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A Qualitative Study of the Psychosocial Impact of Political Imprisonment on Palestinian Families

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"To stop feeling shocked and bewildered, to stop feeling people's sorrows (any people), to be numb in the face of atrocity (any atrocity) — these became my daily nemesis, how I measured my sumud and steadfastness. A person's mental essence is their will, their physical essence is their labor, and their spiritual essence is their ability to feel. Being able to feel for people, feeling the pain of humanity, is the essence of civilization."

– Walid Daqqa

This work could never have come to life without the love and support of my family, both near and far, in Palestine and in Padova. To my beloved parents Eman and Nael who endured the weight of absence, and without whom I wouldn't have been where I am today. To Nadi, whose guidance helped me grow, and to Dalia and Mahmoud for always being there. To my nephews, Joud and Zain, in the hope that their future will be one of freedom and love. To the soul of my grandfather Hasan, and to my grandmother, Fatima, who was first to embody the meaning of *sumud*. To all my family, who stood present through every farewell and every homecoming. To Jamal, the partner of love and light, for his unwavering support. To my friends who carried me across distance and whom I carried in my heart along the way—Loor, Lamar, Omar, Giorgia, Lara, Saji, Raghad, Ahmad, Yara, Fox, Isleen, Akef, and Mary. To the family of *AlMada*, whose relentless work and inspiration on the ground gave depth and meaning to all that I studied; to Zeina for the long conversations that gave me clarity amid despair, and to Maya, Hamza, and Mariam. To Basil Farraj for his always inspiring work. To my Padova family who showed me Palestine through different eyes, *Spazio Catai*. To each one of you I dedicate this work, along the call for a world of justice and liberation. To Elena for the memories we shared before we ever met, for the Palladio weekends, and for the endless talks of love and laughter. To Luca and Davide for giving me the warmth of home. And to Michele, Sofia, Benedetta, Alice, Iman, Lele, Camilla, Caterina, Alessia, Sara, and Zeena for the overwhelming love and support. To professor Scrimin for her guidance throughout the work. To the dears in Refugees Welcome. To everyone who made this journey possible—I am deeply grateful. And above all to the women and children who entrusted me with their stories, and to all the families of political prisoners in Palestine and around the world. This work is for them, in the call for their freedom, and for a free Palestine.

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Introduction

This research examines the psychosocial impact of political incarceration on families of Palestinian political prisoners, with a focus on the prisoners' wives and children in Ramallah governorate in the West Bank. It aims to understand the complexities of their lived experiences; how daily life is reshaped by imprisonment, the emotional and material disruptions it entails, and the strategies the families employ to navigate this reality. The study explores both the sources that sustain a sense of agency and resilience, and the struggles that emerge from unmet needs, structural constraints, and enduring absence.

This study investigates how the imprisonment of a family member reshapes the everyday lives, roles, and responsibilities of Palestinian women and children and the specific emotional, social, and structural challenges that arise from this prolonged absence; it examines the strategies these women and children develop to cope emotionally and practically with incarceration, to maintain connection with the imprisoned parent, and to preserve family stability under conditions of systemic uncertainty; and it explores the narratives and meaning-making practices through which families interpret their experiences, mobilize support networks, resist dominant framings of passive victimhood, and articulate hopes and concerns for the future.

The research is based on in-depth interviews with mothers whose husbands are incarcerated and interactive focus group sessions with youths and children whom fathers or siblings are imprisoned, conducted in the Ramallah governorate. This qualitative and participatory approach makes it possible to engage in depth with the psychosocial strategies through which families sustain life under conditions of absence and fragmentation.

While previous studies have prioritized the imprisoned subject, this study foregrounds the experiences of the family members left behind (Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, 2013). It contributes to efforts to de-center individualizing and pathologizing frameworks and instead draws attention to the forms of relational labor, resistance, and care that emerge in spaces shaped by carceral power.

Understanding the lived realities of families of Palestinian political prisoners requires situating their experiences within a broader historical and sociopolitical context. This study draws attention to everyday not as separate from the political, but as a space where structures of power and political violence are present. It examines how the daily lives of Palestinian women and children are shaped by the carceral violence of the Israeli settler-colonial project.

Moreover, political imprisonment is approached as a colonial strategy that extends beyond individual punishment to disrupt collective life. Consequently, its psychosocial impact on families cannot be reduced to paradigms of trauma or pathology. Rather than viewing families as passive recipients of harm, this work emphasizes their active processes of struggle, meaning-making, adjustment, and resistance. Conceptualizing political imprisonment as a form of structural violence and a relational, lived reality allows the engagement with the multiple interconnected layers of lived experiences, memory, and social reproduction under occupation.

To explore these psychosocial dimensions in depth, it is first necessary to ground the discussion in the historical and political genealogy of imprisonment as a colonial practice in Palestine. Therefore, the first chapter will explore the background of incarceration in the Palestinian context. Through this chapter the concepts of political imprisonment as colonial practice and the family as a political site will be discussed. The second chapter will offer a

theoretical framework with the aim of moving beyond pathologization through exploring liberation psychology, the problem with trauma-as-diagnosis, the concepts of resilience and *sumud*, and calling for psychosocial complexity. The third chapter will examine existing literature on the psychosocial impact of political imprisonment on women and children. The fourth chapter will provide an elaborate description of the methodological approach used in this study. In the fifth chapter the findings of the study will be presented. Finally, in the sixth chapter the findings will be discussed and positioned within existing literature, and will include reflections on strengths, limitations, and implications of the research.

Chapter 1

Background: Incarceration in the Palestinian Context

1.1 Political Imprisonment as Colonial Practice

Political imprisonment in Palestine can only be understood in relation to the country's colonial history. The beginning of political carceral practices during the British Mandate (1917–1947) and their inheritance by the current Israeli occupation (1948–present) are discussed in this chapter. It focuses on incarceration as a tool of controlling individual and collective life, targeting social cohesion, isolating communities, and suppressing political movements. In this study, political imprisonment is situated as part of a long trajectory of settler colonialism—thus, as a form of structural violence that not only targets individuals but, in its essence, aims to reshape familial and communal lived experiences. This is crucial for examining the psychosocial impact of imprisonment on the families of prisoners, not as a temporary and isolated event, but as a systematic form of violence embedded in the details of everyday Palestinian life.

The origins of the colonial practice of political imprisonment in Palestine can be traced back to the British Mandate's legal framework. During the wake of the Arab Revolt (1936 - 1939) against British rule and Zionist settlement, and as one of the responses to the Palestinian demands of independence, the British authorities introduced the 1945 Defense (Emergency) Regulations. The regulations consist of a comprehensive set of laws which granted the High Commissioner the power to produce arrest orders without trials, demolish homes, impose curfews, restrict freedom of movement, and censor media, under the justification of security and public order (Economic Cooperation Foundation [ECF], n.d.).

These regulations marked a turning point in the use of secret evidence and emergency legal justification for criminalizing political activism in Palestine. The British government used law to legitimize their domination through legal formalism. Later, they were adopted, adapted, and expanded by the Israeli occupation in 1948. Thus, the Israeli 1948 Emergency Regulations and other subsequent legal instruments are influenced largely by the British legal system (Sultany, 2017). This administers the continuation of colonial governance in using legal frameworks to impose their domination.

The military legal regime of the Israeli occupation consists of a series of military orders that criminalize a wide range of civic activities such as waving Palestinian flags, participating in gatherings, distributing political pamphlets, taking part in assemblies, and others. Military Order 101, issued in 1967, is one example of these orders. It effectively outlawed political expression, making even non-violent forms of protest punishable by imprisonment. Fragmentation and isolation are also achieved through such orders: by means of these orders the military commander has the power to close an area in which outlawed gatherings are taking place. This is one among other military orders that serve the same purpose of criminalizing any Palestinian political activity, for example military order 378 (Addameer, 2017).

These legal tools serve to delegitimize Palestinian political activities treating them as threats to public security, thereby warranting indefinite detention without trial (Hajjar, 2005). During periods of political moments such as the First Intifada (1987 - 1993), the Second Intifada (2000 - 2005), and more recently during waves of protest in Jerusalem and West Bank and the ongoing genocide in Gaza (IMEU, 2012; Anadolu Agency, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2025), mass arrests were deployed to suppress popular mobilization. This illustrates how incarceration in the

Palestinian context is employed as a political weapon. According to Peteet (2005), the strategy of imprisonment functions as a means of interrupting and dispersing political continuity.

Another aspect of the means of carceral control is Israel's military court system, which exclusively prosecutes Palestinians in the West Bank. In these courts judges and prosecutors are military personnel, Palestinian defendants in some cases are denied proper legal representation, trials are conducted in Hebrew, a language most of the detainees don't speak, and confessions obtained under force or pressure are admissible as evidence (B'Tselem, 2015).

These courts also prosecute Palestinian children; according to the Defense for Children International - Palestine (DCI) (2024), approximately 500 to 700 Palestinian children are placed under trial each year. They documented systematic abuses in the arrests as children report being subjected to physical abuse, interrogation, nighttime arrests, and solitary confinement. According to a report done by Save the Children (2012), child ex-detainees were at high risk of developing PTSD. Child incarceration functions to intimidate younger generations and indoctrinate fear and compliance from a young age.

Administrative detention was introduced as part of the British Mandate's 1945 Defence (Emergency) Regulations and was later adopted by the Israeli occupation. It is a mechanism that allows the incarceration of individuals whom the authorities label as security threats without specifying any charge and without allowing them into trial. This allowed the indefinite detention of individuals that were considered a threat to colonial order (Addameer, 2018). This regulation aims to provide a legal justification to the arrest of Palestinians without due process, and thus the suppression of mobilizations.

Israeli authorities defend the use of administrative detention as necessary for maintaining public order and thwarting terrorism. However, human rights organizations including Amnesty

International (2018) and Human Rights Watch (2017), have condemned the practice as a violation of international humanitarian law, especially Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to liberty and security of person and protection from arbitrary detention. Palestinian prisoners have been using several tactics to protest administrative detention including boycotting military courts and hunger strikes (Farraj, 2022).

Over the past several decades, the number of political arrests of Palestinians has varied annually, with significant increases during periods of heightened tension. Currently, there are approximately 11,100 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, including 3577 administrative detainees, 49 women, and 400 children (Addameer, 2025).

Since the beginning of the Israeli genocide on Gaza since October 2023 till now, the Israeli carceral system has undergone a marked intensification, revealing its role as a key tool of colonial control. The declared "state of emergency in prisons" has enabled the Israeli authorities to suspend core rights and protections for Palestinian detainees, including access to lawyers, family visits, and adequate living conditions. Prisoners have been subjected to arbitrary beatings, prolonged solitary confinement, denial of medical care, and deliberate acts of humiliation such as forced nudity and destruction of personal belongings (Amnesty International, 2023). All of which increased the emotional and psychological toll on the prisoners and their families.

These practices, framed as exceptional security measures, must be understood as extensions of a carceral regime designed to fracture Palestinian society, sever political action, and suppress forms of collective resilience. The escalation of incommunicado detention (Amnesty International, 2024) and administrative orders illustrate the use of legal infrastructure to sustain the conditions of domination and oppression. As in other colonial contexts (Khalili, 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015), the lived experience of political imprisonment is weaponized to erode

social ties and generate fragmentation and isolation. Thus, the current worsening of prison conditions does not signal a temporary rupture but a deepening of the settler-colonial logic of control through incarceration.

According to Foucault (1975), the prison can be viewed as a productive entity that produces subjects, regulates behavior, and reorganizes social life. Yet, as Giacaman and Johnson present in their article (2013) based on the intervention of Judith Butler in a panel in the University of Columbia in 2012 on "Carceral Politics in Palestine: Gender, Vulnerability, Prison", the Israeli carceral regime operates less to produce "Foucauldian disciplinary subjects" than to *deconstitute* or *destitute* the Palestinian subject altogether. In this sense, imprisonment is not only about disciplining and regulating but about dismantling the very conditions of Palestinian political agency and resistance. Thus, Palestinian imprisonment exemplifies a form of carceral power that goes beyond discipline to enact erasure and fragmentation.

Following on this idea, political incarceration, as Khalili shows in *Time in the Shadows* (2013), is not limited to the legal domain but operates through spatial, temporal, and affective practices that shape entire communities. Confinement and detention function as technologies of rule that extend beyond political actors to the families and people around them, producing fear, interrupting everyday life, and suspending futures.

Moreover, imprisonment is a form of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) terms "organized abandonment"; a strategy in which certain populations are systematically neglected, marginalized, and made vulnerable by political, economic, and social systems. It's not random or accidental; it is organized in the sense that policies and structures intentionally leave these populations without resources using their marginalization as a means of control. Gilmore's insights into carceral geography resonate with the Palestinian context, where prisons are not only spaces of removal and

mechanisms to suppress political aspirations, but also nodes in a broader infrastructure and carceral geography that extends far beyond prison walls characterized by surveillance, checkpoints, permit systems, and militarized control.

These mechanisms create a geography of confinement that bleeds into everyday life, shaping how Palestinians move, relate, and imagine their futures. As Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) elaborates, this carceral logic operates under a "security theology" that justifies perpetual violence under the guise of risk management and public order. The prison, then, is not a bounded site, it seeps into homes, memories, bodies, and futures. The psychosocial impact of this regime is deeply gendered and generational. Families are not collateral victims but become embedded within the carceral terrain: mothers and children take on expanded roles and responsibilities living under the shadow of absence and surveillance. Both become vulnerable to different forms of political violence and to being used as instruments of pressure against the imprisoned.

Situating the lived experiences of prisoners' families within a broader architecture of violence where incarceration is understood as a colonial technology rather than a discrete legal response, allows us to understand them not as isolated tragedies but as politically produced and socially endured realities. This socio-political lens challenges framing prisoners and their families as passive victims or individualized cases of trauma. Instead, it opens the space to understand the strategy of targeting bodies, relations, routines, and imaginations through political imprisonment as a means of control and therefore deepens the examination of how it psychosocially impacts families.

1.2 The Family as a Political Site

The violence of incarceration under Israeli settler-colonialism is not limited to the legal aspect of confinement; it encompasses a range of other multi-layered physical and psychological mechanisms that seeks to fragment Palestinian life through intimate and everyday means. Through practices such as prolonged detention, isolation from legal and familial support, coercive interrogation, and the restriction of prison visits, the continuity of Palestinian life is disrupted. These tactics extend carceral violence beyond prison walls, disrupting the rhythms, routines, and relationships that sustain Palestinian kinship and social reproduction.

In this section we will better explain how the Palestinian family should not be seen merely as collateral damage of incarceration but as a deliberate target of the carceral regime; a political site that is shaped by, responds to, and resists the conditions of ongoing colonial control. The family, particularly under conditions of military occupation, becomes a terrain where power is both exercised and contested. By placing the family at the center of analysis, we can understand how incarceration reorganizes time, space, and emotional labor within the home, turning absence into a persistent presence. How the everyday practices of families of prisoners are infused with political meaning.

The family becomes both a site of vulnerability and resistance which can be seen in the arrest and the detention as moments of public and intimate violence, the disruption of familial everyday lives, the gendered transformation of family roles, particularly for women and children, and the political work of caregiving, memory, and everyday resistance.

1.2.1 Violence beyond prison walls

Arrests, particularly in the occupied West Bank, are frequently carried out during night raids, through violent incursions into the sanctity of the home. Israeli forces often storm homes in

the early hours, heavily armed and sometimes accompanied by attack dogs (Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, 2013). These operations are not solely aimed at the apprehension of an individual; they instill fear across the entire household and neighborhood, enacting a form of collective punishment that resonates beyond the immediate detainee. The timing of these raids is not random but strategic: they exploit the vulnerability of families at times of sleep and rest, therefore leading to a high psychological impact. Such practices align with the broader colonial logic of making Palestinian domestic life perpetually penetrable and insecure. It thus becomes clear that settler-colonial violence is enacted in everyday existence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015).

The impact of these incursions; children woken by shouting soldiers, parents handcuffed in front of their children, and the chaos of a ransacked home, lingers long after the event itself (Shehadeh et al., 2015). Yet as shown in the report on the impact of detention on the children of Palestinian political detainees in Israeli prisons "They Came at Midnight" (2013), within this violence, a different layer of meaning begins to take shape, particularly in the minds of children. These moments become formative memories that help them identify and understand the source of the intrusion and harm. However, the household is not solely defined by this violence; often parents, including the one imprisoned, play an active role in shaping how these experiences are interpreted. Through intentional acts, for example waking children before soldiers arrive, offering whispered explanations, or reframing the event within a broader narrative of resistance, caregivers shape how imprisonment is remembered and politicized within the intimate space of the home (Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, 2013).

In some cases, arrests occur at military checkpoints; yet another mechanism through which the occupation exerts control over Palestinian movement and mobility. A practical mechanism that

demonstrates how incarceration extends beyond walls. These checkpoints, scattered across the West Bank, have become a deeply embedded feature of everyday life. Palestinians traveling to schools, hospitals, workplaces, or family visits are routinely stopped, questioned, and, at times, detained without clear cause. The constant presence of these cement blocks not only restricts physical mobility but also produces a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, turning even the most mundane journeys into potential sites of surveillance, humiliation, and arrest (Tawil-Souri, 2011).

Arrests at checkpoints often occur without warrants or immediate explanations. The lack of transparency and due process in these arrests compounds the fear and uncertainty that checkpoints already produce. As Tawil-Souri (2011) argues, checkpoints function not only to fragment space, but to normalize a constant threat. They operate to instill a pervasive sense of arbitrariness and dispossession (Abourahme, 2011). These arrests turn daily acts like commuting, studying, and caregiving into potential encounters with carceral violence, embedding fear and precarity into the fabric of daily life. The uncertainty surrounding each crossing; whether one will be stopped, questioned, detained, becomes an intentional mechanism of control, embedding carceral power within the very geography of everyday life.

Yet, this space of disruption is also a space of resistance. Through every day spatial tactics such as rerouting, informal knowledge-sharing, and mutual aid, Palestinians develop and form resilient human infrastructures that sustain mobility, social ties, and daily life despite the carceral intent of these structures. In this sense, the sphere of a checkpoint is not solely shaped by Israeli military and technological dominance, but also by Palestinian practices of endurance and ingenuity that refuse to allow space to be fully colonized (Hammami, 2006; Hammami, 2015).

