A blink of occupation: A Palestinian woman’s excerpt of life under occupation

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**“As a woman, but really more as a Palestinian, my wish for this International Women’s Day is that every girl and woman experiences, in her lifetime, a distinct joy. The joy of knowing, not only in her own mind and soul, that she is free, free in her own land, free in her own home. No one can stop her, no one can stifle her dream, because she is a woman, she is free”, shares Lisa Sabella, Communications Officer for World Vision in Jerusalem-West Bank-Gaza as she recounts her experience of occupation as a young girl and now as a woman.**

“And they searched his chest; But could only find his heart; And they searched his heart; But could only find his people; And they searched his voice; But could only find his grief; And they searched his grief; But could only find his prison; And they searched his prison; But could only see themselves in chains”- On This Earth, Mahmoud Darwish.

The other day, I was driving in my car and saw a man with an M16 gun in his hand. As I passed him, I realised he was holding an umbrella. And the thought occurred to me- this is not normal. It is not normal that I see a black, long object and assume it is a gun. It is not normal that I know what an M16 looks like. But this is the reality of living under occupation- the absurdity, the abnormality of it all.

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As a child growing up in Jerusalem, I began to notice differences. I noticed that the garbage-strewn streets where we played and the neigbourhoods where the “Arabs” lived were so much dirtier and run-down than those of the “Israelis”, even though we were living in the same country. It took several years to realise that this wasn’t because we were just not as organised or clean, but because much of the taxes Palestinians pay to the Israeli government are channelled into Israeli neighbourhoods. Only 10% trickle down to ours. This was my first lesson.

As a child, I wasn’t aware of the darkness; the looming presence of injustice that enveloped us. Like most children, my life was tied up in childhood dramas, playing marbles and hide-and-seek, even if we didn’t really have parks to play in. I slowly realised that the underlying current of tension and stress I sensed from family members and others was in fact, occupation.

What did ‘occupation’ look like? The checkpoints we had to drive through on a daily basis, the soldiers I would see walking around in the Old City when my mother and I went shopping for clothes and spices and at the bus stops near our home. Or even on the rare occasions when we took Egged buses\*, and I found myself as a young girl, sitting next to an army green-clad soldier in his twenties with a gun slung over his shoulder, and the butt of it (which always seems so large to me) touching my leg.

When a visitor comes here and asks me what life is like under occupation, I really don’t know how to explain it. In a hundred words or less? Absolutely impossible.

I could share stories of the hundreds of checkpoints I have driven or walked through, all the times I have been harassed by Israeli soldiers, of family members being beaten with the butt of an Israeli soldier’s gun for talking back, passing endlessly expanding Israeli settlements, illegally confiscating private Palestinian lands and apartheid laws.

Occupation means pregnant women are sometimes forced to give birth at checkpoints and mothers are separated from their children. And now, of course, the separation wall, slithering through Palestinian lands, three times higher than the Berlin wall and eventually longer.

I have been stopped while walking in my neighbourhood and asked to show my passport. I have been harassed and strip-searched every time I travel.

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My neighbour was shot by Israeli soldiers while coming out from prayer. I have seen the sadness in his little girls’ eyes every time I see them outside their home.

The children, families, separated and imprisoned in the West Bank and Gaza.

Here, we have a home going back generations, a history, but no longer a country. The endless politics, the endless stories. But really, all this can’t encapsulate it. It doesn’t help to describe what it is like. What injustice with no end in sight really feels like.

To really understand why Palestinians who have a choice to leave, in fact decide to stay – you have to see it with your own eyes. The beauty of the land, the feeling that exists no where else in the world. The rustling olive trees that you can almost smell as you walk in the fields, the hills with stone white buildings as far as the eye can see, the smell of spices in the bastas (stalls) of the Old City, the salty oil water of the Dead Sea, the red tulips dotting the fields in Tiberias, the beauty of the north, and the bustle of Jerusalem with the stone pathways on the Via Della Rosa, so smooth they feel like velvet. The beauty of home.

A while ago, I visited Nabi Saleh, a small village outside of Ramallah where its residents hold weekly peaceful protests against the occupation following the expansion of the neighbouring illegal Israeli settlement of the Halamish in 2009, which is eating up Palestinian lands. The 500 residents of Nabi Saleh, including the children, are routinely arrested without cause, harassed, and intimidated by Israeli soldiers.

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In Nabi Saleh, I met a 14-year-old boy, who had previously been arrested and tortured in an Israeli prison. He had described his experience by imagining himself as a bird in a cage and then a bird outside of it – free.

As a woman, but really more as a Palestinian, my wish for this International Women’s Day is that every girl and woman experiences, in her lifetime, a distinct joy. The joy of knowing, not only in her own mind and soul, but knowing that she is free, free in her own land, free in her own home. No one can stop her, no one can stifle her dream, because she is a woman, she is free.

“I would not exchange the sorrows of my heart for the joys of the multitude. And I would not have the tears that sadness makes to flow from my every part turn into laughter. I would that my life remain a tear and a smile”. –A Tear and A Smile, Khalil Jubran.

\*Israeli-owned public transportation, travelling mainly to Israeli-populated areas of the country.