

Women in labour and midwives during Israeli assault on Gaza Strip: between bullets and labour pains

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Abstract

Background We report the personal accounts of childbirth experiences and coping skills of women and midwives during the 23 days of the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, occupied Palestinian territory, in December, 2008, and January, 2009.

Methods Because of the continued closure of the Gaza Strip as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we used the snowballing method to identify participants, and gathered data during telephone interviews in Arabic between Feb 17 and March 22, 2009, with women who had given birth and midwives who assisted births during Dec 27, 2008, and Jan 18, 2009. We asked a small group of women to tell us their stories. With the exception of one woman, who declined, all were relieved to recount their experiences. We transcribed, translated, and analysed the interviews according to themes such as lack of protection, imprisonment, and isolation.

Findings Seven of 11 women (all multiparas) gave birth in hospitals, one in a clinic, and three at home—ie, seven vaginal deliveries, three caesareans, and one miscarriage. Some of the complications included puerperal sepsis, severe back and neck pain from anaesthesia, hypothermia in the newborn baby, and eclamptic fits. The women (n=11) and midwives (n=5) described childbirth during the bombings, with dead and injured people around them; and how they coped with the violence, fear, uncertainty, and the loneliness and pain of waiting for labour to begin, for the baby to be born, and to be reunited with their loved ones. As one woman said “nights were like ‘ghouls’...I was not thinking like other people in face of death or shelling...but was only thinking of my case! What would happen if I had labour pains at night? How will I manage? They were shelling even ambulances! Nights were like nightmares. Each morning I breathed a sigh of relief that daylight had appeared.” Women felt trapped for fear of death from bombs falling on them or their families in the home, street, or hospital; and from childbirth if a birth attendant was not available or emergency care was not attainable. Midwives expressed their fear of assisting women giving birth under duress, and their lack of preparedness—material and psychological—to attend births outside hospitals. Women came to terms with what they had lived through by focusing on everyday life, as suggested in the writings of Veena Das, and by looking after the survival of their families, which seemed to be essential for reconstructing their fragmented existence.

Interpretation Women expressed the severe trauma they had endured, but also their heroic struggles to give or assist birth, and to survive with their families. These women were living a process of healing while surrounded by destruction, and with nowhere else to go, they had begun to remake their lives. “I cannot believe that I did not die. Actually I feel I was sent to life again. Now I try not to think of that time.”

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Contributors

SH interviewed the women in Arabic, and transcribed and translated the interviews into English. SH and LW contributed to the design, conceptualisation, analysis, and writing of this Abstract, and have approved the final version.

Conflicts of interest

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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