

**Voice of Women**  
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**Editorial: On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March**

The eighth of March, International Women's Day, approaches as Palestinian women are achieving important goals such as the establishment of a Ministry of Women's Affairs, earning a share in the local council elections, and winning clear victories in the local council elections.

Despite these accomplishments, the quota for women in the Palestinian Legislative Council is still in the discussion phase after having been rejected during the first reading of the law. And if the quota is able to open up decision-making positions to women, then the concept behind the 8th of March is very much tied to the concept of the quota, because the 8th of March signifies the importance of women roles in addition to the reproductive role which dominates society's view of women. The 8th of March is a day for honoring women as innovators, social workers, economic producers and a partner in decision-making. This is what distinguishes the 8th of March, which celebrates women as human beings, from the 21st of March (Mother's Day) which celebrates women as mothers, as if this was the only role of which they are capable.

On the 8th of March, we remember the struggling women prisoners, and the mothers of the prisoners. We remember the women who are the pillars of strength within Palestinian families against the Israeli military occupation and its oppression. We remember the women resisting the Apartheid Wall and struggling against Israel's confiscation of their lands for expanded settlement, on the pretext of security. We remember the women martyrs who have fallen on the long march of the Palestinian people towards liberation and the establishment of the Palestinian state, and we recall the Palestinian pioneer women in the national struggle who have provided a living example of the ability of

women to overcome difficult challenges. On this day, we also remember the women who have entered the workforce, and those who died in the cigarette lighter factory in Hebron; we remember Palestinian women inventors, and the workers in the social and political fields, and those who have waged the battle for the quota, and those who were elected to the local councils.

It is still a long march ahead for the women's movement on the road to social justice, and if the quota was not adopted in the first reading, then the women's movement must partner with civil society in order to direct more effective pressure on decision makers. It is clear that the attack on the proposal for a women's quota increases as the idea gains support, which explains why the unfair campaign against the quota has increased significantly. We have to work together to achieve social justice which cannot be attained without the participation of half of our society. The historically oppressed half of the society which has been kept out of decision making needs affirmative action in order to achieve wider political participation on the decision-making level. Let us work together to achieve the women's quota at the Legislative Council, and let us, the women's movement and the civil society, rally around that slogan.

### **Partnership Grants Program completes its work in the West Bank and Gaza Itaf Yousef and Mohammed Abdul Razeq, Ramallah/Gaza**

Several organizations have made a call for the programs which focus on building the capacity of grass-roots organizations to be continued, especially those which empower women to negotiate with donor institutions and benefit from their support. The call was made during the closing ceremony of the Partnership Grants Program. Representatives from a number of institutions which were involved with the program attended, including Women Affairs Task Committee, Palestinian Hydrology Group, Welfare Association, the Palestinian Water Authority, the Ministry of Local Government, West Bank Water Department, Environmental Quality Authority, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. And at the end of the two ceremonies, held in the West Bank and Gaza, certificates were presented to the participants for courses provided through the Capacity Building Program.

#### **Forty local institutions**

Mr. Samhan Samhan, the director of the program, praised the role of the participating organizations, saying: "This project was started back in 1999 with two phases. It targeted forty local institutions in forty areas around Gaza, the west of Ramallah, and southern Hebron. The most marginalized areas and areas in need of intervention on the gender and environmental levels were chosen. The first goal of the program was to build the financial, technical and administrative capacity of small civil organizations and integrate women into the work. The second goal was to improve the quality of the water supply and the environment in the targeted areas, through implementing infrastructure projects related to these two sectors." Mr. Samhan added that many goals have been achieved; goals which were selected by the local participating organizations through needs assessments conducted with the participation of the local community. Meanwhile, the

director of the of the Welfare Association, Mr. Alaa' Ghalayeeni, confirmed that the World Bank has extended the Palestinian Civil Organizations Project and the third phase will receive five million US dollars, with the possibility of additional funding up to 51 million US dollars.

### **The outcomes of the program**

As for the projects that were completed, these included constructing 172 wells to collect rain water that are capable of holding 1300 cubic meters of water, constructing five stations for the treatment of gray water, paving and rehabilitating 17 kilometers of rural roads, supplying plastic containers to 392 families for saving water for household usage, rehabilitating two water springs and equipping one of them with an advanced system to pump water and distribute it. The projects also included finishing four organizational headquarters providing facilities totaling 550 square meters, providing 14 organizations with equipment and tools, setting up 160 home gardens and 25 units to process agricultural byproducts, establishing an environmental library for women and children, and developing and protecting 82 agricultural pools and 47 farms, which provided job opportunities for tens of women. Also, ten training courses involving 280 hours were provided in the field of recycling agricultural and solid waste in addition to 350 hours in awareness training in the fields of water, gender, and the environment. Finally, a program was completed building the capacity of partner organizations financially, administratively, and technically through training in various fields involving 620 training hours.

