experiencing many forms of trauma and violence as a direct result of living under Israeli occupation since 1948. Under this occupation, Israel applies military law in the West Bank under which children arrested from the age of 12 years old are treated as adults and are prosecuted in military courts; this stands in contrast to Israeli domestic law under which children are not classed as adults until they reach 18 years of age.

**Aim:** The study aims to explore the experience of the children aged 12-18 years who were arrested and detained by the Israeli military in Ramallah district.

**Method:** The study used a qualitative phenomenological design. A convenience sample of 30 adolescents who were ex-political prisoners in Israel prisons and were released during 2010-2011, was utilized. Data were collected during 6 months, in January/2013-30/June/2013, through semi-structured individual interviews and constant comparative data analysis was used to analyze the data.

**Findings:** The results revealed prisoners passed 4 stages since they were arrested until they were released from prison which included: arrest experience, integration and court experience, prison experience. Some major themes related to the detention and court process, inside prison, and after release from prison experience. The data highlighted the different problems the children were exposed to in each of these stages. For example, the participants suffered from psychological problems especially adjustment problems, fear and anxiety, nervousness, shame and guilt. The data also showed that females exposed to sexual abuse were particularly vulnerable to suffering these symptoms.

Furthermore, participants faced many physical health problems such as severe headaches, malnutrition, cancer, dizziness, neck pain, kidney stones, and epilepsy. Most of them reported that no treatment was offered, and Para-cetamol was the only drug that was prescribed by doctors inside prisons. Alongside the physical suffering, the children reported social problems from the loss of friends and family. On release, the impact of their imprisonment was seen in reported educational problems. The majority of participants found it difficult to attend schools after their release because they were now older than the school year they

should be in; and they found it difficult to cope with new students younger than them was an evident issue.

The impact of arrest extended further into economic problems. Participants reported being unable to work, because of Israeli security restrictions on their movement after their release. This was on top of insufficient money when they were in prison. Finally, they suffered from further restrictions on their political and civil rights, such as having their movements restricted by the Israeli military after being released and the fear of being rearrested.

The result showed that the participants used many coping strategies, but that these were mainly emotional strategies. The children resorted to smoking, cooking, singing, watching TV, and seeking the support of peers. Many said they resorted to joking about, and because of, their inability to change prison conditions. The majority of participants indicated that they were pessimistic regarding their future and mainly focused on their need for psychological intervention, work and education after their release.

## **Conclusion**

This study of the exposure of children to prison experience pointed to a likely development of mental health problems as well as problems with physical, health, educational, social, economic, and political problems. It also appears that the traumatic experiences that these children face at early age may affect their personality development and their future. The negative impact of prison experience may continue into the lives of these children for many years after being released. As such, this call for more attention to be paid by governmental, nongovernmental, national and international organizations to protect these children from being arrested for political reasons as adults. They need protection from torture in all its forms and there must be greater supervision of the services inside prisons to ensure health and mental health services are adequate for prisoners.

## استكشاف تجارب الأطفال الفلسطينيين الذين تعرضوا للاعتقال السياسي في محافظة رام الله

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ملخص الدراسة

خلفيه الدراسة: يتعرض الشعب الفلسطيني لأشكال مختلفة من الصدمة والعنف المستمر، بسبب وجود الاحتلال الإسرائيلي منذ عام 1948. كما ان القانون العسكري الإسرائيلي الذي يتم تطبيقه في الضفة الغربية يسمح باعتقال الأطفال في سن 12 عاما ويعاملهم كبالغين ويتم محاكمتهم في المحاكم العسكرية، وهو مخالف للقانون المحلي الإسرائيلي الذي يمنع محاكمة الأطفال دون سن 18 عاما.

الهدف: تهدف هذه الدراسة الي استكشاف تجربة الاعتقال السياسي للأطفال في منطقة رام الله والذين تتراوح أعمارهم بين 12-18 سنة عندما تم اعتقالهم من قبل الجيش الإسرائيلي.

