

Social work around the world: West Bank and Gaza

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Hi. You're listening to The Social Work Community podcast and this is another episode of the mini-series, *Social Work Around the World*. I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, careers editor at Community Care.

This episode is slightly different to the others in the series because my guest today actually lives in the occupied West Bank, in Hebron, which is about 60 miles from Gaza in Palestine. Before we begin, do give us a follow on Spotify, Apple or wherever you listen to podcasts, and do leave a review. This will help others find The Social Work Community podcast.

So back to my guest. Riad Arar is a Palestinian social worker and a national advisor for child safeguarding and care. Previously, he was the president of the Union of Social Workers and Psychologists in Hebron. He was also a lecturer teaching child protection at the University of Bethlehem.

Riad's native language is Arabic, so do listen along with the transcript if you think that'll help. The link will be in the show notes. If you listen until the end, it'll become very clear why it's important to share stories from social workers who are unable to carry out their basic work because of conditions imposed on them which are out of their control.

I think it's important to contextualise the severity of the destruction that Palestinians have faced in the last eighteen months so that we can understand what Riad's life may be like. Now, since October 2023, over 50,000 people – many of them children – have been killed in Gaza by Israel in their response to the October 7 attack on the kibbutz and the kidnapping of hostages. And the effect of that on the West Bank has been immense. According to recent figures from the Red Cross, there have been over 968 fatalities in the West Bank and 15,000 injuries, again many of them children. The United Nations says at least 100 children have been killed or injured every day in Gaza since Israeli strikes resumed in March after the ceasefire earlier this year. 90% of Gaza's population has been displaced, and thousands of Palestinians have been detained and imprisoned, not just from Gaza but also the West Bank.

So Riad, can I ask you to give our listeners a feel of what life is like for you as a social worker? And welcome to the podcast! [0:02:23.0]

Riad Arar:

Thanks for this invitation and I'm very happy to join you in this podcast. I would like to start my introduction by, in general, the work of social workers under colonialism conditions is emotionally draining

and exhausting. Despite the international sympathy of our people in Palestine, that we are talking about genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, the pain of children and women, continuous loss, and the forced displacement of the citizens in Area C, the attacks on UNWRA, this is for refugees agency. Threats of further displacement in Gaza, they exist of more than 950 military checkpoints in the West Bank, the isolation of the villages and the camps from cities, restricted movement and the targeting of the frontline social workers or workers in general including journalists, medical staff, paramedics and firefighters, social workers of course, who are killed in cold blood while delivering services.

In Palestine, we are not only the pain of suffering of others in our pocket, but are ourselves part of this same suffering and oppression. For instance, I have two sons and they're social workers. I was working in Defense for Children International. But at the same time I cannot defend and protect my children. I have two sons currently detained in the military prison, and myself was arrested, subjected to eighteen days physical and psychological torture, enduring interrogation. Many other social workers share similar experience.

However, we don't see this as the end of the road. We hold a degree of hope for our future and believe that one day the world will become more justice for our oppressed. We are simply human beings. We have names, identities, histories and children. Our only dream is to live in peace and prosperity, like the rest of the people of the world. This introduction may take on a more political dimension but the word 'oppressive' has forced us to connect everything around this political dimension. [0:05:27.7]

Reaching victims or survivors as social workers, providers, it's not easy. The situation in Gaza may be even more worse, surpassing all words and descriptions, while the situation in the West Bank is slightly less severe but it's still deeply challenging. Under these circumstances we can observe in instance of child labour, violence against children, gender-based violence, children separated from their families, children on the move, children without caregivers, the issues related to their mental health and wellbeing, health problems and the lack of primary care, medicines and assistive tools. Additionally, there are challenges related to the refugees and the reduction of service among many other issues. [0:06:27.5]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Riad is currently working for We World GVC, which is an Italian NGO, a non-governmental organisation, active in 25 countries. They focus on projects concerning development and humanitarian aid to guarantee the rights of the most vulnerable communities, especially women and children. Riad explains that the West Bank is split into three sections, Area A, Area B, Area C. [0:06:50.9]

Riad Arar:

I work in We World GVC as an integrated protection and gender coordinator. I'm just new, since five months. I have been working with them recently, We World GVC working on enhancing the resilience of the communities, the vulnerable communities, supporting projects in the water shelter in energy, education and health. And for security. Our organisation used to operate in the same context in Gaza but

after the event of October 7, we are currently just working to provide water in Gaza.

