

Legal Aid in Gaza – Keeping the Family Safe

Asma lives in Jabalia Camp in the Gaza Strip where she attempted to raise a family whilst trapped within a violent marriage. “I have been the mother, the protector, the defender, the bread winner, and the guardian of my children,” she says. “But I have never been a wife. How can I feel that I am a wife while my husband has victimised me since the very beginning of our marriage?”

Asma’s husband was a drug addict and for many years her marriage was characterised by domestic violence and psychological abuse. Aggression and attacks became part of daily life; bruises and physical scars a recurring reminder of her violent marriage. Asma used to be severely beaten by her husband and thrown out into the street, seeking refuge back with her family. Her husband often prevented Asma from seeing her children for months at a time, exposing them to abuse as well.

After hearing a radio spot about the network of legal aid providers in the Gaza Strip, Asma paid a visit to the legal aid clinic run by the Palestinian Bar Association. Since April 2011, UNDP opened 18 clinics across the Gaza Strip. With women accounting for 88 percent of their clients, visitors receive free legal advice and are eligible to free legal representation by qualified lawyers.

Asma is one of the beneficiaries from the legal aid clinics implemented by UNDP in the Gaza Strip. In an effort to empower local communities and improve access to justice for vulnerable the programme helped establish a network of legal aid providers across the Gaza Strip. Bringing together the Palestinian Bar Association, civil society organisations and academic institutions, the network provides an array of advanced legal services, including representation, litigation, mediation and arbitration.

“I take my hat off to the people who established the legal aid clinics, because without them I would have never obtained justice,” says Asma. After receiving legal guidance, she decided to seek custody of her children. Medical records that documented the on-going abuse were compiled, and attempts were made to place Asma and her family in *Beit Al-Aman*, a women’s refuge centre in Gaza City. After her children were unable to join her at the centre however, alternative accommodation was sought.

The legal aid clinic successfully helped secure funding from the Protection Department, which provides Asma with a monthly allowance of approximately USD 230 to cover the rent of her apartment.

Asma was awarded custody of her children and now sees her life restarting again. “I am a new-born woman. I am living with my children under one roof. I warm their bed and share with them oil and bread. I mother them morally, emotionally and psychologically. My children are back to their schools and their marks have greatly improved.”

She is deeply grateful to the network of legal aid providers in Gaza: “I will never forget the support I received from the legal aid clinic,” she says. “When I compare my life before and after their intervention, I realise that there are kind-hearted people out there who try to make a difference.”

By supporting the network of legal aid providers in the Gaza Strip (locally known as *Awn*), UNDP aims to provide Palestinians with the services they need to both access justice institutions and achieve justice within them. While the needs of individual clients differ, the provision of legal aid services aims at breaking the barriers that separate too many Palestinians from justice.