After the arrest takes place, during the detention, interrogation and confinement practices enact another layer of carceral violence, targeting the psyche, body, and the social fabric that binds individuals to their families and communities. During the early stages of detention—especially the first 20 days when access to legal counsel is often denied—many Palestinian detainees report being subjected to beatings, sleep deprivation, prolonged shackling, stress positions, and other forms of coercive interrogation (Addameer, 2023). Beyond their physical toll, these practices aim to degrade the political subject and rupture a sense of control, agency, dignity, and even temporal orientation.

Yet also this type of violence does not end at the prison wall. Its effects seep into the emotional landscape of the family. The violence experienced by the detainee during interrogation becomes a shared psychological burden for their family members, who must imagine and emotionally endure what is being inflicted behind closed doors. Often, families receive sparse and delayed information, leading to an intensification of their feelings of anxiety and helplessness (Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, 2013).

The process of interrogation often targets precisely this relational structure. By isolating detainees, interrogators aim to rupture familial bonds of support and connection. However, this suffering doesn't necessarily translate into submission. Rather than treating the psychological breakdown of the prisoner as a private or shameful matter, families reframe such suffering as a consequence of steadfastness; what Palestinians refer to as *sumud*. The detainee's silence during interrogation, their refusal to cooperate, or their ability to endure harsh treatment is recast by family members as acts of resistance. In this sense, the degradation inflicted during interrogation is not merely personal, it is also collective, and so too is its refusal (Meari, 2014).

1.2.2 Disruption of familial everyday lives

Inside of prisons, Palestinians often endure isolation, physically in the form of solitary confinement but also socially and emotionally. The prison system is structured in a way that targets familial bonds and community networks. Psychological pressure is frequently applied through threats against family members, for example threatening to detain a spouse, a child, or revoking visitation rights (Addameer, 2023). These tactics reveal how the colonial state understands the power of familial connection and seeks to weaponize it.

Even when visits are permitted, geographic and bureaucratic obstacles remain immense. Most Palestinian prisoners are detained inside the territory under the rule of the Israeli occupation. This location makes visitation contingent on permits issued by Israeli authorities, which are difficult to obtain and frequently denied on vague or unexplained "security grounds." For families in the West Bank and Gaza, acquiring a visitation permit can take months, and even when granted, the permits are often restricted to immediate family members; siblings, spouses, or children (Addameer, 2017).

The experience of visiting an incarcerated loved one is itself dehumanizing. Families are required to travel for long hours aboard buses arranged by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), enduring multiple military checkpoints. Upon arrival at the prison, they face additional humiliations: long waiting periods, intrusive searches (including strip searches), and aggressive treatment by Israeli guards. The visit itself lasts no more than 30 to 45 minutes, and always takes place behind glass, using a monitored phone line. Physical contact is prohibited, except for a brief, 10-minute allowance for children under the age of eight (Addameer, 2017).

Another factor of the disruption of familial bonds is that in some cases, family members themselves are subjected to forms of carceral control. Mothers are harassed at checkpoints, denied

permits, or even arrested and interrogated. Children of imprisoned fathers or other family members may also be detained in an effort to break the morale of the imprisoned parent and destabilize family life (Addameer, 2023). This deliberate targeting of family members reflects a broader colonial logic in which the carceral regime is not limited to controlling individuals but operates relationally to fracture the social fabric and extend the reach of repression.

This targeted disruption of the everyday lives of families of prisoners and their familial bonds is also reflected in the concepts of time and space. Political imprisonment reorganizes time and space for the family, creating an extended carceral condition. Time becomes defined by indefinite waiting, waiting for news, for court dates, for possible releases. It is marked by trial postponements, administrative detentions, and scheduled visits that may or may not be allowed to happen. Families of prisoners organize their entire routines around the prison system. Court dates, prison visits, permit applications, hunger strikes, and public demonstrations become fixtures in their calendars. These cycles produce what Veena Das (2007) refers to as a "descent into the ordinary," in which violence and uncertainty become part of everyday life. The family's temporal structure becomes carceral and defined by unpredictability, enforced pauses, and emotional precarity. This suspended temporality reflects what Peteet (2005) has presented through her work in Palestinian refugee camps, a form of temporal disorientation where the future is perpetually deferred, and the present is saturated by uncertainty and delays.

Alongside temporal disruption, the prison regime reconfigures spatial relations between families and their incarcerated members. House demolitions, surveillance, restrictions on visitation, and the denial of conjugal visits collectively extend incarceration into the everyday lives of prisoners' families. The act of movement in Palestine requires navigating a complex and hostile geography of permits, checkpoints, walls, and border crossings. These spaces are not neutral

infrastructures; they are designed to impose delay, exhaustion, and humiliation. As Tawil-Souri (2011) notes, spaces such as Qalandiya checkpoint operate as "non-places"—zones of waiting and uncertainty where identity, rights, and humanity are constantly interrogated.

In this sense, imprisonment does not begin or end at the prison walls, it extends into the everyday geography of the family. The carceral system's reach stretches across the homes, schools, and neighborhoods of Palestinians. It militarizes the domestic, making caregiving, parenting, and kinship acts of political endurance. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) argues, the occupation does not only militarize public space but also infiltrates the intimate sphere of the home. The prison becomes not a fixed place, but a networked system of spatial fragmentation and relational violence.

Families are forced to navigate this fractured geography to maintain even minimal contact. Visiting an imprisoned loved one becomes a form of emotional and physical labor of standing in line at checkpoints for hours, enduring searches and humiliation, and handling travel logistics with limited resources, all while being uncertain if the visit will take place at all (Addameer, 2017; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005). The geography of incarceration is therefore not a static container, but a mobile apparatus of fragmentation and control that disciplines not only movement but also relationships (Weizman, 2007).

Despite these restrictions and the targeting of the family, the refusal to submit, both by the detainee and their family, becomes a site of political agency. Family members attend court hearings, maintain contact with lawyers, organize solidarity events, and ensure that the prisoner's name remains present in public discourse. They learn alternative routes, support one another through informal networks, and convert waiting rooms, buses, and courtroom steps into sites of solidarity and care.

This underscores the enduring truth that Palestinian families are not merely enduring the fragmentation of space and time, but they are continuously resisting it. These acts counter the intended erasure of the detainee and resist the psychological warfare embedded in the process of incarceration. As Angela Davis (2003) has argued, prison is not just a space of physical confinement; it is a technology of control that extends its influence through emotional, temporal, and social disruptions. In Palestine, families refuse to be passive recipients of this disruption. Instead, they transform the prison's violence into a generative site of meaning, resilience, and resistance.

In this way, incarceration is not a closed scene between a prisoner and the jailer. It reverberates outward, implicating the family, reshaping intimate relationships, and enrolling domestic spaces into the broader colonial terrain. The pain of the prisoner is endured collectively—but so too is the act of resistance. This relational endurance underscores the central claim: the family is not collateral damage in the carceral regime. It is a deliberate target and an enduring site of political struggle.

1.2.3 The Transformation of Social Roles

Women occupy a critical position in this carceral landscape. Their labor is not only emotional and reproductive but deeply political. The identity of women in Palestine has a sociopolitical role that is shaped by social demands, community and social expectations, and the embodied practice of *sumud* (steadfastness) (Peteet, 1991). In the case of imprisonment, women, more specifically wives and mothers of prisoners, carry the responsibility of holding together the fragmented family unit in the absence of the imprisoned, navigating a maze of permits, checkpoints, court hearings, and visitation regimes, as well as the responsibilities of parenting

through which they also serve as narrators and interpreters of absence (Giacaman & Johnson, 2013).

Mothers and wives take on the labor of narrating what is happening to their imprisoned loved ones to others in the community, transforming individual psychological experiences into a shared political meaning. They also become interpreters of absence; explaining to children why a parent is not home, why visits are restricted, and what the prison represents. This work of meaning-making is profoundly political. It challenges the colonial state's efforts to isolate and depoliticize the prisoners by ensuring them embedded and their experiences within the social fabric of the family and the community. Moreover, the very act of caregiving, under these conditions, becomes a form of resistance, insisting on life, continuity, and presence in the face of enforced absence (Giacaman & Johnson, 2013).

Children are also deeply entangled in this ecology of carcerality and resistance. Developed by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019), the concept of *unchilding* refers to the systematic dismantling of childhood through colonial structures. Surveillance, arrest, and familial loss thrust them prematurely into roles of emotional restraint, responsibility, and political awareness. The condition of the imprisonment of fathers or siblings is an example of how childhood is transformed into a politicized condition, through which children are stripped of the right to vulnerability. They are expected to "be strong," to understand absence, to remain composed during prison visits, and to absorb surveillance and loss as part of the fabric of growing up. This emotional labor is not merely a family issue; it is the aftermath of a carceral policy that targets kinship as a means of fragmenting Palestinian social life.

Gender further shapes these experiences. Boys are often expected to display stoicism or to take on protective roles in the absence of their fathers. Girls may assume caregiving and domestic

responsibilities. Yet these adaptations are not reducible to victimhood, such responses reflect relational forms of agency. Children become not only witnesses to violence but also actors within it, for example helping younger siblings understand absence or through supporting the family on different levels. Like their mothers, they also engage in everyday forms of endurance: visiting imprisoned parents, participating in commemorations, or even writing letters. Their resilience does not erase their pain, but it does reframe it as part of a broader collective struggle for life under occupation (Giacaman, 2020).

1.3 Conclusion

In the context of Palestinian political imprisonment, the family is not merely an adjacent victim of carceral violence, it is a central terrain through which power operates, and through which resistance is articulated. This chapter has traced how incarceration, in the Palestinian context, is not confined to prison walls. Rather, it extends its reach into the intimate sphere of the home, transforming familial roles, obligations, and temporalities. Prison functions not just to confine bodies, but to discipline kinship, remap emotional life, and regulate the circulation of care, memory, and hope.

In Palestine, the prison is both a literal and symbolic structure. It is deployed as a means of social control, political suppression, territorial fragmentation, and space and time regulation (Daqqa, 2024). Yet, it also produces forms of resistance, collective memory, and alternative visions of justice. Its reach into the family also makes the family a site of refusal. The labor of hope and the mundane acts of care become acts of defiance. The family, in this sense, is not simply surviving the violence of incarceration; it is actively subverting its intended effects (Rosenfeld, 2004).

Mothers, wives, and children engage in daily forms of resistance, transforming prisons from sites of pure repression into spaces of memory, mobilization, and defiance. As Basil Farraj (2022) documents, even the most extreme forms of carceral violence are met with strategies of resistance that are sustained and amplified through family networks. Whether through organized boycott of military courts, hunger strikes, letter-writing, prisoners and their families extend the prisoner's voice beyond the prison, refusing the silence that the carceral regime seeks to impose.

In sum, the Palestinian family is not a passive subject of incarceration. It is a generative site where the violence of the prison meets the endurance of relational life. Through gendered labor, affective ties, and everyday practices of resistance, the family reclaims its role not only as a caretaker of the imprisoned, but as a political actor. This chapter has laid the groundwork for understanding how families bear the cost of repression while also producing forms of resilience and meaning that defy the logic of the carceral state.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework: Moving beyond Pathologization

This chapter sets the theoretical framework for understanding how Palestinian families, particularly women and children, psychosocially experience and respond to the political imprisonment of a family member. It engages with interdisciplinary scholarship to move beyond dominant pathological frameworks that reduce Palestinian experiences to trauma. Instead, it draws on liberation and community psychology, the concepts of resilience according to Ann Masten (2001), the locally rooted concept of *sumud* introduced by Palestinian scholars, and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979), to foreground psychosocial complexity.

2.1 Liberation Psychology and Collective Agency

The importation of colonial and western knowledge and frameworks through different disciplines including the imposition of Eurocentric psychological models, in Arab academic institutions without a critical analysis, and the conduction of studies not completely relevant to the various sociopolitical contexts in the Arab world has been criticized by scholars like Mikkawi (2017). He calls instead for a community psychology grounded in the lived realities of colonization and resistance. Therefore, in this research, a liberation and community framework is used as a lens to understand the experiences of Palestinian families of political prisoners.

Liberation psychology emerges as a critical alternative to dominant psychological frameworks that universalize the individual psyche and depoliticize suffering. It is rooted in the thought of Frantz Fanon (1952, 1968) and Paulo Freire (1970) and later formalized by Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994) in Latin America. Liberation psychology seeks to ground mental health within its historical, structural, and political conditions. This theoretical framework understands

psychological distress as a product of lived oppression such as colonialism, racism, or economic exploitation. It also emphasizes the agency of oppressed populations in constructing meaning and resisting domination; it views emotional life as inextricable from collective struggle and social transformation.

This framework allows us to view women and children not as mere victims of political violence but as active subjects engaged in meaning-making, care work, and a struggle for self-determination. Their narratives, routines, and adaptive strategies reflect not only grief and disruption but also resilience and political insight. Psychological pain is repositioned within a broader terrain of colonial violence—military checkpoints, imprisonment, surveillance, displacement—and emotional suffering is read alongside practices of steadfastness (*sumud*).

As Giacaman (2020) argue, psychosocial well-being under occupation is not defined by the absence of suffering, but by the capacity to persist, adapt, and assert humanity within conditions designed to negate it. Therefore, emotional responses like fear, grief, and mourning are understood as affective responses to structural violence that carry political meaning. They can be shared, narrated, and transformed into solidarity. Resilience can then also be viewed in the everyday: in the mother who maintains emotional stability for her children, in the wife who navigates prison bureaucracy, and in the child who internalizes narratives of dignity despite the violence. Practices such as organizing visits to prisoners, narrating their stories in community spaces, and translating absence into communal memory are then also understood as attempts at collective healing.

Mikkawi (2017) argues that Palestinians in the West Bank, in the period of 1967 - 1987, and mainly during the first intifada, managed to practically manifest a form of liberatory community psychology through bottom-up grassroots community organizing; women's working committees, labor unions, student unions, and other voluntary organizations. Yet, after the signing

of the Oslo agreement (1993) and the establishment of the Palestinian authority, community work became more institutionalized and dependent on the funding of western donors, and thus NGOs psychological – usually top-down – projects became more prominent instead of grassroots community work. This has also been translated into the psychological framing of traumatic events on the individual level rather than on the collective level.

Therefore, the use of the liberation and community psychology lens in this study acts also as an attempt to call for a reclamation and revitalization of forms of community work that are participatory, bottom-up, and rooted in the lived sociopolitical context of Palestine. On the theoretical level, it challenges the dominance of imported, depoliticized psychological frameworks by re-centering the collective dimensions of distress and resilience. On the practical level, it invites institutions, practitioners, and researchers to prioritize interventions that emerge from within communities themselves, reflecting their articulated needs, strategies of endurance, and practices of resistance.

2.2 The problem with trauma-as-diagnosis

Much of the psychological literature on political violence and oppression in colonial and military contexts tends to frame mental suffering through the binary of traumatized and healed. This dichotomy typically casts the oppressed subject as either a passive, traumatized victim or as a heroic, healed figure of resistance. Usually, the healed are also those who adapt best, though in the Palestinian context for example, adaptation is perceived to be a passive term that is unable to reflect the enduring capacities and resistance of political violence (Giacaman, 2020). Such binaries offer a reductive lens through which complex experiences of living under occupation are flattened into discrete categories.

This framing fails to grasp the depth of psychological life under occupation. It overlooks the continuum of suffering, adaptation, and meaning-making that defines life under protracted political violence. Some scholars critique the projection of diagnostic categories like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) into the Palestinian context. They note that such diagnoses often remove distress from its sociopolitical roots, turning collective and political suffering into individual pathology. They call for a liberationist psychology that resists both the individualization of pain and the erasure of political context, emphasizing instead the role of psychological endurance as a form of *sumud* (steadfastness) rooted in collective struggle (Martin-Baro, 1994, Giacaman, 2018, Jabr & Berger, 2017).

These critiques align with a decolonial psychology framework, including the work of Derek Summerfield (2002), Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009), and Lara and Stephen Sheehi (2022), who argue that trauma frameworks when removed from their historical and structural foundations risk reproducing the very power relations they claim to alleviate.

In place of a dichotomy between “healing” and “trauma,” this perspective insists on the simultaneity of suffering and agency. Palestinian mothers, for instance, often perform extensive emotional labor: explaining a father’s absence to children, navigating bureaucracy, sustaining family hope, and maintaining social dignity. These are not signs of "recovery" in clinical terms, nor are they evidence of paralyzing trauma. Rather, they reflect everyday resilience; the ability to live with pain without denying it, to persist without romanticizing strength (Giacaman 2020).

Within this framework, the psychosocial toll of imprisonment is understood not as a pathology of the individual, but as a systemic response to the breakdown of social environments under occupation. It rejects trauma-as-diagnosis as the primary framework for understanding the

psychosocial effects of political imprisonment. Instead, it turns to relational, collective, and temporally complex models that account for the lived experiences.

2.3 The Concepts of Resilience and *Sumud*

According to Ann Masten, resilience is the capacity that a dynamic system must adapt when facing adversity that threatens its functioning or development (2014). Rather than being an extraordinary trait, resilience reflects what she terms *"ordinary magic"*—the capacity of ordinary adaptive systems, such as families, schools, communities, and cultural practices, to buffer individuals and sustain well-being under stress (Masten, 2001). Her model emphasizes that resilience emerges dynamically from everyday relational and ecological systems rather than residing solely within the individual. The continuous interaction between different systems, for example, secure attachments, collective solidarity, cultural meaning-making, and opportunities for mastery, all contribute to fostering resilience across development. This framing emphasizes how adaptation to adversity goes beyond the individual and is deeply relational and embedded in broader social ecologies. In line with this, scholar Panter-Brick through her work in Afghan communities has understood that hope for example, when embedded in cultural practices and shared identity, functions as a vital resilience resource as it sustains the possibility of a better future even under ongoing hardship (Southwick et al., 2014).