Since most of our work is contracted in Area C, concentrated in Area C, our team (including engineers and social workers) face significant difficulties in reaching and targeting our communities and to be in contact with our people of concern. [0:07:56.6]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So because of all the checkpoints...

Riad Arar: Because of...

Sharmeen Ziauddin: ...and increased number of them...

Riad Arar: ...because of the checkpoints. This is one. But the second, here we are talking about these communities including the settlement, and the settlement of the family around these communities. And many times, our teams and I...I was in many bad experiences, many complicated ways, not to contact our beneficiaries and families in these communities. The demolition of their simple houses, because we are working with communities like Bedouin.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah.

Riad Arar: We are working all general geographical areas in West Bank from Hebron until Jenin in the south. This represents the most significant change in our context with all these measures being supported by Israeli political security and military decisions.

For example, the checkpoint also hinder our team's access to communities, as they are subjected to inspections, detentions and psychological harassment me and my colleague in my time, they stopped us.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: They are what, sorry?

Riad Arar: Stopped us in the...

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Oh, stopped us. Okay.

Riad Arar: ...in the checkpoints. They are checking our bodies, our bags. They are checking our logos because we have a visit – formal visit and formal IDs for We World GVC. But in spite of these logos, it's an international association they are dealing with us as a Palestinian. [0:09:43.3]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I spoke to Riad at the beginning of 2024, and you can listen to that audio on www.communitycare.co.uk in the article on how the war in Gaza has affected social workers. I will link that in the show notes.

Okay. So when we last spoke, you mentioned how there were no NGOs or there was restrictions on services to access, which is the case now as well. But have more NGOs and other organisations been able to come in this year to help? [0:10:13.7]

Riad Arar: Yeah after October 7 many things are different. As you know, the US agencies, they closed their offices, they dismissed all the Palestinian

staff and they stopped their services in Palestine. This is regarding the American policymakers, you know, decisions. Also, when we talk about UNRWA for example, they closed their main office in Jerusalem, and they closed five schools for the refugee children.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And they haven't reopened yet? Nothing's reopened yet? [0:10:46.5]

Riad Arar: No, no, no. They have a lot of challenges regarding the refugee in general. They have a short cut of their budget. They are threatened all the time, to stop the fund. And they are...make like a pressure about all donors in order to stop the funding for UNRWA.

And according to the international, I'm talking about NGOs, it means that this is not the formal bodies, this is not the official bodies like the ministries. Because in the ministries, we call them GOs, governmental bodies, yeah. NGOs are not governmental bodies. And also we have a local association, it's called CBOs also. This is community agencies, community association.

Regarding to the agencies that are working in Gaza, they are still working but with a minimum of capacity. After the ceasefire, after 40 days of ceasefire, some of the needs, some assistance, you know, were entered to Gaza. But the rest of the assistance, they were corrupted, you know, by the soldiers themselves, and a lot of settlers, they were on the borders of Gaza in order to prevent the vehicles, the cars, in order to enter Gaza and to give help for the Palestinians in order to save their lives.

There are clusters of protection in Palestine. Some of those associations, they are working with children, with women, within mental health. They are working in protection in general. They are collecting themselves under the name of 'protection clusters', led by UNICEF. I joined their meetings regularly, even in Gaza, even in West Bank because my role, it covers these areas. But even in 40 days of ceasefire, when we talk about trauma, for example, when the people came to their demolished houses, when they came to their homes, their memories, to their historical life, you know, the trauma it starts again. Because they discover that all that what we had, now they haven't. Nothing. They have nothing. It's zero achievement for them.

Also, when they come back from the south to the north, a lot of obstacles face the people there. And some of the social workers, they are just stand in the line, in the road, just to get water for the children, just to help the women when they are carrying their needs by their hands, just to protect them from any kind of abuse or dangers or risks. I'm not just talking about social workers but also I'm talking about volunteers. [0:13:44.9]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Mm.

