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# SAFETY FOR WOMEN - MIDDLE EAST

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Unfortunately, being young and female presents additional burdens to face when working on a CPT project in many parts of the world and especially in the Middle East. Strict cultural gender roles and customs do tend to restrict women's freedom, and Western films give local men inaccurate ideas about Western women's interests.

You have the right to establish your own physical boundaries and to expect others to respect those boundaries. Your personal sense of safety in the world is as important as issues of cultural appropriateness.

## Work Setting

In Middle Eastern culture, it is often the case that more value is given to men and especially older men when it comes to business. For example, a female CPTer can have three years of experience in Hebron and during the meeting, a Palestinian counterpart will turn to the older male CPTer (who is a reservist, and has a total of two weeks in Hebron) and ask his opinion.

"It would be helpful for men, as well as older women teammates, to be aware of power dynamics in settings such as meetings. This way, other teammates could open the floor and be a support for the younger women to take on leading roles in meetings (other teammates could defer questions to the young woman, nodding and contributing necessary words/body language to make clear that the young woman is a significant contributor to "business" of the team)." CPTer Kristen Anderson, Hebron team.

It is especially difficult when the people whom you are working to build solidarity with are also the people who are harassing you. This can create a disconnect on the team as younger women can feel isolated by their experiences with men in Middle East cultures, especially in the face of comments by other team members which 'brush off' or trivialize the experiences. I am learning that dealing with the daily harassment is a factor in the continual stress of being in Hebron." CPTer Maia Williams.

## Friendships

"Men have friendships only with men. Women have friendships only with women. Men and women don't have friendships in this culture. The Arabic word for male friend means boyfriend, and the Arabic word for female friend means girlfriend, and both carry sexual connotations. If you want to describe the close relationships that male and female team members have, say "he is like my bother (or son, or nephew; sister, daughter, niece) to me." Which term will work best depends on the age difference between the two persons." CPTer Kathy Kamphoefner.

If a male Arab you happen to meet would like to become friends, and perhaps invite you personally over or suggest he visit you personally at our apartment, you can politely but emphatically suggest he might like to meet the male team members and become friends. Mention these male team members by name. Iraqi (Palestinian) men do not have platonic women friends.

Sometimes males will come visit with the guise of visiting the team but be really more interested in spending time around foreign women. When males are visiting, dress primly and keep your hair tied back, avoid getting roped into an exclusive conversation with the male guest, and feel free to take advantage of the cultural role of women 'housekeeping' elsewhere while men sit and socialize.

## Social Relations with Men

While some customs can be appropriately challenged either verbally or in action, others are good to observe simply for safety's sake. The following scenarios often feel confusing, or even 'safe,' when they occur at first, but are generally considered red flags or warning signs of seriously inappropriate behavior:

A trusted Palestinian female colleague suggests that greeting cross-gender on the streets is simply not done. Unless a CPT woman has a collegial relationship with a male, she should not generally greet men on the street (the same goes for man to woman). Casual greetings to frequented shopkeepers are okay, but should be done "conservatively". People just do not understand (and thus misinterpret) women who greet men freely on the street.

Young women (under 40) should avoid going anywhere alone with any Arab man, no matter how long the team has known him, and even if he works for the team. At best it will be an awkward experience which passers-by will frown upon, at worst it could be an attempt at sexual assault. Both Arab Christian and Muslim young women are taught not to go un-chaperoned with any male outside the family (unless specifically dating

someone, which you may see at the University (in Baghdad) or in some popular hangouts in Baghdad or Ramallah). All Iraqi (and Palestinian) males know this and wouldn't make such a suggestion to a local woman.

Any man who touches you aside from shaking hands is being inappropriately forward. Accidents happen, but if he does not apologize immediately for touching you, back away and glare; if necessary (example: a male whose family you are visiting touches your wrist and says you are beautiful), it is appropriate (and your "right" as one Palestinian woman told me) to abruptly leave the situation. The man knows perfectly well what he's doing and you are not burning any team bridges in this way. Probably they weren't too interested in working with the team anyway if this occurs. In a social situation, you can escape a male by going to where the females are gathered together. No man will be allowed inside this group.

A question about whether you are married and if not, why not, is an accepted part of making acquaintances in Arab culture and is something all single teammates have to put up with. However, any further inquiry/prying into your love life (or lack thereof) by a male is not appropriate and probably means he is "fishing." Just to give you an idea of seriousness of questions, one time a male CPTer asked a Palestinian man what his sisters' name was. He said, "If you were a Palestinian and asked me this question, I would punch you." The point is that it's inappropriate for men to ask questions related to romance. Again, it's your "right" not to be subjected to such questions, let alone answer them.

Similarly, a male who says, "You are beautiful" once is maybe practicing his limited English. A male who says it more than once is being inappropriate.

On the street, if a male harasses you, it is helpful if the person you are with responds on your behalf. These responses can include a cold glare, or a chide of "Haram!" or "Aib!" (both meaning, 'shame'), or "Aindak ookht" (You have a sister) or the less gracious, "Ookht-aleik!" (same to your sister!).

In the meantime, stomp up and down and vent your frustration to teammates as often as you need. Enlist the help of your male teammates and make sure they read this briefing so they know how to help you out when trouble arises!

by CPTer Le Anne Claussen and other CPTers

#### **Some options for female CPTers**

- Step into a shop
- Glare
- Ignore it.
- Say: "Aib" (shame), "Ookht-aleik!" (same to your sister!), "Haram" (shame, forbidden), "Aindak Ookht" (you have a sister at home).
- If someone grabs my butt, I turn around and grab their collar. Not violently, but firmly, chew them out. This is where I take the western angry woman liberties and argue with lots of gesticulating.
- Ask others with you to speak up on your behalf. This goes along with Arab cultural ways of reconciliation.

#### **Tips for male CPTers**

1. Pay attention
2. Check-in with team mate if she wants you to address the situation.
3. Learn Arabic phrases that you can say.

#### **Some Options**

1. Pretend the comments are for you: Oh, me? Beautiful? Thank you! -gesturing clearly.
2. Physically place yourself between the aggressor men and the female
3. Say: 'Don't talk to her like that, leave her alone, she's not interested,' etc.