In her work, Giacaman (2020) reflects on the meaning of resilience in the Palestinian context. She explores the difference between local research examining resilience, usually facing difficulties finding Arabic translations for the word, and international literature. She comes up with the conclusion that in the Palestinian context to talk about resilience is to talk about the capacity of resistance and endurance. It's a concept that encompasses agency, the normalization of

abnormal conditions, social solidarity, a moral drive rooted in the pursuit of justice for one's family and nation, and *sumud* (steadfastness).

The concept of *sumud* has emerged in Palestinian psychological literature as a necessary alternative to Western frameworks that often reduce suffering to individual trauma or resilience as a purely psychological trait. Within this context, *sumud* operates as an anticolonial mode of being, one that acknowledges the violent pervasive force of colonial power while simultaneously refusing to surrender to it. *Sumud* is enabled through a culture of resistance that pervades everyday life. It is not merely a response to trauma, but a living, breathing ethos that infuses Palestinian political, social, and cultural existence. It is invoked by Palestinians in their daily struggle to maintain continuity, dignity, and a connection to the Palestinian cause. Whether surviving dispossession after the 1948 Nakba, sustaining local economies during the First Intifada, or navigating military checkpoints during the Second Intifada, Palestinians have framed these practices as expressions of *sumud* (Meari, 2014).

Rather than being a means to an end, *sumud* is a refusal to allow coloniality to fully define the present or determine the future. It is a dynamic and flexible concept, in which resistance is continuously rearticulated through everyday acts. In this way, it embraces both continuity and adaptability, defying any fixed or singular definition. From letter-writing and storytelling to acts of caregiving and spatial navigation, *sumud* is enacted through small, accumulative gestures that preserve personhood and community amidst fragmentation. These micro practices are, in effect, material enactments of refusal and survival.

In the context of imprisonment, *sumud* also operates as a response to the temporal violence of the carceral system (Daqqa, 2024). Military courts, indefinite detentions, and the unpredictability of permits and visitation schedules create a condition of suspended time and

uncertainty. Families challenge this temporal fragmentation by developing their own embodied temporalities through their own rhythms and routines, counting the days of imprisonment, marking milestones, saving for visits, and attending court hearings. These rhythms of moving forward and redefining their daily lives assert a continuity that resists the rupture imposed by the carceral state.

2.4 Toward psychosocial complexity

This broader understanding aligns with ecological models of mental health, such as Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979), which is a framework that can also be used for analyzing the effects of imprisonment on Palestinian family life. This model situates individual experience within overlapping systems of influence ranging from the immediate (microsystem) to the structural and ideological (macrosystem) which evolve across time (chronosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Within this framework, the imprisonment of a family member, typically a father, reverberates through each of these layers. At the microsystemic level, it disrupts caregiving arrangements, emotional bonds, and household economies. The exosystem, encompassing institutions such as prisons, military courts, and checkpoints, intrudes into the family through bureaucratic violence, surveillance, and restricted mobility. At the macrosystemic level, settler colonial ideologies and nationalist discourses shape which families are criminalized and how resistance is narrativized. Temporally, the chronosystem captures the long-term effects of indefinite detention, recurring imprisonment, and protracted waiting.

This multi-layered model makes visible how the psychosocial impact of incarceration is neither linear nor confined to the individual. It is distributed across generations and mediated by social relations, legal regimes, and spatial architecture. It also highlights the affective dimensions of occupation—anticipation, anxiety, hope—as integral to its operation.

Chapter 3

Psychosocial Impact of Political Imprisonment on Women and Children

In the context of Palestine, where military occupation and systemic repression shape daily life, the imprisonment of a family member carries added psychosocial consequences. While research has examined the psychological effects of incarceration in general, and research on Palestine has historically focused on direct violence or childhood exposure to conflict (Khamis, 1998; Giacaman et al., 2007), the specific dynamics affecting Palestinian families of political prisoners, particularly women and children, remain understudied (Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, 2013). This chapter synthesizes existing literature on the psychosocial effects of political detention and political violence, as well as the coping mechanisms that sustain families under prolonged absence.

Among the academic work that has focused specifically on the families of Palestinian political detainees is Rosenfeld's (2004) ethnographic account of the psychosocial impacts of political imprisonment on families living in Palestinian refugee camps, which outlines how incarceration restructures everyday life and familial roles. Srour (2008) has written on the psychological effects of female imprisonment and the consequences for children and spouses, emphasizing how gendered experiences of incarceration reverberate across kinship networks. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005) provides one of the few intervention-focused analyses of women with loved ones in prison, documenting not only the suffering they endure but also the forms of resilience and resistance they practice.

More survey-based work by the Palestinian Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre for Victims of Torture (TRC, n.d.) quantifies the psychological, social, and economic effects of imprisonment, providing much-needed empirical grounding to qualitative findings. Comparative literature from other contexts such as Northern Ireland (McEvoy et al., 1999), Chile and Argentina (Allodi, 1980), Jordan (Al-Gharaibeh, 2008), and the Philippines (Protacio-Marcelino, 1989), offers additional insights into how political imprisonment operates transnationally to destabilize families and leads to intergenerational trauma.

3.1 Psychosocial Impact on Women

For the essential roles women play in the Palestinian society, they are particularly vulnerable to the psychological and social disruptions caused by a family member's detention. Research indicates that female relatives of political detainees exhibit a range of distressing symptoms, including fear, anxiety, depressive episodes, and psychosomatic manifestations of stress. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005) documents how the abrupt arrest of a husband, son, or brother triggers acute shock, followed by persistent fear over the detainee's well-being. This anxiety is compounded by the unpredictability of military court proceedings and the ever-present threat of rearrest. Moreover, these symptoms often result from a combination of shock at the moment of arrest, prolonged uncertainty, and the weight of increased domestic responsibilities.

The experience of visiting incarcerated relatives further exacerbates psychological distress. Women report enduring dehumanizing security procedures, including invasive body searches and verbal harassment, which induce feelings of humiliation and powerlessness (Srour, 2008). In one study done with wives of political prisoners, 19 out 20 participants have experienced verbal and nonverbal sexual harassment during visits which had negative short- and long-term effects on them

(Al Issa & Beck, 2020). McEvoy et al. (1999) draw parallels with Northern Ireland, where similar practices were found to deepen trauma among families of political prisoners.

Beyond the immediate emotional toll, women also shoulder increased domestic and financial responsibilities; their roles extend beyond caregiving into the realm of legal and bureaucratic labor, as they become coordinators of visits, providers of emotional stability for children, and intermediaries between the incarcerated family member and the outside world (Khamis, 1998; Rosenfeld, 2004).

On the social level, some studies have also focused on social relationships and how they change as a consequence of incarceration. In one study several of the participants reported increased restrictions on their freedoms in terms of dress or movement by extended family and community members (Giacaman & Johnson, 2013).

The findings of another study have shown that one of the main challenges wives of political prisoners' face, is related to their social network, including family and non-family members. The issues the women described included being perceived as suspicious, incapable of raising their children, and feeling a sense of control over them (Shehadeh et al., 2015).

3.2 Psychosocial Impact on Children

The experiences of Palestinian children living with an incarcerated parent must be understood within broader contexts of violence, insecurity, and structural oppression. As previous studies on children in conflict zones have shown, the pervasiveness of Israeli military violence, uncertainty, and other community-level pressures intersect to shape children's daily lives and psychosocial well-being (Cavazzoni et al., 2022; Veronese et al., 2022).

The children of political detainees grow up under the shadow of incarceration, an experience that disrupts normative developmental processes. The arrest or prolonged absence of a

parent disrupts the protective emotional environment of the home. Studies such as Garbarino and Kostelny (1996) and Allodi (1980) found high levels of social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, and behavioral issues among Palestinian children exposed to political violence or familial detention. Boys may externalize these disruptions through aggression or disciplinary problems, while girls are more likely to internalize through silence and emotional withdrawal.

Adolescents participating in research done to examine the association between parental imprisonment and mental health have shown considerable mental health problems, and witnessing the arrest was a factor that increased the risk (Shehadeh et al., 2015). These symptoms are often rooted in the abrupt severance of the parent-child bond, which Allodi (1980) identifies as a critical factor in the development of attachment disorders. The absence of a detained parent creates a destabilizing void, leaving children susceptible to feelings of abandonment and unresolved grief.

A critical issue raised by Srour (2008) concerns the denial of physical contact with imprisoned parents during visitation, particularly affecting children over the age of six later increased to eight. He examines how this restriction impedes emotional bonding, forcing young children to reconcile their longing for parental affection with the cold reality of forbidden touch.

At the same time, children draw on a range of resources at the personal, family, and community levels to endure these burdens, often cultivating forms of resilience through everyday acts of normalcy, peer solidarity, and creative meaning-making (Veronese et al., 2022).

3.3 Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite these challenges, Palestinian families demonstrate resilience, employing a range of culturally embedded coping strategies. Coping strategies employed by families of Palestinian detainees are embedded within broader cultural, religious, and political frameworks. General psychosocial literature identifies a variety of responses to trauma in conflict settings, including the

creation of meaning, mobilization of social networks, and normalization of adversity. Within the Palestinian context, these strategies are deeply influenced by collective experiences of dispossession, *sumud* (steadfastness), and the ongoing struggle for national liberation (Afana et al., 2020; Veronese et al., 2017).

Women with incarcerated spouses often rely on both religious faith and political identity as sources of endurance. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005) notes that women participate in communal rituals, prayer groups, and political gatherings that provide both emotional sustenance and a framework for resistance. These practices reflect what Giacaman et al. (2007) describe as the capacity of Palestinians to transform suffering into acts of *sumud* (steadfastness), in which individual hardship is rearticulated as part of a collective struggle. In this sense, religious devotion and political activism are not separate spheres but intertwined coping strategies that reaffirm women's agency and embed their experiences within a wider moral and national cause. Veronese and colleagues (2017) further emphasize that resilience in Palestinian women is relational and collective, shaped by community solidarity, cultural values, and the normalization of abnormal conditions under protracted political violence.

Children, too, develop contextually specific coping strategies that reflect both vulnerability and agency. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2009) explains, children are socialized to view the imprisonment of a parent not as a private tragedy but as part of a collective narrative of resistance. Symbolic practices, such as writing letters, displaying photographs, or participating in commemorations, enable children to maintain a sense of connection and continuity with the absent parent. The study by Rabaia and colleagues (2018) adds further nuance to this dynamic, demonstrating how adolescents in the West Bank use a variety of relational, emotional, and practical strategies to cope with sadness, sustain community ties, and assume responsibilities

within the family. Veronese et al. (2017) add that everyday acts of play, storytelling, and peer solidarity are essential coping resources that allow children to assert normalcy and reconfigure experiences of loss into opportunities for resilience. These strategies underscore the importance of viewing Palestinian children not merely as passive victims of political violence but as active participants in sustaining family bonds and collective memory under occupation.

Support systems available to families of prisoners encompass emotional, financial, and practical dimensions, which intersect and reinforce one another. Emotional support is often provided by extended family members and neighbors, functioning as a crucial buffer against psychological isolation. Community solidarity, particularly in refugee camps or villages with strong kinship ties, and mainly with families and members of the community who go through the same experiences, offers a collective infrastructure for caregiving and grief management (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005).

Financial support is also critical, particularly when the imprisoned individual was the primary income provider. Some families receive assistance through the Palestinian Authority, while others depend on political factions, charitable organizations, or remittances from relatives. However, access to financial aid is often inconsistent and limited, especially with the recent decision done by the Palestinian Authority to cut off the prisoners' salaries.

Practical support includes help with transportation for prison visits, legal representation, childcare, and household maintenance. NGOs such as Addameer, the Palestinian Prisoners' Society, and the Palestinian Counseling Centre play a pivotal role in providing such support. However, the combination of the high number of prisoners, the limited financial resources of these institutions, and the political censorship and surveillance they face has created a persistent gap between the needs of families and the support provided.

Religious institutions and local mosques in some cases serve as sources of support, offering guidance and community-based networks of care. Religious institutions and local mosques in some cases serve as sources of support, offering guidance and community-based networks of care. Veronese et al. (2022) show that children often describe mosques and religious events as spaces of comfort and tranquility, where prayer and spiritual practice help them feel safe and connected to God. These spaces not only provide solace but also reinforce a sense of identity and hope for the future. On the individual level, many affected family members turn to prayer as a way of cultivating stability and meaning amidst ongoing insecurity.

Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1 Aim of the study

This research aims to examine the psychosocial impact of political incarceration on Palestinian prisoners' wives and children, understanding the complexities of their lived experiences – how daily life is reshaped by imprisonment, the emotional and material disruptions it entails, and the strategies the families employ to navigate this reality. The study explores both the sources that sustain a sense of agency and resilience, and the struggles that emerge from unmet needs, structural constraints, and enduring absence.

This study is guided by three intertwined questions:

1. How does the imprisonment of a family member alter the everyday lives, roles and responsibilities of Palestinian women and children, and what specific emotional, social, and structural challenges arise from this prolonged absence (RQ1)?
2. What strategies do women and children develop to emotionally and practically adjust to the imprisonment, maintain a connection with the incarcerated parent, and sustain family stability under conditions of systemic uncertainty (RQ2)?
3. Through what narratives and meaning-making practices do families interpret their experiences, mobilize support networks, and resist dominant framings of passive victimhood, while articulating future hopes and concerns (RQ3)?

4.2 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a thematic analytical framework to explore the lived experiences of women caregivers and children affected by political imprisonment. While it was not conducted as a full Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, the study was informed by the core principles and philosophy of PAR, mainly: collaboration, shared agency, and the recognition of participants as active contributors to knowledge production. These principles shaped the design of both the semi-structured interviews and the interactive focus groups, which were structured to center participants' voices and to create participatory, expressive spaces for reflection and storytelling.

PAR has its intellectual roots in emancipatory educational traditions, particularly the work of Paulo Freire (1970), who emphasized the transformative power of critical consciousness and the importance of collective reflection and action for social change. Freire's approach to research challenged hierarchical models of knowledge production and sought to empower marginalized groups by engaging them in processes of inquiry and transformation. Building on this foundation, PAR has evolved into a philosophical and methodological orientation that views research not simply as a tool for understanding the world, but as a collaborative effort aimed at altering unjust social conditions. It prioritizes the concerns of those most affected by systemic inequality, positioning them as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects (MacDonald, 2012).

While the present study did not involve participants in all stages of the research process due to time and feasibility constraints, its orientation was guided by PAR's ethos. In particular, the research emphasized ethical reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and social justice. Rather than treating participants solely as sources of data, I approached them as individuals whose lived experiences are shaped by ongoing structures of political violence, displacement, and resistance.

This positioning informed both the relational dynamics of data collection and the substantive focus of the research itself. Furthermore, both the interviews and focus groups emphasized the participants' and my shared role in fostering social change. Through discussions we explored potential actions that can be undertaken on an individual level, but also collectively as families, communities, and broader social groups.

The choice of thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), also aligned with this framework. Thematic analysis offers a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns across qualitative data. It was well suited to the aims of this research, allowing the capturing of both the unique and collective aspects of participants' experiences while remaining attentive to the broader sociopolitical structures in which those experiences are embedded.

4.3 Participants

Participants in the study included key informants, women caregivers, children, and youths. All of them were engaged through a multi-informant approach, as each was able to contribute a different perspective.

4.3.1 Key Informants

Three key informants were interviewed at the outset of the research. These individuals were selected for their professional roles and firsthand knowledge of working with families of political prisoners. They included a female psychosocial counselor at an international NGO in Ramallah, a male school counselor, and a female leader of a feminist community center. These interviews provided critical contextual understanding and helped shape the thematic focus of the interview guides and focus group activities.

Key informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their professional expertise and direct engagement with families affected by political imprisonment. Recruitment occurred through word-of-mouth and informal professional networks, which facilitated access to individuals with relevant experience and contextual knowledge. I initially met the school counselor through a psychosocial activity I had previously implemented at the school where he works. This existing professional connection facilitated trust and access.

4.3.2 Women Caregivers

Eight women participated in individual interviews. All were wives of political prisoners who were currently incarcerated and were the primary caregivers for at least one child under the age of 18. These women were recruited using purposive sampling, with some referrals made through snowball sampling as the research progressed. Inclusion criteria required that participants be the spouse of a political prisoner and actively engaged in daily caregiving responsibilities. Women whose partners were imprisoned for non-political reasons, or who were not primary caregivers, were excluded from the study.

All participating women were residents of Ramallah city or nearby villages and towns (Saffa, Beit Rima, Silwad). This geographic focus was chosen for reasons of feasibility and accessibility, enabling regular communication, safe meeting spaces, and logistical coordination. While the participants' children were not directly involved in the study, the interviews explored the caregiving dynamics and emotional labor involved in raising children under conditions of forced paternal absence and political repression.

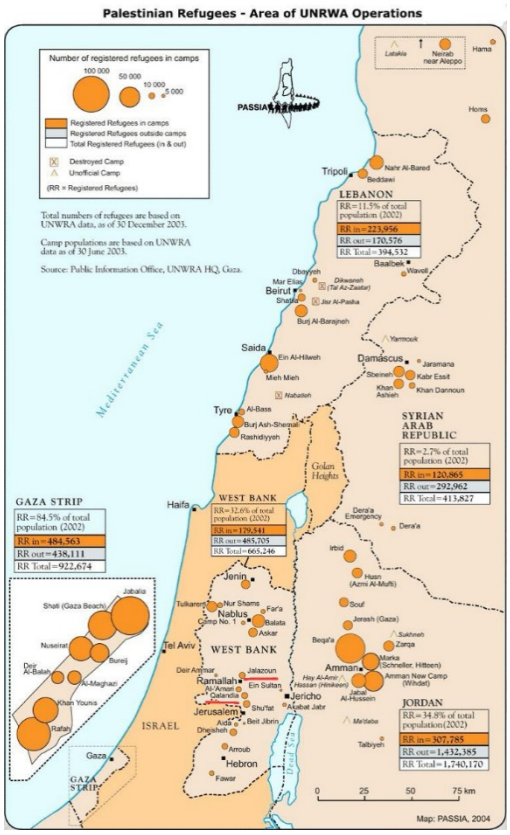
4.3.3 Children and Youth

The study included 24 children and youth between the ages of 7 and 15 (*mean* age=12.75, *SD*=1.96). All the participants are enrolled in formal education, 17 participants (70.8%) in

UNRWA schools, 6 participants (25%) in public schools, and one (4.2%) in a private school. The group consisted of 13 girls and 11 boys; this aimed at providing an inclusive understanding of the impact of political incarceration on childhood experience. Ten of the participants were raised in Jalazoun refugee camp, six in Qalandia refugee camp, and eight in the town of Silwad, all of which fall under the province of Ramallah. All participants live with their mothers and siblings; in two cases, the households also include grandparents.