Riad Arar: This is the picture in general. But when we talk about after 7 October everything is very bad. According to my colleague in We World [GVC] for example, before 7 October they could enter C areas, communities in safe time. There was a list of checkpoints. Now when we talk about settlers we are talking about radical settlers because they are

protected all the time by soldiers and they are all the time are asking for killing Palestine to stop water, to cut electricity, to prevent them from any kind or any chance of...in order to be alive.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Is that in West Bank as well or are you talking about Gaza?
[0:14:33.6]

Riad Arar:

In West Bank the same. Because when we talk about the north of West Bank, for example in Jenin, or in Tulkarem, or in Al-Farah, for example, in Tobas, between Tobas and Nablus, you know, there are the majority of the people out of their houses, out of their...because I'm talking about the refugees' camp. And they are right now in shelters without protection, and the volunteers they are dealing with them, the social workers. But you know, this is voluntary work, you know. But according with...when we talk about PEC, PSEA, for example, this is regarding to the sexual harassment, you know, policy or safeguarding policy in general, you know, they are not trained.

They are dealing, you know, by empathy or by emotional factors. But there is no safety for these families when we are talking about more than 2,600 families from Jenin and the same I think, or less, in Tulkarem, for example. They are out of their camps and they are distributed. And some of the children they are separated from their caregivers. Because I'm talking about the Palestinian families, it's large numbers, you know, and there's no space for them with their relatives. Some of them are in the mosque, some of them in the school, some of them in the CBOs [community-based organisations]. But...

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So these refugee camps in the West Bank, so the people who are in those camps, they've been displaced from their villages in the West Bank around the settlements because of the settlement, illegal settlements? [0:16:25.0]

Riad Arar:

Especially in the north they are Jenin and Tulkarem. And also they are damaging their houses, they have corrupted the roads, the water, the electricity. You can imagine how the people they can access the services. There is no education that they can access to their right of education. If someone needs medicine or medical services, how can they enter?

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

At this point it was very clear that there's very little social work going on because the Palestinians are in survival mode. Getting basic necessities and not being arrested is the priority. [0:17:04.6]

Riad Arar:

There are some of the families still inside the camps, and you can imagine how the people they can access them because all the time there are...they are firing, they are shooting. And all the people right now, they are afraid. And this is when we talk about wellbeing and mental health in general Palestine. We are still in the same environment of fear and [unclear] trauma, and we are looking for...and we are monitoring the situation well. When we talk about employment, there is nothing to do for the people. And when we talk about gender also, the women also...or the people with disabilities, also they have special needs and there are challenges in covering all these needs. And when we talk about the role of social worker, in

order to intervene or to help the others, I should be safety from one side, from inside, should be comfortable. But when we talk about social work in general and social workers, they are a part of a tragedy because they are belonging to the same communities, they are bringing it to the same refugees' camp, they are bringing it to the same families. It means they are traumatised. And how can the traumatised people give services or give help or assistance or lead the process of recovery for the people? We are encouraging each other, we are supporting each other, we are going to these meetings, to these clusters, to these workshops. We are talking about experience. We are expressing about our pain, about our oppression. And we support each other. The actions are ongoing. The trauma, it's ongoing. No one can stop it. [0:19:20.4]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And you had colleagues in Gaza, didn't you? How are they doing? Are they still there? [0:19:26.0]

Riad Arar: Well, I don't meet them but like the other people we have a security unit in We World. But in Gaza everything is different. A lot of the victims came from the international agencies. And no one had a guarantee to save his life or to protect himself because the bombing, the missiles, the tents, you know, everywhere. And targeting all people. Even a tent or even a building. Or even a school. And no one, if you ask anyone from Gaza, 'Where is there a safe place?' no one can answer you. Everything under fire. Or everything on fire.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I mean, you've mentioned trauma and it is ongoing. And I was going to ask you how do you really cope. And I guess you do speak to each other and give each other support. But how are you surviving? [0:20:27.6]

Riad Arar: Yeah, because we believe in the future. This is the basis of our ideological background. We think this is a critical movement of our moment of our people in Palestine. We are looking for the future in spite we are all under fire. But we have experience and we have capacity to building our resiliency. We cannot give up. We cannot give up. Talking about myself. I'm not talking by the name of any agencies or any others. I am just talking about my work recently. But this is not...this is a personal interview with me.