### **A right, not a handout**

The general director of Palestinian Hydrology Group, Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Tamimi, said: "The goal of the program was to involve people in transforming the way their organizations work. The people involved in this program are the partners, implementers and the beneficiaries. The program aims to buttress good societal values, because these projects are a right for the people, and not a handout from anyone."

Mrs. Rose Shomali, the director general of Women's Affairs Technical Committee, called upon partner organizations to implement the training they have received. She referred to the transformation experienced by the partner organizations, in terms of financial management skills, computer use, new methods of thinking, and she emphasized that for the Committee the real test of the success of the project is the degree to which it is able to enhance the role of women and their participation in decision-making, whether on the level of participating in local organizations, or on the level of local councils. Shomali mentioned the example of the local elections and the victories that women achieved, including in some cases becoming the heads of councils. She added that experience has shown that when women are armed with the necessary skills they can do great work.

### **A tense period**

The representative of the Welfare Association, Mr. Abdul Rahim Asad, said that the birth of this program happened during a very tense period as it was launched in the months of April and May of 2002 during a period of Israeli invasions, closures, and security threats, and if it were not for the persistence of the projects officials and the field workers, this

program would have not achieved the success that it was. He added that 800,000 dollars were spent in 14 locations in the West Bank and Gaza to construct wells for agriculture and for drinking, agricultural roads and to conduct training courses and field visits to build the expertise of participating institutions. Asad said that hopes that the investment in building the capacity of organizations will give them new strengths, and that remaining weaknesses could be overcome through cooperating with other organizations.

Mr. Zaghoul Samhan, representative of Ras Karkar, said he would like to see more projects that aim to develop the citizens and the available resources, and he pointed out the need to strengthen the cultural, environmental, development and health awareness of the public. He also said that the infrastructure needs care, especially when it comes to sanitation and roads, and he stressed the importance of focusing on the children as the future generation. He added: "Attention has to be focused on the contractors and their need for development and rehabilitation in follow-up, monitoring, meeting specifications, writing reports, committing to dates, and previously agreed-upon schedules."

Mrs. Nadia Abu Nahle, the Gaza director of Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), reviewed the goals of the project and its results, and emphasized the importance of empowering grassroots organizations and their staff and integrating women into the various projects. She urged women to employ all their energies to develop themselves and influence the opinions of society towards women participating as partners in decision-making and community development. She said that WATC will continue its work to develop women's capabilities by integrating them in employment and awareness projects and by developing women's committees that support women in attaining decision-making roles in projects. She emphasized the need to spread awareness among women about conserving resources, protecting the environment and exercising their civil, social, and political rights as full partners in public life.

Mrs. Farida Dahdah, who is responsible for the Capacity Building Program in the Ramallah area, explained that the program was implemented in five locations in the Ramallah region: Deir Izbigh, Ras Karkar, Kharbatha AlMisbah, Beit Sira, and Bileen. She pointed out that the training targeted the project coordinator, the accountant, the treasurer, and two members of the club or the women's committee. She added that the training aimed at developing skills in the training subjects, writing proposals, project management, fundraising, accounting and financial systems, strengthening women roles, strengthening societal participation, strategic planning, and computer skills. Dahdah said that she encountered many men and women with a thirst for knowledge who responded eagerly to the information provided in the trainings about new concepts related to gender and project management. She added: "The partner organizations had been working, but without strategic planning. Through the training they became aware of the necessary steps that need to be taken to meet goals, and became able to formulate a vision of goals and projects according to their needs, in a manner that does not conflict with the role of the local councils, and with a clear role for the clubs." And as a result of the educational role that the program has provided, the director of the Kharbatha Al Misbah Club asked the WATC to train the young leadership, and the women of Beit Sira and Bileen have asked for a continuation of the courses to help them manage their organizations.

## **The ban against employing women in dangerous or labor-intensive jobs** **Attorney Ali Abu Hilal**

The right of working women to protection from dangerous and labor-intensive jobs does not violate the principle of equality between men and women and does not constitute a form of discrimination between them. This is because of the biological functions exclusive to women, particularly pregnancy and birth. These functions require special health care and positive psychological conditions, something which is not compatible with dangerous and labor-intensive jobs. Because of this, regional and international agreements and legislation have provided special protection to women working in high-risk fields. The Arab Agreement Number Five of 1976 provides special protection for working women and bans their employment in dangerous, labor-intensive or harmful jobs. The sixth article of the Agreement stipulates "banning the employment of women in dangerous, labor-intensive, or jobs that risk health or morality determined by legislation in every country." Labor law in some Arab countries guarantees the right of women to protection from employment within such harsh conditions.