Figure 1

UNRWA Map of Palestinian Refugee Camps



Note. The two red underlined refugee camps are those where the study was conducted.

Inclusion criteria included having an immediate family member imprisoned for political reasons. Children without such familial connections were excluded from the study. These children

were not related to the women participants but were recruited independently through community and school networks using purposive sampling.

Each child participated in one focus group session only, and the 24 participants were distributed across four separate focus groups. Three of these groups were conducted in schools within two refugee camps: a girls' school and a boys' school in Jalazoun refugee camp, and a boys' school in Qalandia refugee camp. The fourth group was mixed gender based on the recommendation of the director of the community center in the town and was held in the space of a feminist community center in Silwad town. This approach allowed for gender-sensitive facilitation and safe expression, while the diversity of locations provided insight into the experiences of children living in different types of communities affected by political incarceration.

Recruitment was carried out through collaboration with schools and community centers, whose staff contacted families and facilitated the enrollment of children into the focus groups. The selection of these sites was informed by both logistical and contextual considerations: I had pre-existing connections with associations working in these areas, which facilitated access and helped build trust with participants and gatekeepers. At the same time, these locations were chosen due to their heightened exposure to political violence, making them highly relevant for understanding the impact of incarceration within environments of chronic instability and resistance.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the recommendations of the 2013 World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki on ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects (World Medical Association, 2013). All participants were assured of their confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and written reports. Data were stored securely, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point

without penalty. For child participants, all focus group sessions were designed with their emotional and developmental needs in mind, and care was taken to ensure a safe and respectful environment throughout the research process.

4.5 Positionality Statement

My positionality encompasses a complex interplay of proximity and distance to the research context, shaped by personal history, gender, professional experience, and academic background. Recognizing these factors has been essential to conducting research that is both ethically grounded and attentive to the voices and realities of participants. As a Palestinian young woman who was raised in Ramallah city in the West Bank, my positionality is deeply intertwined with the sociopolitical realities that frame this research.

While the topic of political imprisonment is personally resonant, given the pervasive risk of arrest in Palestinian communities and my extended network of friends and acquaintances who have experienced incarceration, I have not directly experienced the imprisonment of a close family member. Even if my understanding is partly shaped by family narratives on the arrest of my father and other family members before I was born, which influenced my perspective, yet not experiencing it firsthand can limit my direct insight into the emotional and practical realities faced by families living with political imprisonment. Moreover, due to the fragmented geographies in Palestine, living in the city might have limited my direct insight into the daily life and dynamics within refugee camps, where some participants reside.

Another important aspect is my identity as a woman, which may have facilitated trust and rapport with the women participants, as cultural and social norms often encourage women to share more openly with other women. This gendered positionality likely contributed to creating a more comfortable and culturally sensitive environment for data collection with female caregivers.

My shared language and cultural background with participants also provided significant proximity, enabling nuanced understanding, communication, and interpretation of participants' expressions, stories, and emotions. This common ground helped foster rapport and trust, while also allowing me to grasp subtle cultural references and meanings that might otherwise be overlooked.

In working with children, my prior professional experience supported engagement, yet the age difference and my position as a researcher associated with external institutions inevitably introduced power dynamics. These dynamics required careful attention to foster a respectful and empowering atmosphere for youth participants.

Additionally, my time living abroad during my studies exposed me to diverse cultural contexts and critical academic perspectives, which have enriched my reflexivity but may also have distanced me somewhat from local, on-the-ground experiences. Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive practice with other people with shared experiences to navigate these complexities, acknowledge potential biases, and strive for ethical sensitivity.

4.6 Procedure

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and interactive focus groups, designed to be participatory and context sensitive. All sessions were conducted in Arabic, and I was the one to facilitate them due to sharing linguistic and cultural proximity with participants. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent or, in the case of minors, with parental consent and child assent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to protect participant identities and then translated into English. Only one of the interviews with a mother was not recorded due to the woman's request for confidentiality, therefore detailed notes were taken during and immediately after the conversation.

Throughout the data collection process, I followed ethical protocols that included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. In all interviews and focus groups the aim of the research was clearly explained, and a space to answer any questions related to the motivation and procedure of the research was provided.

4.6.1 Interviews with Key Informants

The data collection process began with interviews conducted with three key informants: a psychosocial counselor, a school counselor, and a community center director. These professionals were selected due to their direct involvement in supporting families of political prisoners and their familiarity with the psychosocial challenges children and caregivers face in this context.

The aim of these interviews was to inform the design of the subsequent data collection tools of interviews with women and the focus group activities with children. Moreover, to draw attention to challenges and institutional gaps that can inform any attempts for practical work and suggestions with the research target group. These interviews also allowed me to have an in-depth understanding of the sociopolitical and geographic context in which the focus groups were conducted; the two refugee camps and the town of Silwad.

In the interviews, I explored themes such as the emotional and behavioral changes observed in children after the incarceration of a family member, children's levels of engagement in educational and community settings, and the role of institutional support structures. Informants reflected their own professional roles and the challenges they encountered in providing adequate care. They also identified systemic gaps in psychosocial services and highlighted the kinds of support they believed were most urgently needed.

While the insights from these interviews significantly influenced the design of the research tools, the selection of themes and activities was also grounded in my own lived experience and

cultural understanding. As a Palestinian researcher from the same region, I drew upon my familiarity with the sociopolitical context, my awareness of common family dynamics in the face of political imprisonment, and my understanding of local cultural norms and narratives. This positionality allowed me to identify relevant areas of exploration that were not only institutionally visible but also deeply embedded in everyday lived experience.

4.6.2 Interviews with Mothers

Eight women, all of whom were mothers and primary caregivers to children whose fathers were political prisoners, participated in semi-structured interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The participants lived either in Ramallah city or in surrounding villages. The interviews were conducted over a two-months period in person, in spaces selected by the participants themselves to ensure comfort, privacy, and accessibility, including their own homes, community centers, and public parks.

The interview questions focused on several interconnected areas, including the changes and the challenges the women and their children experienced following the incarceration, the strategies they employed to support themselves and their children emotionally and practically, and their efforts to sustain a connection between the children and their imprisoned parent. Participants were also asked about the forms of emotional and psychological support they received or lacked, their interactions with formal and informal support systems, and their future hopes and concerns for their families.

Table 1

Interview Guide: Key Domains and Questions

Domain	Guiding Questions	Probes/Examples
Warm-Up Questions	Can you tell me a little about your family?	- Number of children, their ages, and household members. - When was the partner incarcerated? - How old were the children at that time?
Changes After the Incarceration	How has your family's daily life changed since the incarceration?	- Description of a normal week before vs. after incarceration. - Changes in family dynamics. - Changes in children's behaviors (e.g., sleep, school, aggression). - New responsibilities taken on by the children (e.g., caregiving, financial, household).
Parental Coping Strategies	How have you adjusted your parenting approach since the incarceration?	- Relationship with children and any changes. - Parenting adjustments to support children. - Emotional, academic, or social strategies.
Relationship with the Incarcerated Parent	How do you maintain a relationship with your incarcerated partner?	- Communication methods (visits, letters, calls). - Logistical/emotional challenges of visits. - Children's experiences of visits. - Emotional impacts on children's well-being.
Emotional and Psychological Support	How have you and your children been coping emotionally?	- Personal struggles and adjustments. - Sources of support (family, religious, community). - Impacts on health and parenting. - Teenager's emotional expressions. - Role of external support (school, extended family, community resources).

Challenges	What have been the biggest challenges for your family since the incarceration?	- Emotional/psychological challenges. - Parenting/family dynamics. - Financial and practical difficulties. - Barriers to services. - Social/community challenges.
Future Outlook	How do you see the future for yourself, children, and family?	- Hopes and concerns. - Needed support. - Suggestions for improvement.
Closing Questions	Is there anything else you'd like to share?	- Additional experiences not covered. - Reflections on the interview. - Clarifications or questions.

While the questions followed a consistent structure, the interviews were conducted in a flexible and conversational manner, allowing participants to expand on topics that were most meaningful to them. I attempted to remind the women at different points of the conversation of the possibility of going off-topic and reflecting on whatever they think matters mostly. Many of the women chose to reflect not only on their roles as mothers but also on broader issues of resilience, injustice, and the collective experience of incarceration in Palestinian society. Their responses offered rich, nuanced accounts that illuminated both personal and political dimensions of caregiving under conditions of prolonged absence and state violence.

4.6.3 Focus Groups with Youth and Children

Following the interviews with women, I conducted and facilitated four interactive focus group sessions with the child and youth participants. Each group session lasted approximately 90 minutes and included five to ten participants. All sessions were held in familiar, child-friendly settings that supported emotional safety and encouraged meaningful engagement.

Drawing on literature that positions children as active social beings rather than passive recipients of adult knowledge (Adler et al., 2019), the sessions sought to empower participants by acknowledging their agency, insight, and ability to communicate complex emotions and

experiences in diverse ways. The activities were structured, yet flexible; children were encouraged to take the lead in discussions, propose new topics, or skip an activity if they wished. In one session, for example, children collectively initiated a conversation about the moment of their family member's arrest; a theme not formally planned but deeply meaningful to the participants.

Inspired by Norris and colleagues' (2012) reflections on the challenges of traditional research methods with youth and adolescents, and their recommendation to incorporate interactive performance techniques, the focus groups were designed using interactive and participatory methods. Additionally, following Rousseau's (2004) emphasis on the importance of integrating both verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, the sessions combined creative and reflective activities to engage participants meaningfully. The sessions included ice-breaking games, guided open discussions, drawing, storytelling, and interactive mapping. These activities were intentionally designed to recognize and respect the developmental differences among children, and to honor their unique capacities for meaning making. The sessions were designed to be developmentally appropriate and participatory, combining creative and reflective methods.

The methodology also aimed to reduce hierarchies between the researcher and the children by creating a peer-like, open environment. The focus groups functioned not only as data collection sites but also as spaces of experience exchanged in which children could hear each other's stories, feel less isolated, and co-construct a shared understanding of their experiences. This emphasis on relational engagement aligns with the participatory philosophy that partially guided the study's design.

One of the activities used was the "Spectrum of Changes", in which children were invited to reflect on the extent to which different aspects of their lives had changed following the incarceration of a family member. Using a visual scale ranging from "changed a lot" to "didn't

change at all", participants considered a range of domains including school, household responsibilities, friendships, sleep patterns, social visits and outings, daily routines, work, mobility, relationships with family members, and engagement in hobbies.

Another exercise, the "Support Systems" activity, prompted children to consider the presence and effectiveness of various sources of social and internal support in their lives. They reflected on figures and structures such as mothers, fathers, teachers, relatives, friends, school counselors, themselves, their communities, institutions, other families of prisoners, the government, and the popular committee in the camp.

Children were also invited to use any creative method of their choice like drawing, writing, or narrating, to express their thoughts and feelings evoked by hearing specific words such as childhood, visits, prison, family, motherhood, longing, heroism, happiness, lawyers, and celebrations. In two of the groups, participants collaboratively constructed visual or narrative maps of their experiences visiting a parent or relative in prison, enabling a shared exploration of these complex and often emotional journeys. In one group, children engaged in a reflective writing exercise, composing letters to their future selves to be opened five years later.

All sessions incorporated informal moments for snacks and socializing, which played an important role in creating a welcoming atmosphere. These moments contributed to trust-building and supported the formation of a sense of group cohesion and mutual recognition. Children were also reminded verbally that they are the experts of their own experiences, and that our time together was not only a space for sharing but also a mutual learning process. This framing positioned them as active contributors to knowledge production rather than passive subjects. In one case, the children introduced me to the structure of their neighborhoods and explained how bureaucratic

systems function within the refugee camp—a context that differs significantly from the urban environment in which I was raised.

4.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-step model of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing up. Transcripts were reviewed repeatedly for depth of understanding before coding was initiated. Coding was conducted manually, and emerging codes were continually revised and grouped into higher-order themes. Key themes were discussed and refined in consultation with the thesis supervisor to enhance credibility and validity minimizing individual bias.

To identify patterns across participants, the frequency of specific codes was tracked, noting how many women or children raised a given topic. This allowed for a more grounded interpretation of which themes were most salient across the different participant groups. In the case of focus groups with children, the analysis also incorporated data from creative expression activities, such as drawings and written reflections, which were treated as meaningful forms of communication and analyzed alongside the verbal discussions. This approach acknowledged the diverse ways children express meaning and contributed to a richer understanding of their experiences.

Chapter 5

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which draws upon both in-depth interviews with wives of political prisoners and interactive focus group discussions with children of political prisoners in Palestine. To contextualize these narratives, I also conducted interviews with three key informants working directly with children and families of detainees: a school counselor in one of the refugee camps in which one of the focus groups was conducted, a psychosocial support specialist working with an NGO, and the director of a community center. Their perspective provides an important professional lens through which to situate the lived experiences of families, shedding light on both the structural environment in which children of prisoners grow up and the systematic challenges they face but also the ones that are faced by the organizations that seek to support them.

Across the three interviews some themes were consistent and interrelated, for example the importance of moving beyond the oversimplification of the lived experience of children with incarcerated fathers. While many children demonstrate resilience, pride, and a precocious maturity, they also struggle with fear, loss, and uncertainty. As the psychosocial support specialist explained, imprisonment produces a multi-layered experience for children, who are encouraged to take pride in their fathers' sacrifice, yet are simultaneously burdened by grief and frustration: *"The idea of imprisonment is something very combative, resistant, heroic—but also hurts, frustrates, involves loss, deprivation, pain, and anger"*. Moreover, she reflected on the complexity of having to make sense of the differences in the realities the families live in comparison to those lived by

their beloved ones inside of prisons: *"Whether it's the family itself or the person in prison—because someone's life is on pause, while the lives of those outside continue. But often, those outside are barely holding on, and there are pivotal, transitional events in their lives. So, there's this idea that here, life is moving forward, and there, life is on pause. Time stops. But I think this is part of the grief and oppression people feel—that yes, I'm learning, growing, working, getting married, having children, and my father is in prison. This is the issue—that often you're not exposed to the same oppression directly as the person who was imprisoned".*

The school counselor similarly pointed to behavioral and academic challenges, noting that some children become withdrawn or aggressive, while others are forced into premature responsibility, including child labor due to the family's economic strain. He emphasized that such outcomes are not uniform but shaped by family history, personality, and broader community context: *"They appear older than their age, but they still need a supportive environment to sustain their vision for the future"*.

The director of the community center highlighted the importance of symbolic and practical interventions, ranging from psychosocial support and solidarity sit-ins to trips, skill-building activities, and free tuition for prisoners' children. Yet she also underscored the material and institutional constraints under which such centers operate due to financial shortages, but also due to the constraints of operating in a context of colonial oppression and censorship. At the same time, she stressed the persistence of community solidarity, exemplified by the collective initiatives of prisoners' mothers: *"Community solidarity is still strong, we have a group for prisoners' mothers—they organize visits to Ramallah together, which strengthens their bonds"*. Moreover, she reflected on their role in fostering children's identity: *"We remind children that this is their land, especially that the occupation tries to brainwash them from a young age".*

Institutionally, however, the informants all noted serious gaps in resources and coordination. The psychosocial support specialist was especially critical of NGOs' tendency to prioritize quantity over quality, reproducing victimhood framings that sustain donor interest rather than genuinely addressing families' needs. As she reflected: *"Many institutions don't see children or parents as people—heroes, resistors, or something combative. No, it's easiest for them to see them as victims so funding keeps coming"*.

With these gaps in mind, the psychosocial support specialist made sure to focus also on working methods that through her experience were useful for the people she worked with such as doing group counseling instead of individual: *"Because when you're in a group where you share something in common, it makes you feel more comfortable and like you're not alone in facing this dilemma. It reinforces your belonging to the community you're in".* Moreover, she was critically aware that mental-health workers and specialists are subjects who live through the same colonial violence as those they help, and this requires developing therapeutic practices that acknowledge the psychosocial impact of colonial violence on both clinician and patient alike, fostering spaces of collective disalienation and decolonial subjectivity (Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022).

These professional perspectives reveal the broader context of resilience and constraint in which families of political prisoners live, marked by systemic neglect and structural violence, yet also by communal strategies of care, solidarity, and resistance. The insights of these key informants were not only essential in contextualizing the experiences of women and children but also helped refine the interview and focus group guides used in this study. Their observations regarding children's emotional experiences, institutional shortcomings, and the importance of community-based solidarity informed both the questions and the interpretive lens through which the findings are

analyzed. The subsections that follow therefore focus on the narratives of mothers and children themselves, with the informants' perspectives lenses that frame and enrich the analysis.

5.1 Interviews with wives of Palestinian political prisoners

The analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews with wives of Palestinian political prisoners revealed a set of interrelated themes that together capture the complex psychosocial realities of families living under the shadow of incarceration. These narratives are far from isolated events, they are situated and embedded within a broader context of occupation and structural violence, where imprisonment functions as a deliberate disruption of family life. This context foreground both the emotional and structural dimensions of women lived experiences.

The analysis of the interviews was organized into four overarching domains: (1) Challenges experienced following the incarceration, (2) Strategies of adjustment and resilience, (3) Support received, and (4) Future hopes and concerns. As shown in table 2, each domain resulted in themes and subthemes, reflecting the complex interplay between emotional strain, political violence, structural gaps, and the creative strategies families mobilize to sustain themselves under conditions of prolonged uncertainty.