منهجيته الدراسة: استخدمت الدراسة المنهجية البحثية النوعية : دراسة الظواهر. وتمت دراسة عينة من 30 مشارك والذين كانوا سجناء سياسيين سابقين في السجون الاسرائيلية وخرجوا من المعتقلات خلال عام 2010-2011. حيث تم جمع البيانات خلال ستة شهور من 1 كانون الثاني 2012 إلى 30 حزيران 2012 من خلال المقابلات الفردية شبه منتظمة، وتم استخدام تحليل البيانات المقارنة الثابتة لتحليل المعلومات.

النتائج: وكشفت النتائج المراحل الرئيسية التالية المتصلة بتجربة الاعتقال وهي عملية الاعتقال والتحقيق والمحكمة، دخول السجن، وبعد الخروج من السجن. وأظهرت النتائج أن الأطفال قد تعرضوا لانواع مختلفه من المشاكل وقد استخدموا اليات تكيف مختلفه لمواجهة هذه التجارب. على سبيل المثال، "عانى المشاركون/ات من مشاكل نفسية مثل مشاكل التكيف، والخوف والقلق، والعصبية، والشعور بالخجل والذنب، وخاصة الإناث بسبب تعرضهم للتحرش الجنسي.

وعلاوة على ذلك، واجه العديد من المشاركين من المشاكل الصحية، مثل، الصداع الشديد، وسوء التغذية، والسرطان، والدوخة، وآلام الرقبة، وحصى الكلى، والصرع. كما ذكر معظم المشاركين/ات أنهم خلال وجودهم

في المعتقلات لم يتلقوا أي علاج طبي، ما عدا الاكامول (para-cetamol) حيث انه الدواء الوحيد الذي كان يتم صرفه لهم من قبل الطبيب داخل السجن. أيضا عانى المشاركون/ات من المشاكل الاجتماعية كفقدان الأصدقاء والبعد عن الأسرة. وعانوا من مشاكل التعليم حيث ان الغالبية منهم وجدوا صعوبة في الالتحاق بالمدارس بعد الإفراج عنهم بسبب منعهم من استكمال دراستهم في الصفوف التي كانوا فيها قبل الاعتقال والذين عادوا الى المدرسه عانوا من صعوبات اكاديميه بسبب انقطاعهم عن المدرسه فتره الاعتقال، بالاضافه الى مشاكل بالتاقلم في المدرسه، وقله التركيز داخل الصف.

وايضا ذكر المشاركون المشاكل الاقتصادية حيث ان معظمهم كانوا غير قادرين على العمل بسبب القوانين العسكريه الإسرائيلية التي تقيد حركتهم بعد الافراج بالاضافه الي عدم وجود كمية كافية من المال لديهم في السجن. واخيرا ذكر المشاركون أنه عانوا من مشاكل سياسية مثل تقييد حركهم من قبل الجيش الإسرائيلي بعد الإفراج عنهم والخوف من إعادة اعتقالهم.

وأظهرت النتائج أن المشاركين استخدموا العديد من استراتيجيات التأقلم خاصة الاستراتيجيات العاطفية مثل التدخين، والطبخ، والغناء، مشاهدة التلفزيون، والدعم الاجتماعي، والمزح بسبب عدم قدرتهم على السيطرة او تغيير تجربة او ظروف السجن. وايضا معظم المشاركين كانوا متشائمين بشأن مستقبلهم كما انهم عبروا عن حاجتهم إلى التدخل النفسي والعمل والتعليم بعد الإفراج عنهم .