## **MIFTAH publishes a review of reproductive health literature** **Tahseen Yaqeen**

A review of the literature on the reproductive health issues of Palestinian women is considered one of the achievements of the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, MIFTAH. Researcher Dr. Aisha Al Rifa'i identified important issues that have to do with reproductive health such as early marriage, marriage among relatives, school dropout, women's participation at work, violence against women, and legal issues, addressed from a Palestinian perspective.

In Dr. Al Rifai's book *The Palestinian Woman: Reproductive Health*, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi mentioned in her introduction that, "Previous experiences proved that without a clear action plan for advocacy during decision-making on reproductive and population policies, women's social, economic, and health rights will remain the last priority for policy makers and legislators." Dr. Ashrawi notes that working to achieve sustainable development requires that we focus our work on reproductive health issues, "though a lot of work has been done by many non-government organizations, research institutes, and government agencies vis-à-vis reproductive health, little has been achieved so far. Infant mortality rates, fertility rates and first year child deaths are still high."

During the literature review, the following was noticed:

- 1- An obvious gap between what is said and planned and what is practiced
- 2- The need for a clear and strategic action plan at the Palestinian Legislative Council to solve reproductive health issues. The absence of a clear point of reference or philosophy for the legislators makes it challenging to pay proper attention to women's and children's issues.

### **Introduction to reproductive health**

In this chapter, the author highlights the absence of a collective responsibility when it comes to gender and reproductive health issues in Palestine. The unstable political situation and the demographic factor that plays an important role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict make dealing with reproductive health issues a thorny field to visit.

Reviewing the statistics on early marriage, Dr. Al Rifai recommends eighteen as the legal age for marriage age. She also comments that marriage among relatives is very common and proved that there is a correlation between marriage among relatives and infant mortality and hereditary diseases.

### **School dropout**

The Ministry of Education has adopted a system to reduce school dropout. However, due to the difficult political and economic situation the dropout rate has continued to rise during the past period. Early marriage by girls affects the whole society. This problem warrants serious attention because women who become mothers and wives at an early age without being fully prepared to assume their new responsibilities constitute a threat to their own well-being that of the whole society. Dr. Al Rifai mentions that the current social structure has a negative affect on the opportunities offered to women, which is main reason behind the weak representation of women in the work force. Lack of awareness of legal rights and the increased number of children below the age of six in addition to the shortage of kindergartens all contribute to dropout.

### **Violence against women**

Different forms of violence are practiced against women. Physical violence can be identified and addressed if the appropriate tools are available. Some husbands practice physical violence in bed and link it to religious and cultural reasons and rights. Women become depressed as they feel unable to exercise control over their bodies. Other non-physical violence forms include unavailability of work, being prevented from participating in decision making, and economic dependency on men.

### **Wanted: A gender-sensitive Palestinian budget Ibrahim Abu Kamesh, Ramallah**

Researcher Dr. Hadeel Qazzaz has called for the formation of a national commission to supervise the budgetary process and to ensure that the budget is gender-sensitive. Dr. Qazzaz pointed to the need to improve the civil service law to provide equal opportunities for men and women. A fair retirement system that ensures an adequate and respectable life for men and women is needed. Finally, the civil society should assume its responsibilities and play an active role in the budgetary process both at the ministerial and the legislative readings phases to ensure that the budget is gender-sensitive.

### **The budget from a gender perspective**

The 2004 Palestinian budget does not consider gender issues even though women are those most affected by the current situation. Women experience poverty, are unemployed, and the effects of the Separation Wall to a greater extent than men do.

However, the budget does not reflect this. There is no support for poor women or women heads of houses. There are 3,440 new posts in the security forces that are open only to men. These posts constitute a form of the masked unemployment phenomena. These men are selected to work without an adequate assessment of their financial needs, credentials, ability to perform required work or even the society's need for such posts. Dr. Qazzaz also criticized the formation structure of the Budget Committee. Three employees from the Ministry of Finance are chosen by the Director General of the Ministry each time. This does not give any chance for these randomly selected employees to accumulate any experience or be trained in human rights, transparency issues, and development or gender issues. There should be at least one woman in this committee, and the members should undergo a minimum period of training on society needs, development planning, and ministerial needs and requirements. Committee members should be trained in gender related issues and should work closely with decision makers. Unless we achieve these pre-requirements, the budget will remain insensitive towards gender issues.

### **A national commission**

Dr. Qazzaz suggested that a national commission should be formed comprised of representatives from the Ministries of Finance, Women, and Planning, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, academic institutes, the Palestinian Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS, civil society and women organizations. The commission should prepare a gender-sensitive budget and compare this budget against needs and geographic distribution. Dr. Qazzaz also stressed the important role of pressure groups. Without capable civil society organizations play a central role in formulating the budget in order to ensure gender-sensitivity, the entire process will founder.