For the challenges experienced, all eight participants mentioned all four themes: emotional, psychological, and social burden, children's emotional and behavioral changes, violence of the occupation, and institutional gaps. These themes are characterized by subthemes such as increased responsibility and parenting under strain that were present in most interviews. In regards of strategies of adjustment and resilience, psychological resilience was mentioned by all participants; with the most recurring subtheme being religious faith, while the support the mothers provide to their children supporting children appeared in 7 out of 8 interviews with the most present subtheme being sustaining their connection with the incarcerated parent. The most mentioned support

required was family networks, followed by community and institutional support. For future hopes and concerns the most prevalent theme is the enhancement of institutional and community support, with psychological and practical support as subthemes, followed by hopes for justice and reunion, and finally the concern regarding uncertainty and instability. Below I will describe the main themes and subthemes supported by illustrative excerpts from the participants as well as quantitative indications of their prominence. Specifically, the percentage of participants who referred to themes and subthemes are reported, thereby providing depth to the qualitative analysis.

Table 2

Themes of Interviews with Wives of Political Prisoners

Themes	Frequency	%
1. Challenges experienced following the incarceration		
Mothers' Emotional, Psychological, and Social Burden	8	100%
Children's Emotional and Behavioral Changes	8	100%
Violence of the Occupation	8	100%
Institutional Gaps	8	100%
2. Strategies of adjustment and resilience		
Psychological resilience	8	100%
Supporting children (emotionally and practically)	7	87.5%
3. Support received (emotional, psychological, and practical)		
Family Networks	8	100%
Community Support	3	37.5%
Institutional Support	4	50%
4. Future hopes and concerns		
Hopes for justice and release	7	87.5%
Enhancement of institutional support	8	100%
Uncertainty and instability	6	75%

Note. Frequencies are out of a total of 8 participants.

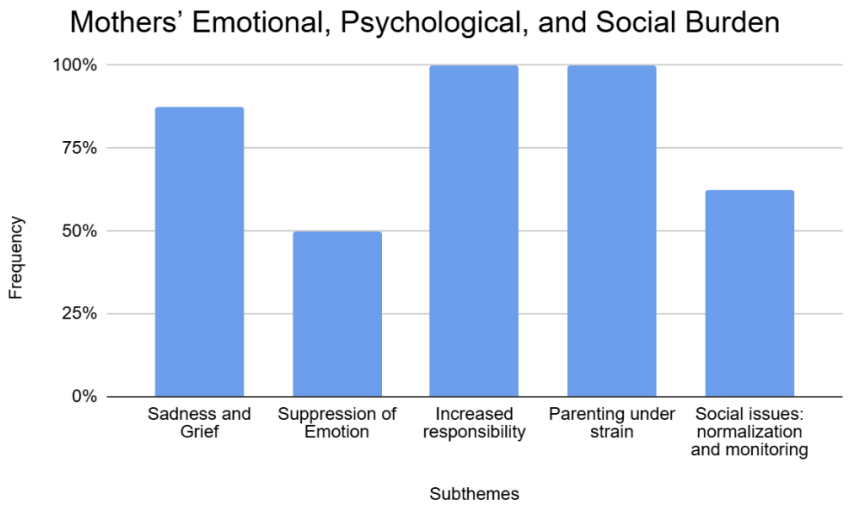
51.1 Challenges experienced following the incarceration

This domain included four themes with different subthemes that are described below. All mothers mentioned all the main themes.

Mothers' Emotional, Psychological, and Social Burden. All women described the burden of their husband's absence due to imprisonment as a continuous and multilayered strain that affected different dimensions of their lives. This psychological burden manifested in different forms shaped by the initial shock of the arrest and by the protracted absence that followed.

Figure 2

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Mothers' Emotional, Psychological, and Social Burden



For 87.5% (7 of 8) women, the earliest period was marked by deep sadness and grief. One participant reflected, *"At night, I express things in my own private way… I cry alone*". Another explained, "*Yes, it's an occupation—we expect the worst—but still, it crushed me. I was devastated by his imprisonment. No one truly understands the pain except those who live it".* The inability to share milestones and celebrations with their husbands deepened this sense of absence, producing a persistent longing that resurfaced during different occasions. One woman expressed how she was hoping that her husband would attend her labor *"I was hoping when I give birth to Mira, he'll get to be there, see me giving birth. I wished I could have celebrated, given out gifts. I arranged everything. But he wasn't released"*. Another woman shared*: "During special occasions—now*

Ramadan is coming, and the atmosphere doesn't feel right. During family gatherings, everyone else has their fathers, but my children don't—it affects us deeply".

Alongside this sadness, 50% of the women spoke of actively suppressing their emotions, *"I don't talk to anyone about these negative feelings or fears"*, in some cases it was framed as a necessary performance of strength for their children *"You have to be strong in front of your kids"*. Participants described this suppression as an attempt to shield themselves and their families from the intensity of their pain, but also as a means of preserving a sense of stability in the household. This practice, however, left them emotionally drained, creating an ongoing tension between the need to cope privately and the cumulative weight of unexpressed grief. A woman reflected on how other people were praising her for showing strength even though she had to endure her husband's imprisonment, heart surgery, and the death of her infants and she commented on that saying: *"but crying, yelling — what would that do for me? No one can do for me what Ihab [her imprisoned husband] could have done if he was here".* Another woman, when asked about the reason for preferring not to share her emotions with someone else she said: *"It's like, we're all in the same boat. All of us are in this situation. I mean, I feel like we as Palestinian people—this is something we all have to go through…I feel ashamed to say that I'm struggling when my husband's only been in prison for six months. Really, when you look at others—our neighbors, for example, she raised her kids alone, her husband was exiled and only recently returned. So what can I say? That I miss my husband?"*

In their husbands' absence, all women described how they were compelled to assume expanded responsibilities, often stepping into roles that had previously been shared. These included managing the household, caring for children's educational and psychological needs, and making all major family decisions, all while navigating a politically and economically volatile

environment. *"I have to take care of the kids, psychologically and academically, and the house overall"* explained one woman. A working mother highlighted the adjustment this required: *"I relied on him about 70% of the time… So it was really hard to adjust to his absence"*.

Another topic that was raised by all was the difficulty of parenting under strain and the dual parenting roles they are forced to perform, assuming full responsibility for discipline, academic supervision, and the emotional care of their children. As one woman put it, *"I never imagined I'd have to live alone with the two kids and take on both the mother and father roles"*. They reflected how these increased responsibilities often lead to heightened irritability and feelings of inadequacy. *"I've become more short-tempered with them… I take it out on the kids"* shared one participant, while another shared, *"I've completely lost control [with my son]… it's hard to manage four kids"*. Mothers were acutely aware of the emotional void left by the father's absence: *"I'm raising her on my own. I'm present, but the presence of the father is really important for children's development—for their emotional stability, for love, for communication. Life just feels different when he's around"*.

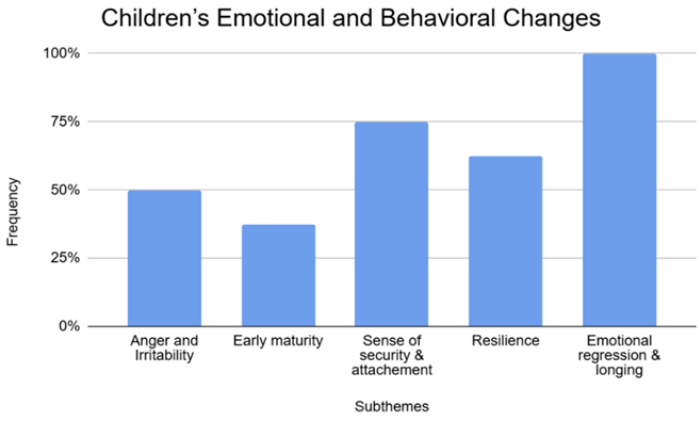
Moreover, 62.5% of the women highlighted how their husband's imprisonment exposed them to broader social pressures, including gendered monitoring and the gradual normalization of their situation within the community. Several participants described being closely observed by neighbors and relatives, who monitored their routines and behaviors: *"People ask me where I went, what time I got back… they're watching"*. Alongside this, women reported social expectations around gender that increased their sense of burden. One participant shared that she felt that any perceived shortcomings in her children's behavior were attributed to the absence of the father: *"If you fall short, people say 'That's a woman's raising'"*. Normalization also emerged as a social issue, wherein imprisonment became an accepted part of life in the community. One woman

remarked: *"...what will people do for us? They'll sympathize then everyone goes on with their lives. No matter how much they want to support, people have gotten used to the fact that he's always in prison".* This process of normalization, while reflecting the prevalence of political imprisonment, also produced a painful sense of neglect for families who felt their suffering was overlooked. Another participant expressed frustration at how the community's engagement with the issue had diminished over time: *"The topic of prisoners is a big topic. It's wrong for it to become normal. It's a shame for someone to be a prisoner and to be treated as nothing. That's what hurts a person when people start treating the issue as ordinary—because he sacrificed his life, his stability, his family. At the very least, people should continue to value prisoners as having great national importance and social standing".*

Children's Emotional and Behavioral Changes. All participants reported that their children exhibited significant emotional and behavioral changes following the imprisonment of their fathers. These shifts encompassed both distress and adaptive responses to altered family circumstances about their fathers' absence and differed based on the children' s age, gender, personality, and preexisting relationship with the father.

Figure 3

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Children's Emotional and Behavioral Changes



Fifty percent of mothers observed an increase in irritability and anger among their children. As one mother observed, *"She became more aggressive, more explosive"*. Moreover, they described a pervasive emotional sensitivity, in which even minor incidents provoked intense reactions: *"She starts crying even when something small happens"*. For some, this fragility was tied directly to the absence of the father and intensified by public or social situations that highlighted the absence, like school celebrations, family outings, or seeing other children with their fathers.

A recurrent theme that was brought up by all women was the longing for the absent parent. One mother recounted her son's repeated inquiries: *"Why isn't Dad here?"*. She described how, once he began kindergarten, these questions intensified: *"Let Dad come and bring me cake to distribute at school. Why doesn't Dad come to my school?"*. The same child's distress peaked when witnessing other fathers participating in school activities, prompting comparisons and a renewed longing for his father's presence. The mother explained how she relied on reassurances—telling him *"Inshallah, he'll be out soon… just be patient"*—even as she admitted exhaustion from having to constantly comfort and redirect his longing. Another child framed his sense of loss more indirectly: *"All the other kids, their moms or dads pick them up. Why not me?"*. These moments were not limited to formal events; they surfaced in everyday routines. Mothers noted that even casual activities such as eating meals or playing at home could spark memories: *"They mention their father every day—something always happens that reminds them of him. When we eat, when we sit together, they'll say, 'Dad used to do this, he used to do that'"*. For some children, this longing took the form of finding a substitute figure, such as a boy who began calling his uncle "Dad".

While some children responded with withdrawal or sadness, 37.5% of the mothers described how their children displayed forms of early maturity and heightened political awareness. One mother described her son, only four years old, as unusually perceptive: *"When you talk to him, you wouldn't say he's only four or five… he says, 'The flag of Israel is something we knock off, and we put the Palestinian flag on our heads.'"* This precociousness was experienced ambivalently valued as a sign of intelligence but also recognized as the loss of a protected childhood.

For some children, 75% of the mothers observed that the father's absence fundamentally reshaped their sense of security and attachment. Some became more emotionally dependent on their mothers, greeting them with intense physical affection after even brief separations: *"From the moment I come home from work, they attack me, start clinging to me and kissing me"*. For adolescents, the effects were perceived through the lens of emerging identity and gendered expectations. One mother spoke of her 14-year-old son's ongoing struggles, noting his resistance to her guidance: *"He still needs my help… He always says, 'If dad were here, this wouldn't have happened to me.'... He feels like he's lost his backbone."* In this case, the father's absence was tied not only to emotional pain but also to a perceived erosion of security and protection, influencing the boy's relationships with peers and teachers.

Accounts from 62.5% of mothers highlight that, despite the profound psychological toll of paternal imprisonment, children often demonstrate notable forms of resilience. Women described their children as showing an increased sense of responsibility and developing coping strategies. One mother explained how her eldest daughter, after obtaining a driver's license, began transporting siblings, running errands, and even providing emotional support to her mother, at

times becoming a confidante in moments of fatigue or despair. This redistribution of roles positioned children as central contributors to the households.

One mother also noted how friendships with peers who had similarly incarcerated fathers helped to reframe paternal absence, transforming it into a source of pride and political meaning. The father was represented as a hero; a symbolic figure whose sacrifice could anchor resilience and instill a sense of belonging to a wider collective struggle.

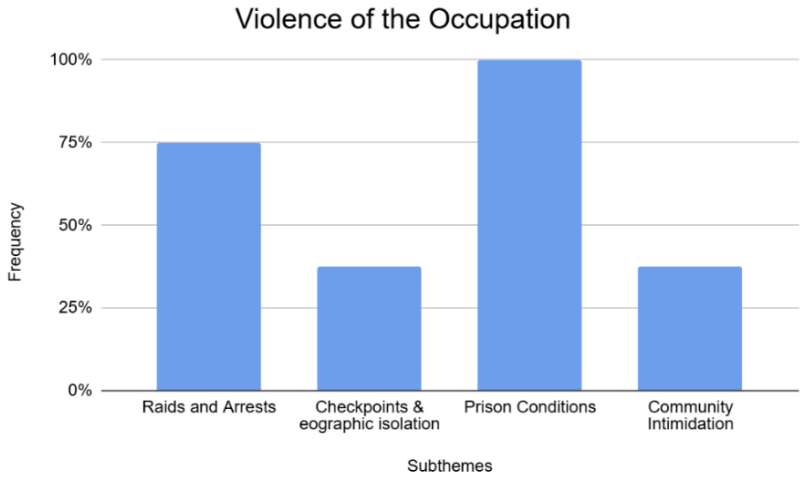
At the same time, resilience was often interwoven with ongoing vulnerability. Younger children displayed resilience through imaginative reinterpretations of absence, though these were often tied to distressing associations with violence. As one mother recounted, her daughter repeatedly connected her father's imprisonment with military raids, saying: *"The army came and took Baba… I want to go to the army to bring back Baba".* These associations between military violence and paternal loss often became embedded in the child's sense-making, surfacing during play, speech, and daily interactions.

Taken together, these narratives reveal a complex emotional landscape in which resilience manifests both through adaptation and symbolic meaning-making. As one mother reflected: *"Children of prisoners often show a kind of strength—you can really tell. But still, they always have something missing".* In this sense, children's resilience is neither a simple story of adaptation nor of victimhood; it reflects both signs of children's agency in confronting absence, but also stark reminders of the psychosocial toll of political imprisonment on the family unit.

Violence of the Occupation. Beyond the personal strain, women's accounts highlighted the constant broader occupation-related violence into their daily lives.

Figure 4

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Violence of the Occupation



Arrests and raids were described by 75% of the women with detail: *"They surrounded the building, unleashed a dog on him, and beat him in the house"*. The fear of recurrence meant that even after an arrest, participants remained in a high state of attentiveness: *"After my husband was imprisoned, the soldiers came back again… I stay tense all the time"*. One woman also endured the destruction of her home as a punitive measure: *"After a while of his imprisonment, they came and demolished the house"*.

Checkpoints and geographic isolation were also mentioned by 37.5% of the participants as factors that enhanced these challenges, as one woman explained her anxiety before giving birth, *"If labor starts while I'm at my parents' house, how do we get an ambulance? And what if they don't let us pass through the checkpoint?"*. As the disruption of infrastructure meant journeys that once took minutes now stretched to hours, one woman reflected: *"The biggest challenge I see is the occupation itself… it places obstacles to make our lives abnormal, even impossible. Whether it's waking up in the morning and going to work and facing the closure of these iron gates, the*

closing of villages and our inability to reach the cities. Many days I have to work from home because I can't get to my workplace".

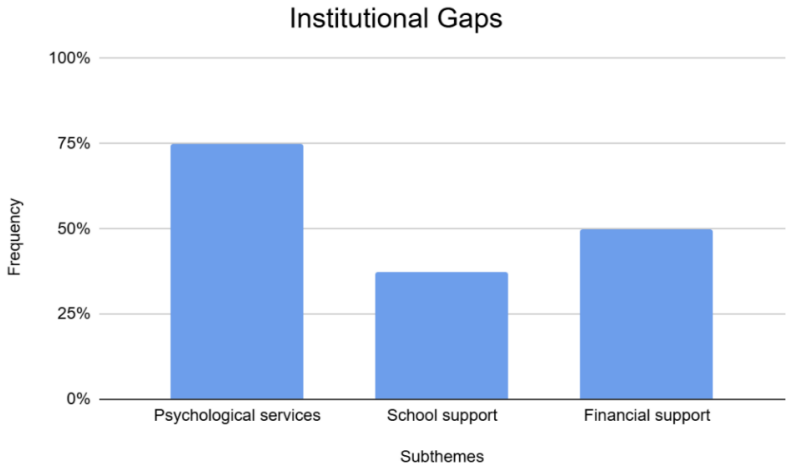
Three women (37.5%) also elaborated on how the occupation also permeated community dynamics through criminalizing visiting the family of a prisoner which could itself become grounds for harassment or arrest: *"The circumstances of the war made people afraid of visiting us, because now you may be arrested for visiting prisoners' families"*.

According to all participants, poor conditions inside of the prison generated additional distress. One woman described her fear due to medical neglect: *"I was afraid my husband wouldn't get his medicine because he had an open-heart surgery"*. One of the important challenges was the communication cut off between the families and the prisoners, on this a participant shared: *"We used to visit or at least get calls... but now there's no communication"*.

Institutional and Structural Gaps. All participants also identified significant gaps in institutional and structural support.