I have an ideological background. Well, I have experience in the past because I was in prison five times. But all the time I'm talking about hope. And if we lose hope I think we will lose everything. And this is the ideological background for me, you know. This has given me more strength or more motivation to work, to be committed to my community, to my family, and also to send the best feeling to others, not to oppress them, not to frustrate them. You know, in spite of the dark pictures around us, what we are looking for is giving us more power to strengthen us, it's the sympathy of the world, the people. In general. I don't believe in the political decision-makers. I know there are some of the political decision-makers that are talking about standing with us in solidarity, you know. But really, we depend on the movement of the people in general, the movement of social work in general. And if we can build the social work without borders, this can enhance the spirit of us, our capacity of us.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And have any social work organisations reached out to you or you reached out to them? [0:22:57.7]

Riad Arar: Yeah. Regarding to myself?

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah.

Riad Arar: Yeah. Regarding myself, I'm in touch with the Union of Social Workers and all the majority of my friends they have a background of social worker and mental health in general. And many times we are meeting here in my village or even during our work, and we are exchanging and we are talking. And we are encouraging us. And if there is any workshop or there's any training regarding self-care or regarding mental health in general, or psychological first aid, you know, it's very important to me to join this, this training. You know, I encourage also all my colleagues also know if there's any opportunity or any chances regarding this capacity building training, you know, I encourage them to get involved or to join this. This is good for their mental health in general and wellbeing.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So I mean, I guess at the moment you're all in survival mode, really. When, say, the bombs stop, hopefully soon, and the occupation stops, what is...I mean, you have hope, obviously. Without hope there's nothing. But what do you want from the future? [0:24:14.4]

Riad Arar: For the future, just I need from the people to just to stand with Palestine and with our rights. And to defend our rights. Because we have...we are like the people in the world. We are not less than them. And to access justice in general, we need the help of others. I'm not talking about money. I'm just talking about to stand with solidarity, to talk to all the people in general, to make advocacy and lobbying against your political decision-makers because their silence is a general message. But for me, if this stops I will continue my PhD.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: What was your PhD in? [0:25:01.8]

Riad Arar: I will continue. I have just now Master's in human rights and democracy. But I'm looking for any chances regarding the PhD, even social work or even in social science in general, yeah. This gives us more capacity, enhance my awareness, enhance my skills, building my ethical attitude in order to support others, in order to stand to their needs, in order to keep their safety and dignity, in order to speak their rights. And I believe that the intervention should be based on rights, not based on needs.

The second thing is making me more safety and more wellbeing. Also to release my children from the prison. And to live as a whole family.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Well, I hope that happens very soon. You mentioned, you know, solidarity and from the rest of the world and, you know, there's many, many people who stand in solidarity with the Palestinians. Do you observe all the things that go on in other countries in terms of marches and protests and boycotting? Does that...that matters, does it, to you? Because... [0:26:17.1]

Riad Arar: Yeah, yeah. It's very important for us...

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Okay.

Riad Arar:

...that there are a lot of people, there are...touch our feeling, they are touching our rights, they are believing in justice, they are believing in the Palestinian case and asking for our rights. And this gives us more confidence to stay alive. And this is also building our resilience. But you can imagine if all the people they ignore us, they isolate us, they are not responsive to our pain, not responsive to our stories, not share our stories, not make marches or demonstrations or strikes or something like that. This is going to make us more frustrated and more traumatised in general. But I feel all the marches, all the social movement, because also my friends, even in the US or even in Europe, you know, they are...I'm talking to them every time and we have a group WhatsApp. It's through WhatsApp, through Zoom, you know. They are around all the time, they are talking about today or tomorrow they have a march, they have a demonstration, they have to go to the Parliament, for example, they have to raise their banners and their slogans, you know, in order to support us. And this is very important for us. Because we have a lot of the world's people. I'm talking from all the political and the British people. But also we have a lot of the kind people. They are feel with us and they are supporting us and they stand in solidarity with us. When you give me this chance to talk about ourselves or about myself or my case, or about the social work and the situation in Palestine, this is also good for us because this is a chance for others to listen and to take our stories and to talk to other friends, other families and to break silence. And in this way we can stand in solidarity.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That was Riad from Hebron. I hope you found that insightful. Please do get in touch if you have any comments or if you'd like to take part in any of our podcast episodes, including the *Social Work Around the World* series, then do drop us a message on CommunityCare@markallengroup.com or get in touch via The Social Work Community. If you're not a member, what are you waiting for? Sign up for free at www.thesocialworkcommunity.com. Also do follow us on socials. We are @communitycareofficial on Instagram and we are also on LinkedIn and Facebook. That's all for now. See you next time.