



Aseel stands at the door of her office to welcome patients as they walk in. The entrance to her office is a colorful display of paints and art supplies, which she often uses to put her younger patients at ease.<sup>7</sup> September 2022 - Aseel stands at the door with a warm and reassuring smile as patients nervously enter her office. “Anyone who’s coming to see me is not in a happy place. It’s my job to find out what is distressing them and provide support in overcoming any mental health challenges they might be facing because of their situation or life experiences,” says Aseel.

Aseel is a psychosocial counselor at the UNRWA Hebron Health Centre, providing mental health services to Palestinians living in Hebron city in the southern West Bank. The health centre covers the H2 area, which has witnessed multiple cycles of violence due to settlement activities. Many of Aseel’s patients suffer from psychological distress and mental health issues caused by the conflict and living in a constantly tense environment.



Aseel points towards the H2 area, which has seen multiple cycles of violence due to settlement activities. Residents of the H2 area often suffer from mental health issues caused by conflict and difficult life conditions. COVID-19 has further exacerbated the situation and contributed to an increase in gender-based violence (GBV), which has enhanced the vulnerability of women and girls, Aseel explains.

In the last two years, Aseel has received an increased number of female patients who have developed acute stress and mental health issues as a direct consequence of experiencing violence and abuse at home. “It’s appalling and heart-breaking that women are bearing the brunt of the rising uncertainty that many families are facing due to COVID-19,” Aseel laments.

Flipping through her files, she recounts a recent case.

Salma , a young mother of two, was being verbally and physically abused by her husband after he lost his job during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

She was an easy target for him. He took all his anger out on her. So much so that she started to believe that she was the cause of all his problems and would take her frustration out by beating her children. She developed severe anxiety and her mental health was spiraling,” Aseel recounts.

Salma, who lived close to the clinic eventually turned to Aseel for help. “We had four sessions, each better than the last,” Aseel explains.

“I supported her in developing mechanisms for getting her mental health under control and understanding that she is not alone. Her mindset gradually started to improve. Luckily, her husband also realized the impact his actions were having on her and that drastically changed the situation for the better.”

Unfortunately, meeting GBV survivors experiencing similar situations has become all too familiar for Aseel. But she explains that not all cases are as straightforward or have as quick a resolution as Salma’s. Some patients don’t feel confident or are trapped in circumstances where it’s extremely hard for them to reach out for support.

Women’s mental health issues can sometimes be an indicator of the GBV they are experiencing.

Often GBV survivors seeking health care at clinics are unable to be upfront about their situation due to fear and stigma. At times they don’t even recognize that they are developing mental health issues because of what they might be going through, she says.



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