Figure 5

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Institutional Gaps



Psychological services, according to 75% of the women, were either absent or distrusted due to stigma and a perception of over-medicalization. One participant explained, *"Therapeutic services are unavailable, and honestly, even if there were, I'd say no. Because if I talked, they'd categorize me as depressed. There's a habit of medicalizing people and boxing them into diagnoses. Socially, there's a stigma around psychological treatment—not from me, but from the institutions and doctors we have. They just prescribe medication and that's it. No one is qualified to truly listen to me. There's a need to talk, but there's a constant expectation that if you've gone through all this, then you must have depression. There was even a pharmacist who kept pushing me to take antidepressants—I told him I know myself. But still, the assumption is that it's impossible to go through all this and not be depressed".* Another participant expressed how psychological services could have helped her with her child: *"Sometimes she suddenly acts out or gets frustrated – if there was someone else working with her, they might understand those reactions better than we, her family, can. They would probably notice things we don't".*

Three women also discussed how schools often fail to provide a safe or supportive environment for their children, as one of them expressed: *"There's a lot of violence at the boys' school… no real learning"*. Moreover, trust in official bodies was further eroded by neglect: *"The worst time was after the house demolition—not a single person from the governor's office asked about us"*. The absence of consistent financial and social support reinforced the perception that families were left to navigate these compounded challenges largely on their own. Fifty percent of the women raised the major issue of the Palestinian authority's decision to cut the monthly salary of prisoners that was used as the main financial support to families of political prisoners. One woman explained: *"... at any moment, the prisoners' salaries could be stopped. Of course, for many families, they have no other source of income. As for me, I rely a bit on my own salary, but*

many others depend entirely on this salary—it covers rent, children's school and university expenses. We're talking about a very difficult financial problem".

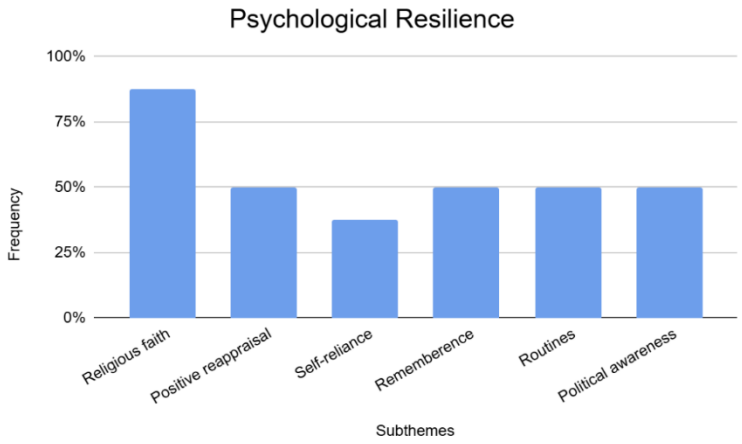
5.1.2 Strategies of adjustment and resilience

This domain included two main themes with psychological resilience being the most frequent followed by support they provide for their children. Each theme had different subthemes which are described below.

Psychological Resilience. All the participating women described a range of strategies they employ to maintain their psychological resilience, create a sense of stability in their households, and protect their children from the psychological toll of prolonged absence. These strategies were described at multiple levels, individual, familial, and communal, and were embedded in broader cultural, political, and religious frameworks.

Figure 6

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Psychological Resilience



Religious faith played a central role for 87.5% of the women, serving as both a coping mechanism and a moral anchor. One woman shared: *"I always have faith God doesn't leave us*

alone, and actually God blesses and provides", and another described *"I leave it to God… I try to stay strong"*.

For 50% of the participants, positive reappraisal was employed as a strategy through which the difficult situation they are going through was reframed in a more positive way. For example, some women shared how comparing their situation favorably to those in more difficult positions with less resources, helped them reduce feelings of despair: *"I tell myself, 'I'm better off than others'"*. One woman also shared how she tells herself that the most difficult part of it has already passed: *"Many people around me expect me to be very emotional, to cry a lot. But no, I'm not that type. It's like – okay, he got arrested, he'll get out eventually. Worse things have passed, and this will pass too. So I live each day as it comes"*.

Three women articulated a self-reliant strategy, as one participant stated, *"When a person goes through an experience like this, eventually you become the one who helps yourself... Either you decide to stay depressed and broken, or you decide to live your life day by day"*. Another added, *"No one in this world can help you more than yourself. No one"*.

For 50% of the participants this hope was reinforced by remembering words of their imprisoned husbands, who framed their own incarceration as purposeful as one woman quoted her husband telling her: *"I may not be in a comfortable place, but I am in the right place… planning the future that will be just for you and the children"*. Another example is of a woman who remembered her husband's strength, after the death of his mother, nurtured her resilience: *"When I saw him like that—strong—it actually helped me cope"*.

Establishing and maintaining routine**s** was another key tactic for 62.5% of the participants, for example one woman shared how household organization helped her *"I record all the bills, everything I need to do—to keep the house running"*. Another woman when asked about the things

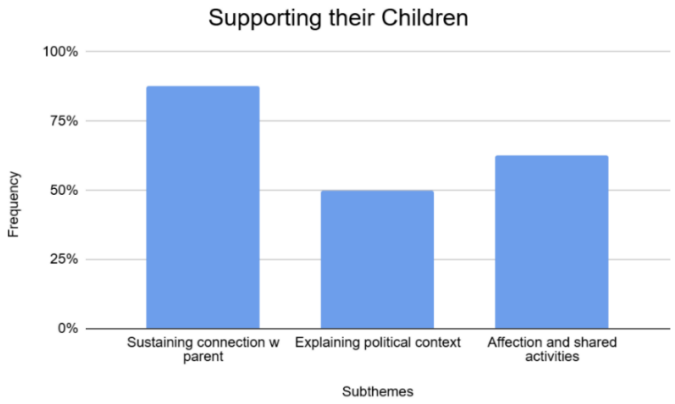
that help her cope, she shared: *"I create a new routine. I go back to exercising. I follow a structured plan. I work in the land—I keep busy with gardening and the nursery"*.

Fifty percent described their political awareness as a strength that made them make sense of their situation not as an individual case of despair but as part of something systematic. When one woman was asked her thoughts on this she replied extensively: *"I always say: may God help the women or wives of prisoners who aren't connected or aware, or who don't have education—because a degree is a weapon these days. Awareness and understanding of our context is critical. Sometimes I can anticipate that he'll be renewed again because the political climate isn't favorable for his release, so I mentally prepare myself for that—even if the decision still breaks me. I follow the news and politics very closely, not just local or war-related politics, but global politics too, because it all affects us. So yes, political awareness is crucial"*. These practices provided a sense of control in an otherwise unpredictable environment and aligned with a political awareness that grounded their expectations in the reality of life under occupation.

Supporting their Children. Alongside maintaining their own emotional stability, 87.5% of the mothers mentioned the importance of supporting their children from the full weight of the father's absence.

Figure 7

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Supporting their Children



Symbolic acts of sustaining their connection with the imprisoned parent played a significant role in this process: some pretended to speak with the father on the phone: *"Daddy sends his love"*, or attributed small gifts to him, telling the children they came from prison. Women also engaged in creating videos for the imprisoned father or sending recorded messages, giving children an outlet to express their feelings directly.

For 50% of them, explaining the political context was considered an essential tool to support their children's sense-making process. Mothers reported explaining to their children why their fathers were in prison and who was responsible, fostering a sense of political consciousness and pride in the father's role. As one participant described her children: *"They are aware now of where their father is, who is responsible, and why"*. Another participant emphasized: *"I want to teach her that her dad is in prison, and at any moment he could come back—then they could come and take him again"*. For the women, using the political narrative as a tool to support their children's understanding is important for fostering a sense of predictability that can help them in managing uncertainty, reducing fear of the unknown, and reframing their father's absence as part of a broader collective struggle.

Acts of affection and shared activities emerged as strategies mothers used to provide their children with emotional stability, with 62.5% of the participants highlighting these practices. Such interactions were described as a means of fostering closeness. Through play, storytelling, and moments of intimacy, mothers aimed to create spaces where children could feel safe and supported despite ongoing disruptions. One mother explained: *"We have specific games and activities. We read stories, she plays with her toys in a certain way. Some days she'll ask me to stay home to play, she doesn't want to go out".* Another act of affection that one mother expressed is her determination to shield her children from additional burdens or external interference in their upbringing, she emphasized: *"My personality doesn't allow anyone to interfere in raising them, or to give them extra burdens. I go along with what my daughters want—I don't want them to feel pressured"*. This statement illustrates how acts of affection extended beyond physical care to encompass a deliberate choice to respect children's preferences and preserve their sense of agency in a context where much of their environment was outside their control.

5.1.3 Support received (emotional, psychological, and practical)

This domain included three themes with the most frequent being family networks mentioned by all participants, followed by community and institutional support presented by 4 participants out of 8. Different subthemes emerged for each theme and are described below.

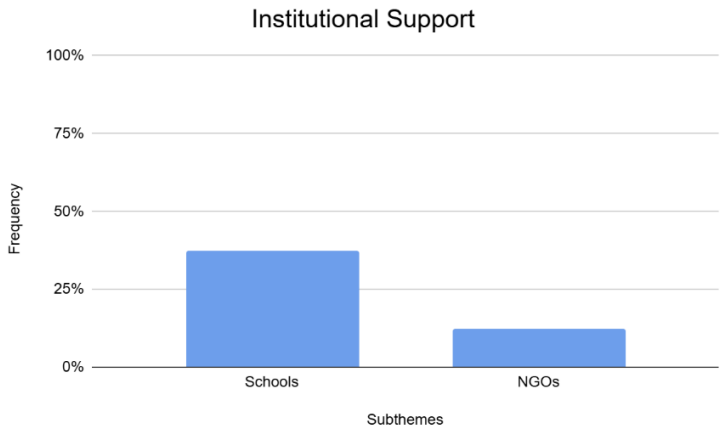
Family Networks. Family support was the most consistent and immediate form of support received by all women: *"My only support is my family—they've stood by me and still do"*. Relatives often stepped in to help with childcare, errands, and emotional care for the children, as one woman shared: *"My sisters-in-law try to support and pamper my kids more during this period than before"*.

Community Support. The support from the community was a topic raised by 37.5% of the women. The main source of community support was that of families of other political prisoners. Connections with other prisoners' families were highlighted as significant and unique forms of support. When asked about her relationship with other families of political prisoners one woman expressed: *"Of course we [families of political prisoners] comfort each other. We talk about the things that bother us. You find then that our experiences are very similar. People living in the same situation can feel you more"*. These relationships were often nurtured during prison visits or through regular communication, yet, due to visit and communication cuts participants expressed how these relationships decreased.

Institutional Support. Although many women emphasized the insufficiency of institutional responses to their needs, half of the participants (50%) nonetheless identified educational institutions like schools, kindergartens, and nurseries and, in some cases, NGOs as sources of meaningful support. These accounts highlight both the potential role of institutions in easing the psychosocial burden on families of prisoners and the persistent gaps that leave many needs unmet.

Figure 8

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Institutional Support



Three mothers pointed to the importance of educational settings in providing children with a supportive environment. For some, the nursery and school played a critical role in ensuring that children were not stigmatized by their father's imprisonment. One participant explained: *"It helps a lot. They do many activities that help. They never make her feel that Ehab is in prison"*. Beyond daily routines, one mother recalled schools occasionally being engaged directly with the issue of imprisonment: *"They had them [in school] bring their father's photo, and on Prisoner's Day, they'd talk about prisoners. It was always with respect and attention the way they treated them".* Such gestures, though symbolic, were seen as valuable in normalizing the child's experience within the peer group and in affirming the social significance of their father's sacrifice. Moreover, only one participant described accessing an NGO program, reflecting a broader pattern of institutional neglect. She explained, *"They arranged a course for my son at the center—12 sessions, free of charge"*.

Taken together, these narratives underscore a paradox: institutions have the potential to play a crucial role in mitigating the burdens of parental imprisonment, yet their contributions remain fragmented and limited. The accounts of mothers demonstrate both appreciation for the symbolic and practical support received, and a clear call for more consistent, comprehensive, and accessible institutional engagement.

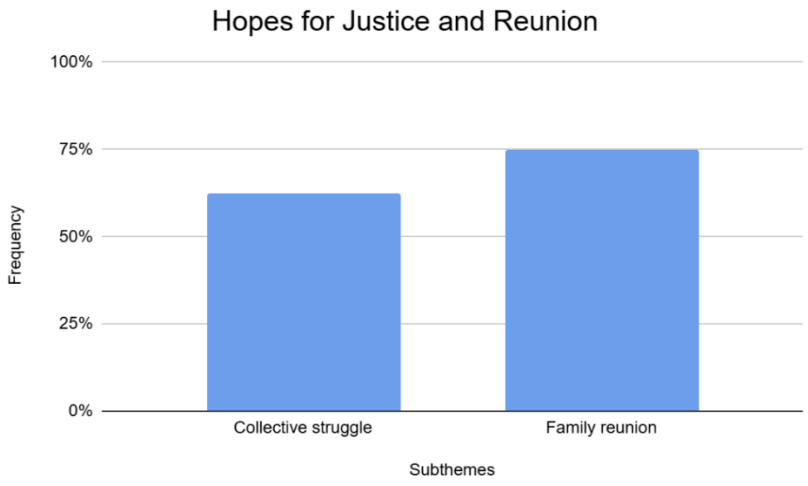
5.1.4 Future hopes and concerns

This domain included three main themes. The most frequent is the enhancement of institutional and community support followed by hopes for justice and reunion, followed by uncertainty and instability. Each theme had different subthemes which are detailed and discussed below.

Hopes for justice and reunion. Despite the hardships, a recurring theme brought up by 87.5% of the interviews was the cultivation of hope and the belief in the justness of the Palestinian cause. Mothers emphasized that their ability to endure was sustained by a common conviction that justice would ultimately prevail. One participant explained: *"As Palestinians, we live a unique life—we continue on despite the constant uncertainty about the future, or even about how our day will end. But we have faith, because we are people of justice. Things will get better, God willing"*.

Figure 9

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Hopes for Justice and Reunion



Five mothers (62.5%) framed their personal suffering within the broader Palestinian collective experience. This sense of connection to a wider struggle helped sustain hope, even when daily life felt overwhelming. As one participant put it, *"We are definitely part of the bigger future. We can't plan our future under occupation and such complicated conditions".* This collective lens provided a sense of shared purpose and a wider narrative of resistance and perseverance.

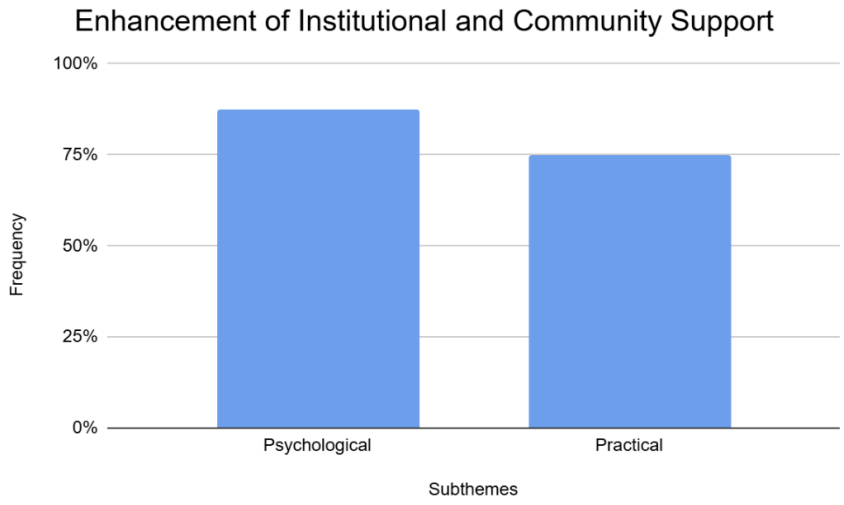
Moreover, 75% of the women shared their hopes for the reunification of their family and the eventual return of their husbands. When asked about their vision for the future, one participant shared "God willing, for example, Mira, … when she enters kindergarten next year, he will be

there, really". She continued praying that her husband would hear his son whom he never saw saying the word "baba". Another woman answered the same question saying: *"...my daughter Farah—I hope that her mental health stays good, that she remains emotionally connected to her father and doesn't forget him. That's my biggest fear—that she forgets".*

Enhancement of institutional and community support. When speaking about the future, all women underscored the need for improved institutional and community support.

Figure 10

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Enhancement of Institutional and Community Support



The hopes of 7 out of 8 women centered on the psychological aspect. They emphasized activities for children as a main type of psychological support that is lacking. One participant expressed: *"I wish they'd do more activities for the children—especially because they are affected",* another participant shared: *"I wish the club focused more on younger age groups in their activities, because at the end of the day, every age group has a right to access activities".*

Practical support was also viewed as essential by 75% of the women, particularly in light of financial insecurity and bureaucratic burdens as one woman shared the stress related to having to follow up with all different governmental entities by herself. Another woman shared her concern

about financial cuts *"hopefully, the salaries won't be cut off, and things won't go as we've heard"*. Another type of practical support was related to the role of media institutions as well as the responsibility of the community, as one woman expressed: *"The torture, starvation, beatings, and abuse were talked about at the start of the war, but after that, there have been no media institutions shining a light on this issue… the world is blind and doesn't see, with double standards, but we do what we must—we have to keep exposing the crimes of the occupation, we have to reveal them".* Thus, the women's vision for the future was closely tied to the strengthening of institutions capable of offering sustained assistance and support to the families and more generally the cause of political imprisonment.

Uncertainty and instability. Another pervasive theme was the uncertainty and instability and was expressed as an important concern for the future by 75% of the participants. They discussed the inability to plan the future under conditions of political imprisonment and occupation. The forced absence of husbands not only reshaped everyday routines but also undermined long-term stability. *"Arrest becomes part of everything – your sleep, your daily details. It shows how sensitive and personal the issue is. Even the second baby we were planning to have – there wasn't time"*. The impossibility of making future plans was echoed: *"You don't think about or plan the future. Because the person you are supposed to plan with isn't there"*. The women's narratives reflected how instability under occupation magnified this uncertainty: *"There is no stability under occupation"*. For many, the future remained a suspended space—characterized by waiting, hoping, but never fully knowing what to expect. This enduring instability reinforced both emotional strain and practical limitations, making hope a fragile yet vital coping resource.

5.2 Findings from Children's Focus Groups Discussions

The focus groups with children provided rich insights into their lived experiences of parental incarceration, reflecting both the psychosocial toll and the resilience strategies they employ. The analysis is organized into three domains: (1) challenges experienced following the incarceration, (2) strategies of adjustment and resilience, and (3) future hopes and aspirations for change. As presented in table 3, within each domain different but interrelated themes aroused through which children's voices highlight the interwoven effects of political imprisonment with everyday life in their communities.