## الخلاصه

تعرض الأطفال إلى تجربة السجن قد يؤدي إلى ظهور المشاكل النفسية بالإضافة إلى مشكلة صحية أخرى، المشكلات التربوية والاجتماعية والاقتصادية، والسياسية. قد يستمر التأثير السلبي لتجربة السجن في حياة الأطفال لسنوات طويلة بعد أن الافراج. كما أنها تعتبر واحدة من التجارب المؤلمة التي تواجه هؤلاء الأطفال في سن مبكرة والتي قد تؤثر على التنمية الشخصية الذاتية والمجتمعيه ومستقبلهم. وينبغي إيلاء المزيد من الاهتمام من قبل المنظمات الحكومية وغير الحكومية، الوطنية والدولية لحماية هؤلاء الأطفال من التعرض للاعتقال لأسباب سياسية، لمنع التعذيب والإشراف على الخدمات داخل السجون الصحة والخدمات الصحية النفسية بشكل خاص.

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# Chapter One

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## Introduction

Palestine is considered a young society as children and adolescents accounted about one million and nine hundred thousand under the age of 18 years (Palestinian Bureau of Statistics 2010). Also based on of the census 2007, data showed a high proportion of individuals under the age fifteenth (41.3%) (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

In addition, It is known that the Palestinians have repeated encountered traumas since the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948 which represents all forms of arrest, torture, terrorism, murder, demolition of homes and violation of civil, political, economic, social and cultural freedoms. The arrest and the detention of the Palestinians are governed by a wide-ranging set of military regulations that govern every aspect of the Palestinian civilian life. For example, there are over 1,500 military regulations governing the West Bank and over 1,400 governing the Gaza Strip. Also, since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967, over 650,000 Palestinians have been detained by Israel and this forms approximately 20% of the total Palestinian population (Addameer, 2005). The majority of those detainees are male, and the number of Palestinians detainees forms approximately 40% of the total Palestinian male population (Addameer, 2005). The Israeli military commander of the region issues military orders and the issuance of new orders often remains unknown and become apparent when they are implemented, as the military commander may issue new military regulations at any moment (Addameer, 2005).

Similar to men and women who have experienced imprisonment, young children have entered prisons and have been released after they became mature adults. They have been deprived of their simplest right to a dignified life and have experienced the bitterness and harshness of incarceration. In addition, they are held in harsh conditions that contradict standards stipulated by the Human Rights and Fourth Geneva Conventions for the protection of civilians during wars and the Convention against Torture (DCI,2004) These experiences have left their marks and imprints on the daily lives of political detainees who

have managed to survive torture and large sectors of the Palestinian society are affected by experiences related to torture, including children, women and youth (DCI, 2004).

## **1.1 Research Problem:**

As mentioned previously, the Palestinian people confronting ongoing various forms of trauma and violence, as they are living in a tragedy as a result of the Israeli occupation since 1948. In addition, the Palestinians are under military control through over 1,500 military regulations which rule every aspects of Palestinian life. Palestinian above 12 years of age can get arrested, interrogation, detained, sentence and imprisoned (DCI 2009). Since 1967, over 700,000 Palestinians had been detained, 9,493 were under administrative detention, and 394 aged less than 18 years were arrested. The majority of the prisoners were males and 75 were females (PLO Negotiation Affairs Department, 2008). The Israeli military law which is applied in West Bank treated children at age 12 as adults and they are prosecuted in the military courts; in the contrary to Israeli domestic law by which the children should be attained at 18 years. Each year Israeli military court prosecuted 9,000 Palestinians including 700 children. Some of those children face maltreatment from the Israeli soldiers and some are tortured during the interrogation so they reach the detention centers traumatized, tired and alone (DCI, 2009).

These events may expose these children to trauma directly or indirectly (El-Sarrj, et al 2003). For example, it was found that 85% of the male and female detainees live in harsh conditions and severe forms of torture especially at the military interrogation and detention centers; such as Offer and Howard (Military, 2010). The official statistics indicate that there is a correlation between detention and torture, and that all detainees have suffered from one form of torture or another, involving psychological and physical maltreatment or public humiliation, including humiliation in the presence of their family members (WHO, 2010). Furthermore, the Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs reports that there is an increase in the number of the Palestinian children who are arrested by the Israeli military since the Al-Aqsa Intifada as more than 7500 child have been exposed to the most extreme forms of torture within the Israeli prisons and the number of children who died due to torture are 191. Also more than 90 children or 25 percent of the total number of these children are suffering from various illnesses which require

treatment that is not available inside the prisons due to the policy that is adopted by the prison's administration to neglect them medically (Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners Affairs, 2011).