In the first domain all four themes were present in all the four focus groups: psychological impact, daily life, responsibilities, and relationships, violence of the occupation, and institutional neglect. For the second domain the two main themes, psychological coping strategies and eternal support systems as strategies of adjustment and resilience were also present in all four focus groups. In the final domain, the most frequent theme was hope for reunification and freedom, followed by the provision of better spades and resources as well as increased psychological support.

In the following subsections, I present the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the four focus group discussions with the children. These are supported by excerpts from the participants, alongside reports of the frequencies to give an indication of how common each theme and subtheme was across the groups. Beyond spoken narratives, the analysis also incorporates insights drawn from interactive activities, such as children's drawings and expressive writings, which offer an additional window into their emotions, perceptions, and aspirations.

Table 3

Themes of Focus Groups with Children of Political Prisoners

Themes	Frequency	%
1. *Challenges experienced following the incarceration*		
Psychological impact	4	100%
Daily life, responsibilities, and relationships	4	100%
Violence of occupation	4	100%
Institutional neglect	4	100%
2. Strategies of adjustment and resilience		
Psychological Coping Strategies	4	100%
External support systems *(emotional, psychological, and practical)*	4	100%
3. *Future hopes and aspirations for change*		
Reunification and freedom	3	75%
Better resources and safe spaces	1	25%
Increased psychological support	1	25%

Note. Frequencies are out of a total of 4 focus groups.

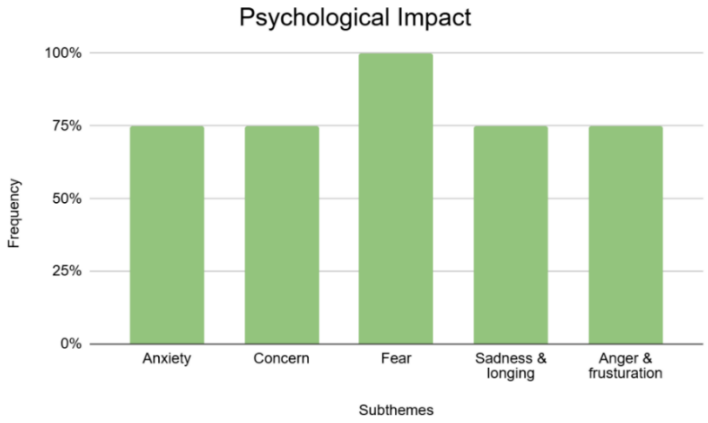
5.2.1 Challenges experienced following the incarceration

This domain included four themes that recurred in all four focus groups, which will be presented with the specific subthemes for each in detail below.

Psychological impact. All groups described how different feelings arose after the incarceration of a family member. Feelings of anxiety, concern, fear, sadness and longing, and anger and frustration emerged across the different focus groups.

Figure 11

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Psychological Impact



In three groups participants described their anxiety and the ongoing tension they carried. One girl explained: *"We sleep anxiously"*, while another added: *"You stay tense at night, scared, anxious, and can't sleep".* This anxiety was accompanied by constant concern for the prisoner's well-being, as one adolescent put it: *"You keep thinking about his condition—it stays on your mind"*. Concerns also extended beyond the prison to fears of displacement and the wider instability of camp life, with a participant reflecting: *"They've put marks on houses in the camp because they want to demolish them to widen the streets so tanks can enter. The entire camp will be gone; they marked the houses, even my uncle's"*.

Fear was another recurring emotion mentioned by children in all of the four focus groups. Children described being scared not only for themselves but also for vulnerable family members. As one participant recalled: *"I was scared they'd hit my grandfather—he's had three operations"*. Others linked fear to the experience of checkpoints and occupation violence: *"We started thinking more before going out and became afraid of checkpoints and roads"*. These emotions were intensified in the aftermath of the war, as one group shared: *"Everyone is scared, especially after the war"*.

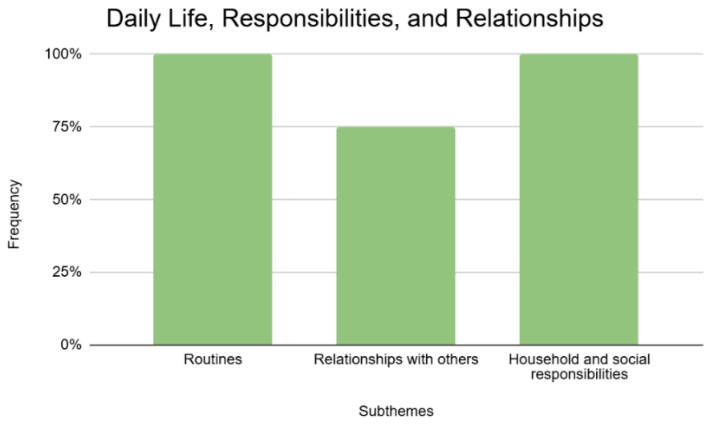
Alongside fear and anxiety, the children in three groups expressed sadness and longing for their imprisoned relatives. *"Sometimes I feel like crying"*, said one girl, while another explained: *"When someone hugs me, I think of my brother"*. These feelings were especially sharp during family occasions: *"Occasions become sad. You miss him. You want him to be there, so the joy isn't complete without him"*. For some, imprisonment was compounded by further losses, as another participant recounted: *"Sorrows too—while he was in prison, our father also passed away, so he couldn't see him"*.

Anger and frustration also surfaced for children in three of the focus groups, particularly in the early stages of imprisonment. One girl explained: *"Yes, especially in the beginning, you're irritable. You're not composed—any little thing makes you angry"*. Others emphasized the frustration caused by rumors or misinformation, which added to their stress: *"People should be careful because any small news changes everything and stresses the family"*.

Daily life, responsibilities, and relationships. All groups highlighted changes in their daily lives, a redistribution of responsibilities within the household, and their relationships with others.

Figure 12

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Daily Life. Responsibilities, and Relationships



Children from all groups reported that everyday routines and activities changed. One main part of daily life that changed according to the children was going on trips and visits: *"Trips changed... he was the one who took us. After he was arrested, we stopped going"*. Another example was the structure of the day: "*For example, we used to have lunch together when he came back from work. Now, everyone's schedule has changed".* The children also shared how their school life was affected: *"Everything changes depending on whether my dad is here or not... I prepare myself alone because my mom goes to work", "he used to help me a lot with my homework... Now I study alone"*.

All groups discussed how household dynamics were also reshaped, with children stepping into new roles: *"Helping my mom—yes, it's changed… now I go get the groceries"*. One participant shared how also his social responsibility changed: *"When there's an event or celebration in the neighborhood, I go to attend instead of my dad"*.

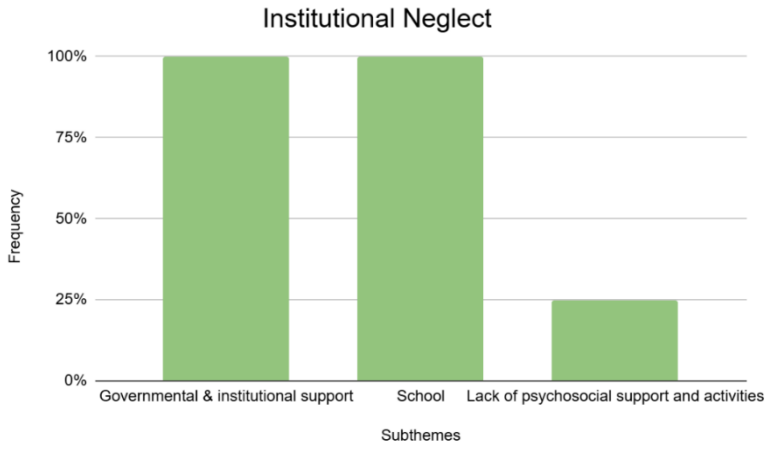
Three groups out of four reflected on how their relationships with siblings and peers were also reconfigured, sometimes strengthening bonds: *"My relationship with my siblings changed a lot for the better. We became closer because I was afraid another one of my siblings might get arrested"*. Others felt misunderstood by friends outside their situation: *"Friends who haven't gone through this think you're exaggerating"*.

Violence of the occupation. Experiences of raids, arrests, and brutality were recounted in every group. One child described: *"That day, this year, a week ago, the army blew up our house and came in while I was sleeping"*. Another remembered: *"When they took my brother, they kept beating him, they broke him and took him to the hospital"*. These accounts highlight how paternal incarceration cannot be separated from the broader landscape of occupation-related violence, which compounds fear and instability.

Institutional neglect. Children in all focus groups expressed frustration at the absence of effective support.

Figure 13

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Institutional Neglect



Schools were described by all groups as sites of neglect or even harm: *"There is no counselor in our school"*, *"Teachers have no role... they make things harder for you"*. Conditions such as lack of clean water and poor facilities were also noted: *"There's no water—only in the principal's and teachers' bathrooms"*.

Moreover, Palestinian government was seen by all groups as ineffective or complicit: *"The authority doesn't help—on the contrary, it has a very negative impact"*. One girl shared her disappointment from how this entity that is supposed to provide protection for its people has been instead collaborating with the occupation: *"Lately, they [the government] have become like the army"*, *"The authority took my brother and said they'd protect him... then instead they ordered him to surrender to the occupation"*.

One group criticized limited psychosocial interventions, and they also raised the issue of the lack of recreational opportunities: *"There are no recreational centers in the camp… nothing*

for teenagers". These accounts paint a picture of systemic neglect, where children's needs remain largely unmet.

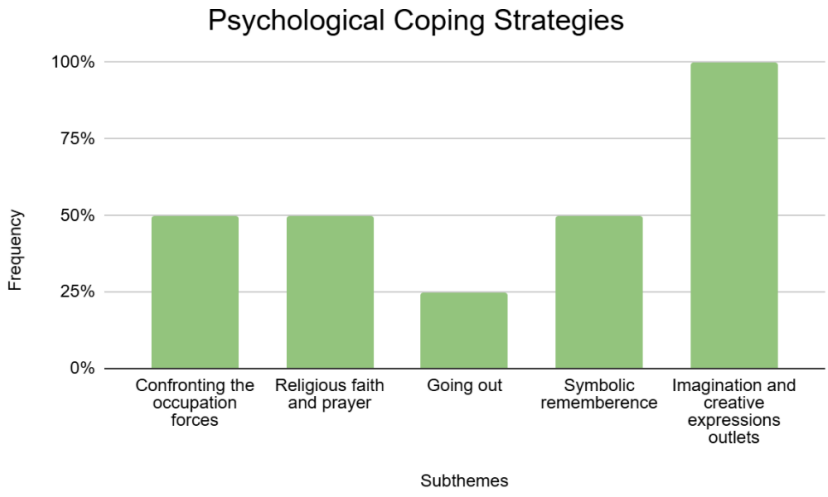
5.2.2 Strategies of adjustment and resilience

This domain included two themes that are described below. Both of them were present in all four focus groups.

Psychological coping strategies. All groups drew on strategies to manage distress, describing different methods.

Figure 14

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Psychological Coping Strategies



One group described confronting occupation forces directly, such as throwing stones or expressing defiance. One boy shared with the group: *"After my brother was martyred, drones kept flying over the house. I hit one with a stone, and it fell"*. Two groups mentioned how they rely on religious faith and practices like prayer: *"When they came and took my brother, I sat reciting the Quran"*.

Symbolic remembrance was also common and described by two of the groups: *"This is my imprisoned brother's hat… I use his watch, perfumes"*, or *"I have pictures I hang up—I need to*

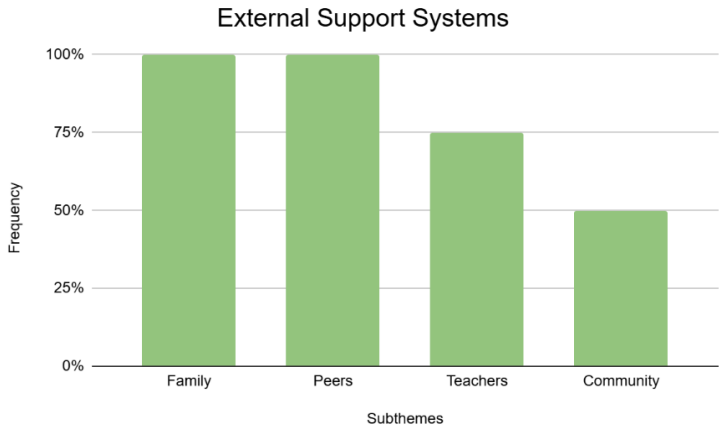
feel and see his face". One girl mentioned how they keep her brothers' memory during everyday practices and narratives: *"For example, if he loves a certain dish and mom makes it, we say, 'I wish he were here to eat it'"*.

Imagination and creative outlets were described as vital by all groups: *"I sit and imagine he's here and we're playing together—it eases my mind"*, *"Sometimes I write to myself... I can't talk to anyone to express myself", "There are basketball and football fields we go to play in; this helps"*. In one group, some of the children said that they like to go out with friends to enjoy their time and distract themselves from the feelings of sadness: *"We spend time outside the house with friends, trying to forget"*.

External support systems (emotional, psychological, and practical). All groups identified sources of external support systems. They identified family, peers, teachers, and community as examples of sources of support.

Figure 15

Frequency of subthemes of the theme External Support Systems



Mothers were described as central anchors, one child shared: *"My mom is the most important source of help and comfort", and* another continued: *""She comforts us, gives us memories to hold onto so we don't grieve too much"*. Fathers were also seen as important providers

of support: *“There is a connection between father and comfort, because he provides us with a home and makes us feel safe, even though there’s no real safety because of the occupation".*

Peers offered solidarity and were considered a source of support by all groups: *"My relationship with my friends has always been good, but it got stronger after my dad was arrested. They stood by me”.* For some of the children it was mostly friends with shared experience who showed greater support: *“Only those who have a prisoner brother truly get it”*. Teachers were recognized by three of the groups for small gestures of support: *“There’s a teacher… She prays for prisoners and martyrs before class. It motivates us to attend the class”*. The counselor was specifically mentioned: *“The counselor gives us gifts and organizes activities for us”*.

Communities also played a role and were mentioned by two groups: *“Sometimes the relationship with the community of the camp is better than with family. They empathize more and ask more”*. The broader community of families with incarcerated relatives was also described as an important source of support, particularly in providing updates about the prisoner’s well-being. As one group explained: *“We try to ask about him from people who visit and hear about his health and mood. It improves our own mood”*. Together, these accounts underscore how networks of solidarity with the community and among other prisoners’ families provide crucial emotional sustenance, compensating in part for the gaps left by absent or ineffective institutions.

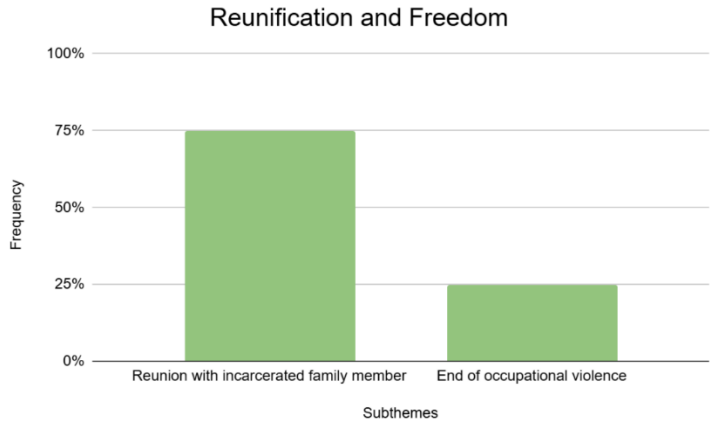
5.2.3 Future hopes and aspirations for change

This domain included three themes with interrelated subthemes that are described below. The most frequent was reunification and freedom which was mentioned by three focus groups. While the second two themes, better resources and safe space and increased psychosocial support were mentioned by only one group.

Reunification and freedom. This theme consisted of two subthemes, one related to the reunification with imprisoned family members and the other related to the general aspiration for freedom and end of occupational violence.

Figure 16

Frequency of subthemes of the theme Reunification and Freedom



The most prominent hope expressed was reunion with incarcerated fathers and brothers, which was mentioned by three of the groups and freedom from occupation brought up by one. Others framed their aspirations in collective terms: *"To stop army raids so there are no injuries or martyrs"*, *"That the occupation ends"*. They also expressed their hope for having the freedom to move without restrictions, as one reflected: "*I wish to visit Jerusalem without facing checkpoints".* These statements capture both personal desires for family togetherness and broader political aspirations for justice and liberation.

Better resources and safe spaces. Only the female focus group participants highlighted the need for improved infrastructure and safe recreational spaces. They reflected on their frustration from the lack of suitable activities designed only for girls in which they would be more willing and comfortable participating in: *"There's a need for activities just for girls".* School facilities were also specifically mentioned, as the adolescent girls were sharing how the

improvement could affect their school experience significantly: *"The bathrooms need cleaning. Sanitary facilities greatly affect our experience at school"*. These concrete needs not only underline how structural changes could directly enhance their daily lives but also demonstrate the children's clear awareness of their priorities. Their reflections serve as a reminder for institutions and schools to engage seriously with the voices of these girls, recognizing their capacity to articulate their needs rather than dismissing or overlooking them.

Increased psychological support. The female focus group participants also explicitly called for better counseling and improved teacher attitudes. One explained: *"Change the teachers' attitudes—those who humiliate or mock without reason… You feel suffocated, and it makes things worse"*. Another urged: *"There's a counseling session, but only once every four months… It'd be better if there were more"*. These reflections reveal an acute awareness of the gaps in available support and a desire for supportive environments.

5.3 Findings from Children's Focus Groups Creative Expressions

Children were invited to reflect on specific words such as *letters, happiness, hero, visits, soldiers, motherhood, longing,* and *celebrations* through short writings and drawings. These activities provided them with tools to communicate complex emotions and meanings that might not easily emerge in group conversations. Below, I present excerpts from these creative outputs, along with analytical reflections that situate the children's expressions within the broader psychosocial and political context of parental imprisonment.