## **1.2 Justification of the study**

Many studies were done to assess the effect of torture experience on adult prisoners particularly in Gaza district (El Sraj, Guota ,1997, El Sraj, Punaamaki ,1996) and little attention was paid to children . Also, there is a lack of qualitative studies that assess the psycho-social, economical, and political stressors that the Palestinian-detainee children experience during detention and after their release from Israeli prisons and their coping mechanisms. This study might be the first to investigate or explore in depth the effects of the detention experience on the life of the Palestinian children in Ramallah district.

## **1.3 The purpose of the study**

The main aim of the study is to explore the detention experience of children aged 12-18 years old from Ramallah district, which were arrested by the Israeli military and released in the year (2010-2011).

## **1.4 The Specific Objectives**

1. To explore the experience that the detainee children face during their arresting process.
2. To explore the experience that the detainee children face during their the integration process and prosecution process.
3. To explore the experience that the detainee children face during the Israeli prisons.
4. To explore the experience that the detainees children face after their release from the Israeli prisons.
5. To explore the coping mechanism that the Palestine children used to cope with their stressors during the detention, inside prison and after their release from prisons.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

The study tried to explore prison experience of Palestinian children in Israeli prisons. Findings showed that the exposure of children to prison experience may result in the development of mental problems in addition to the other health problem, educational, social, economic, and political problems. Also it is considered one of the traumatic events that these children face at early age which may affect their personality development and their perception of their future. The negative impact of prison experience may continue on children life for long years after being release so more attention should be paid by governmental, nongovernmental , national and international organizations to protect these children from being arrested due to political reasons, to prevent torture and supervise the services inside prisons particularly health and mental health services. The integration of children into society after being released should be one of the outmost priorities of mental health professionals and educational system.

## **Recommendations**

### **Implications for the Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners Affairs, international organizations and local organizations**

- Improve the mental health services for prisoners that are provided by (MOPA) centres or institutions
- Increase local and international organizations awareness about the prison experience of young prisoners including torture and the Israeli military policy to destroy their life inside prisons and after release
- Create a lobby to protect young prisoners and to prevent them from arrest by the Israeli military
- Supervise and improve health services in prisons and particularly mental health services by the international and local organizations
- Provide comprehensive plan of rehabilitation and to integrate the ex-detanees to sociality, in order to help them to deal with all dimensions of prison experience including their emotional, educational, political, economical and social problems.
- Provide psychological intervention immediately after the release of young prisoners in order to prevent deterioration and the development of mental disorders such as PTSD, suicide, orb depression and to facilitate their re-integration into their societies
- Provide family therapy for prisoners' families in order to improve their psychological status and improve their relationships with their children
- Increase adolescent and families awareness and knowledge about prison experience, and its impact on the life of children through media, in schools , youth clubs, and local community organizations



- Increase the awareness of health professionals and particularly mental health practitioners about prison experience of children and provide training in specialized and advanced psychotherapy such as cognitive behavior therapy for professionals to treat their mental health problems.
- Increase effective treatment program should be developed to target young prisoners and should be provided by well trained mental health professionals in psychotherapy and in the field of war, conflict, and torture and prison experience.
- Increase the knowledge and the awareness of mental health professional about the importance of assessing young prisoners' coping strategies in order to provide appropriate treatment and increase their ability to use functional coping mechanisms

#### **Implications of research**

- There is a need for further qualitative studies to explore in more depth each stage of prison experience and the emotional problems in addition to other problems and challenges
- There is a need for further qualitative study including more female participants in order to understand their prison experience and how it affects their life
- There is a need for quantitative study to assess the mental and psychological problems such as PTSD and depression among young prisoners after their release