5.3.1 Children's Expressive Writings

Children's writings revealed recurring themes of longing, disrupted family life, and the tension between pride and pain. Letters carried strong symbolic meaning, representing both absence and connection. One girl wrote about what ***letters*** meant to her:

> Because he used to send many letters asking about us, how we were doing, and on the other hand, I had so many things inside me I wanted to tell him—how much I missed him and how much we missed him at home. I wanted to tell him what had changed after he was imprisoned, and how much it affected us. He used to keep sending letters, and after he was imprisoned, my other brothers kept writing letters to make up for the emptiness we felt. And whenever someone was released from prison, we would wait eagerly for any letter to reassure us about whether he eats well, sleeps well, get treatment, take his medicine? There are so many questions we want answers to. He, too, wants to ask about us but he can't. He wants to ask about his fiancée, whom he should have been married to by now, and we need to tell him that she is patient and waiting for him, and God willing, God will make up for the years he lost in prison. When he gets out, we'll talk so much and ask each other all the questions. If I could send him a letter, I would have already done it long ago. And I would

tell him that I love him so much, that the house feels incomplete without him, and I hope he will soon be with us again. I don't forget all the prisoners—may God grant them freedom, and grant relief to the people of Gaza.

Happiness was often defined by memories of shared family moments and the father's role in creating joy within the household:

In general, happiness meant that he used to take us out, make us happy, sit with us, make us laugh. Also, when it came to family occasions, we began to feel that our joy was not complete because he wasn't there. Our happiness turned into sadness when all the young men of the family gathered—except him. There was always a lump in our throat. We miss him a lot; he used to create a joyful atmosphere, cheer us up, go out with us, we would fight, joke, and play together. Now, after he was imprisoned, everything went away with him, and joy has decreased in the whole house. I would tell him that I miss him and God willing, soon he will be with us.

The concept of ***hero*** was closely associated with the imprisoned father or brother, described as a protector and source of strength. One child wrote simply, "*He used to defend me when the boys hit me and would solve my problems".* Similarly, another participant wrote: *"He used to defend me and always stood by my side, so when he was imprisoned, it made a huge difference—he was my support, someone I could truly lean on. So, the word 'hero' fits him perfectly".*

The word ***soldier*** evoked anger and sorrow, with children questioning the injustice of military violence:

Why does the soldier take a young man younger than him and deprive him of his childhood—with checkpoints, killing, war—and deprive them of achieving their dreams?

Meanwhile, ***holidays*** *and* ***celebrations*** were described as bittersweet moments:

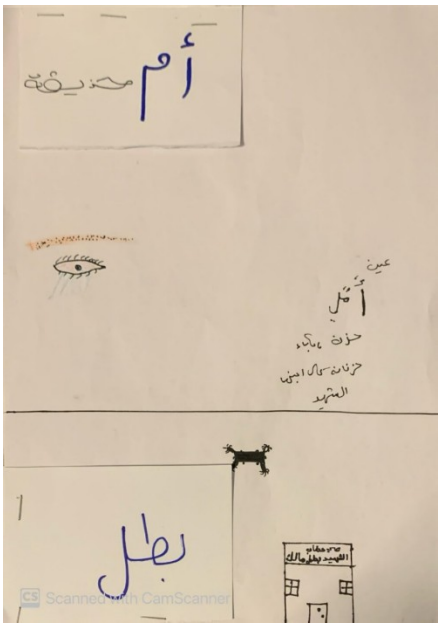
> Occasions used to be very joyful, but when my brother was imprisoned, occasions changed completely. We used to play together, but everything changed when my brother was taken. My mother used to teach us to memorize the Qur'an, and now we pray for my brother to be released from prison.

5.3.2 Children's Drawings

Drawings provided another layer of expressive detail, often merging imagery of family, loss, and ongoing military presence. For instance, when reflecting on the word *motherhood*, one child drew a crying eye, explaining: *"I drew my mom's eye when she cried. An eye, sadness, grieving for her martyred son. We just picked him up from the hospital yesterday".*

Figure 17

Drawing by a 9-year-old child reflecting on the words mother and hero



Note. Activity took place during the focus group session in Jalazoun Refugee Camp.

The same child later chose the word *hero*, drawing his home with a banner that reads "*The martyr hero Malek".* He explained that Malek was his brother, killed days before the focus group session. Above the house he drew a dark structure, which he explained as an Israeli surveillance drone: *"Since the martyrdom of my brother and the imprisonment of my father, Israeli drones have been flying over the house every night"*. This drawing vividly captured the intertwining of personal grief with the collective experience of occupation. The child concluded by saying: *"There's a boy at school who's good at drawing. I want him to draw a picture of Malik [his martyred brother] for me".*

Other drawings explored *childhood* and the boundaries of innocence. A 12-year-old, who was also detained himself, reflecting on his sketch of children playing football, remarked:

> Childhood is kids playing football around the house and in the picture, you can also see cars passing by. A person stops being a child when they turn 10—after ten he becomes a man. I drew little kids and a house. They're playing in the neighborhood. They stop playing when they grow up.

Figure 18

Drawing by a 12-year-old child reflecting on the word childhood

Note. Activity took place during the focus group session in Jalazoun Refugee Camp.

This statement illustrates how parental imprisonment and military violence accelerate the sense of growing up too soon, redefining what childhood means in this context.

Depictions of *happiness* showed the children's enduring capacity to imagine joy despite current hardships. One participant explained that even simple drawings of a colorful birthday party helped them visualize a more hopeful future.

Figure 19

Drawing by a child reflecting on the word happiness

Note. Activity took place during the focus group session in the town of Silwad.

Another drawing focused on *lawyers* and a Palestinian court, underscoring children's awareness of justice systems and their longing for fairness, even while recognizing the reality of Israeli military courts.

Figure 20

Drawing by a child reflecting on the word lawyer

Note. Activity took place during the focus group session in Qalandiya Refugee Camp.

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Summary of Main Findings

This study explored the psychosocial impact of political imprisonment on Palestinian families focusing on Palestinian prisoners' wives and children. Through the psychosocial impact it was aimed to explore the alteration of the participants' everyday lives including roles, responsibilities, and challenges. As well as, the strategies employed by the women and children to support their adjustment, and the mobilization of support networks. Four main domains emerged from the results of the interviews with the women and the focus groups with the children: the challenges experienced following the incarceration, the strategies of adjustment and resilience developed, the different types of support they received, and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Mothers reported a profound emotional, psychological, and social burden, characterized by sadness, anxiety, and uncertainty, while also assuming expanded parenting and household responsibilities. Children expressed parallel experiences of anger, sensitivity, longing, and early maturity, alongside a pervasive sense of insecurity under occupation. Both groups highlighted institutional neglect, particularly the lack of psychological support, meaningful school engagement, and recreational opportunities.

Despite these adversities, resilience was a recurring theme. Family networks, community support and institutional support in some cases played a vital role in supporting families of political prisoners. Moreover, mothers sustained hope through faith, routines, and symbolic gestures, while

children relied on imagination, peer solidarity, and family support. Importantly, political consciousness and collective struggle served as vital tools of resilience. Finally, both mothers and children voiced a sense of uncertainty about the future, yet they made sure to emphasize their aspirations for justice, family reunification, and the need for stronger institutional and community support.

6.2 Positioning in the Literature

The findings of this study align with and extend a growing body of literature on the psychosocial consequences of political imprisonment for families, while also revealing gaps and shifts in the ways Palestinian women and children cope with incarceration.

A recurring theme across literature is the importance of ideological commitment and religious belief as buffers against the effects of imprisonment. Baker and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (1999) highlight how strong political and religious convictions mitigate psychosocial problems in the Palestinian context (as cited in Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, 2013). This resonates strongly with the present findings, where both mothers and children emphasize prayer, faith, and a sense of justice as sustaining forces.

The literature further underscores the role of political socialization and collective action in shaping resilience. Protacio-Marcelino (1989), writing about the Philippines, shows that children draw strength from engaging in political organizing around their parents' imprisonment. In a similar way, Palestinian children in this study described symbolic practices such as writing letters, imagining conversations with their imprisoned parents, or participating in commemorations, that allowed them to maintain bonds and give meaning to absence. These findings extend earlier work by demonstrating how symbolic and imaginative practices serve as a bridge between individual coping and collective political identity, especially for children growing up under occupation.

A second line of literature emphasizes family and community networks as vital forms of support. Rosenfeld (2004), for instance, describes how in Deheisheh Camp, families of detainees built strong networks that provided moral and material support, shared information, and organized joint visits. While this study confirms the significance of these networks, especially among children who saw other prisoners' families as an essential source of solidarity, participants also highlighted a decline in such support in recent years. Mothers expressed feeling isolated, with less community engagement than previous generations of detainees' families. This suggests that while communal solidarity remains an important framework, it may be eroding under current political and economic pressures, leaving families more vulnerable.

Finally, the literature documents the increased burdens as a result of imprisonment. Khamis (1998) stresses that wives of detainees often assume dual responsibilities as caregivers and economic providers, while Rosenfeld (2004) points out their central role in sustaining family survival through contact with lawyers, the Red Crescent, and other families. The present findings reinforce this picture but add further on the idea that women are not only logistical anchors but also emotional narrators, mediating their children's understanding of imprisonment and transforming private suffering into shared meaning.

At the same time, this research also highlighted critical institutional gaps. Participants did not speak of their challenges only in abstract terms but articulated their needs directly: mothers emphasized the urgency of halting the cuts to financial support by the Palestinian Authority, children pointed to the lack of adequate facilities and safe spaces in the camps, and both stressed the importance of accessible psychosocial and community-based services. These accounts reveal a gap between family living realities and the institutional responses currently available.

Moreover, the creative methods used in this study provided an alternative channel of expression, enabling children to voice their concerns through drawings and writings. Such methods not only deepened the analysis but also underscored the importance of designing interventions that recognize and amplify children's own modes of expression and meaning making.

6.3 Reflection Based on Researcher's Background

As a Palestinian, I approached this study with cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness of the structural violence shaping participants' lives. This positionality facilitated trust and allowed participants to share personal reflections, as I was perceived not as an outsider but someone familiar with the broader conditions of occupation and imprisonment. At the same time, it required conscious reflexivity to avoid overidentification or assumptions of shared experience with the participants.

A guiding aim of this research was to reduce hierarchies often embedded in conventional research encounters. The design of the study and the methods through which interviews, focus groups, and creative activities sought to create space for the participants to express themselves on their own terms, and to avoid reproducing binary categories of vulnerability and resilience. The children's drawings and writings for example, enabled forms of expression that exceeded linear narratives. For this, in the findings of the study we see the co-existence of longing and anger with pride and agency. The results spoke to the complexity of living in conditions of absence and violence. The richness of these accounts underscores the value of participatory approaches in research (MacDonald, 2012).

The process of analyzing and interpreting the results showed the importance of moving beyond individualistic psychological framing. For example, a key reflection can be made concerning the framing and interpretation of resilience. Participants did not describe their

strategies using the language of "coping" in the sense of passive adaptation. Instead, their narratives reflected resilience as acts of resistance, endurance, and agency (Giacaman, 2020). For example, symbolic gestures, political awareness, and storytelling were not merely ways of enduring absence or accepting it but strategies and tools for sustaining the prisoner's presence and resisting erasure. This echoes the collective orientation of Palestinian family life under occupation and highlights resilience not as a passive concept but as an active, culturally embedded practice of living (Giacaman, 2020).

These reflections are linked to one of the main aims of the study: to reflect both the burdens and the capacities of families without reducing their experiences to trauma alone. In the attempt to foreground the narratives of participants, dominant psychological models are challenged, which often risk depoliticizing Palestinian suffering (Summerfield, 2002). On the contrary, the results emphasize the experience of grief alongside resistance and how families articulate futures rooted in personal well-being but also in collective justice.

6.4 Limitations

While this study offers insights into the experiences of children of political prisoners and their mothers, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, despite efforts to incorporate participatory elements, the research could not be conducted in a fully participatory manner due to time limitations and feasibility. Children were engaged through focus groups and creative activities, but the short duration of the encounters and the researcher-led structure limited the extent to which participants could fully shape the process or outcomes. A more sustained participatory design might have allowed for deeper co-construction of knowledge. Moreover, including women from the beginning of the research to support in the design of the study, and

adding creative activities and group sessions with them as well could have allowed deeper reflections.

Second, the time available for fieldwork posed constraints. Each focus group with children was conducted as a single session, which limited the possibility of building rapport over time or creating bonds between the participants. Extended engagement with the same groups would likely have yielded richer material, particularly given the sensitive and complex nature of the children's experiences.

Third, the study involved a relatively small sample. The richness of the narratives highlights important dynamics, yet the sample size and composition mean that the results should be understood as context-specific illustrations. Also, the scope of the fieldwork encompassed children and families in three refugee camps and one town but all in the province of Ramallah. The inclusion of participants from within and outside refugee camps provided variation in perspectives but overshadowed the specificity of the contexts. For example, a more focused study within camps alone in different cities in the West Bank might have offered deeper insights into the structural challenges and social dynamics of camp life, where overcrowding, institutional neglect, and daily exposure to occupation violence are especially pronounced.

Fourth gender emerged as an important dimension that this study could only partially capture. Adolescent girls were notably more comfortable sharing in the girls-only group compared to the mixed-gender group, suggesting that separating all groups by gender could have provided deeper insights into the distinct ways boys and girls experience and articulate the absence of an incarcerated parent. Furthermore, this research focused primarily on families with incarcerated fathers or siblings. Future studies should also include children of incarcerated mothers, whose experiences may differ significantly, and extend to including husbands of incarcerated wives, to

provide a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered dynamics of imprisonment and its impact on family life.

Finally, individual and developmental differences among the children should be noted. The age of participants, their position within the sibling hierarchy, and the size and composition of their households shaped how they experienced and expressed the absence of the incarcerated family member. Moreover, the economic status of the family should be taken into consideration.

Taken together, these limitations underscore the need for future research that is longer-term, more participatory, and attentive to the specificities of the context geographically, politically, and socially. There is also the need for research that attends more systematically to age, gender, family composition, and economic status as mediating factors in how imprisonment is experienced and negotiated within the household.

6.5 Implications

The findings of this study hold practical implications at different levels. Academically, it raises the importance of integrating structural violence and the sociopolitical context into the psychological and social understanding of the lived experiences of people facing oppression. Moreover, the study iterates the importance of analyzing family life in the context of colonialism and political imprisonment in specifically not only through the lens of trauma but also through resilience and collective meaning-making. Overlooking political context risks reducing families' experiences to individualized psychological diagnoses, neglecting the collective dimensions of resistance (Barber, 2013).

Moreover, the results underscore the urgent need for structural and institutional support to families of political prisoners. Beyond the occupation-related hardships, participants repeatedly highlighted the ways in which Palestinian governmental institutions sometimes exacerbate rather

than alleviate their struggles. Families spoke of bureaucratic burdens, financial cuts, and a lack of sense of responsibility towards their lived realities and the hardships they are forced to endure. This points to a fundamental responsibility of the Palestinian government: to keep the issue of prisoners alive as a matter of national struggle, but also to ensure that families of the imprisoned are supported rather than abandoned. Supporting these families materially, psychologically, and socially is an obligation central to sustaining both individual resilience and the broader collective narrative of resistance.

At the institutional level, there is a responsibility on the local and international NGOs working in the field of psychosocial support, that entails the development of focused psychosocial programs, safe recreational spaces sensitive to age and gender, and more responsive school environments that consider the specific challenges faced by children of prisoners and their families. Crucially, interventions must be designed with families rather than for them, as participants themselves clearly articulated both their needs and their strategies for coping. Locally grounded, context-specific, and creative approaches are therefore essential to building interventions that are trusted, effective, and sustainable (Mikkawi, 2017; Cavazzoni et al., 2022).

At the same time, the implications of this research can extend beyond Palestine. Globally, there is an urgent need to educate young people about what their peers in different contexts, in this case in Palestine, experience. It is important not to only focus on suffering and oppression but also in terms of cultural strength, resilience, and creativity in the face of adversity. Initiatives in schools can play a vital role in amplifying these voices and fostering solidarity. By learning about both the hardships endured by Palestinian children and the resilience rooted in family bonds, cultural values, and collective struggle, students elsewhere gain a more nuanced understanding of resistance and survival under oppression. The recognition of ongoing injustice while appreciating

cultural resources can transform international education into an act of solidarity. It can shift the gaze from pity to recognition, and from distance to shared responsibility.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the psychosocial impact of political imprisonment on Palestinian families, with particular focus on wives and children of prisoners. It aimed to understand the way incarceration reshapes everyday lives, the strategies of adjustment and resilience that emerge, and the broader narratives through which families interpret their experiences. Through in-depth interviews with women, focus groups and creative participatory methods with children, the study reflected how incarceration reverberates beyond prison walls to shape daily lives, emotional experiences, and resilience strategies of families of prisoners.

The findings reveal that imprisonment is not solely an individual experience but a deeply collective one, framed by structural violence, cultural meanings, and intergenerational effects. Across the narratives of mothers and children, themes of psychological burden, disrupted family routines, and institutional neglect were recurrent. Mothers reported heightened emotional strain, increased responsibilities, and persistent uncertainty about the future, while children described anxiety, sadness, and anger intertwined with resilience and agency. These challenges were compounded by occupation-related violence and a lack of responsive institutional support, underscoring the layered vulnerabilities of families navigating both state repression and systemic neglect.

Therefore, this study carries important practical implications. It calls for Palestinian governmental institutions to assume responsibility for supporting families of prisoners. It further emphasizes the urgent need for child-focused psychosocial programs, safe spaces, and school-based interventions designed with families rather than imposed upon them.

Moreover, the findings also highlighted resilience as a culturally grounded, active process. Children and mothers deployed symbolic remembrance, political awareness, familial and

communal networks and religious faith as means of sustaining the presence of the absent parents and resisting erasure. So globally, these findings underscore the importance of educating young people about the realities faced by their peers in Palestine, not only to expose ongoing injustices but also to honor the cultural strength and resilience that sustains these families.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the understanding of political imprisonment not merely as a legal or political event, but as a profound social and psychological reality that shapes family life, childhood, and collective identity. By situating their suffering within the wider Palestinian struggle, families resisted victimhood and affirmed agency. The study challenges depoliticized framings of suffering and foregrounds resilience as resistance. In doing so, it underscores the urgent need for both local institutional reforms and international solidarity, while affirming the dignity, strength, and agency of Palestinian families navigating the enduring absence of their loved ones.

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