### **Dr. Sahar Al-Qawasmi: A Palestinian woman elected to the leadership of the largest political party in Palestine Thaer Faquseh, Hebron**

The Israeli forces, which consider political party activists as main targets for their military operations, did not prevent Mrs. Sahar Al-Qawasmi from assuming a leadership position in the Fatah Party in Hebron City.

### **A fighter from a family of fighters**

Sahar says she has understood what it means to love your country since she was a child. Her father, Fahd Al-Qawasmi, was killed by the Israeli forces in 1984. Sahar pursued her education in Hebron and then moved to Russia to get her medical degree and then complete her OB-GYN specialization. By then she had become an active member of Fatah Party. In 1996, Sahar was elected to the Fatah regional committee in Hebron and became responsible for the work of the women's sub-committee. Sahar got married and had four children. She did not let this prevent her from assuming more responsibilities with the party. She proved to be a strong woman who is able to overcome all obstacles and achieve her goals.

### **Management and self-confidence**

There is a lively debate over the ability of the Palestinian woman to carry family responsibilities at the same time as a political role. But Sahar provides a good example of a woman who has managed to play both roles successfully. She says, "Women have to be self confident. Self-confidence constitutes the driving force for women to achieve what they want. I notice that many women are not eager to assume any leadership position. They are dependent on their husbands and fathers who support them financially. I came up with a new work strategy within the Fatah Party. My success is due to my approach of conciliation and unification of efforts. This has proven to many that women are capable of achieving success and of assuming leadership responsibilities." Looking closely at Sahar's work, it is apparent that her life is a story of everyday struggle: both against the Israeli occupation, and as a woman. Many women have lost their husbands and sons due to the conflict and have had to fill the roles they had played. One important issue that Sahar raised is the active role of the Palestinian women in fighting occupation. Women have participated positively in all aspects of political life. They have organized thousands of sit-ins, demonstrations, and study sessions. They have also participated in the political parties' movements and in the Intifada.

### **Concepts to correct**

The Palestinian woman faces different obstacles when she assumes any leadership role in general. Sahar mentioned that many of her colleagues at the Fatah Party objected to her election to leadership. However, with a combination of tactfulness and hard work, she managed to prove that she deserved her position.

### **Women enter a new field: Lifeguards at the beach A special report for *Voice of Women, Gaza***

It should not seem strange to find Palestinian women working as lifeguards, after they became Legislative Council members. This type of work in a conservative society such as Palestine, draws attention to a new era in the Palestinian woman's lifestyle. Hadil Kamooni, a fifteen-year-old young woman from Gaza, says: "I loved the sea since I was a little kid. I used to go with my father to the swimming pool for hours. Then I heard that the Ministry of Social Affairs was organizing swimming lessons for girls. I joined the program with some of my friends and in ten days was able to swim. I then worked as a lifeguard assistant and took other advanced training courses to become a life guard. I've also participated in many swimming competitions with AlAhli Club and AlZaytoona Club." Ms. Kamooni, who is the youngest lifeguard in Palestine, says that she started working as a lifeguard at Al Nawrass Resort, a segregated resort for women and children. In the beginning she was afraid, but with the support of her family she gained confidence and has succeeded in her work.

### **Avoiding criticism**

Hadil says that the uniform used by lifeguards is not acceptable for women within Palestinian society. She says that she tries her best to avoid criticism and follow social norms. "I was able to save my neighbor's life once when she almost drowned and I feel very proud to have done so. The reason why I am doing this is that I love the sea and I like to take care of women and children while swimming and make sure that they are safe. I also hope to represent Palestine internationally. I recently received an invitation from the United Arab Emirates to participate in a competition there next April."

Iman Ramadan, a 21-year-old lifeguard from Al-Bureej Refugee Camp, is a university student at Al-Aqsa University. She is studying physical education and is in her final year. Iman says: "I've loved swimming since I was a kid. I decided to take the training session organized by the Ministry of Social Affairs because I wanted to be able to save lives, since dozens of innocent people drown on the Gaza coast each year. When I passed the training, some people were not happy; they reacted negatively. I did my best to change this image of the lifeguard profession among my family members and the society and was able to get through this and go on to study physical education and become a lifeguard with the full confidence and support of my parents." Iman also mentioned that there are some characteristics that a lifeguard should have: courage, self-confidence, motivation and philanthropic values. "I was frightened at the beginning," she says, "but after I had trained in a small pool, then a bigger one, then the sea, I felt able to combat the sea. I can dive down to 200 meters." Iman hopes she will be able to find a good job in her field when she finishes her university education.

Amani Nassar, 21, is a fourth year university student at Al-Aqsa University. She says, "I practiced swimming as part of my physical education requirements at university. At the beginning it was not easy to swim in the sea and overcome my fear. However, after much training, practice and help from my trainers, I managed to master swimming." As far as her family's opinion, Amani says: "I managed to resist family objections when I joined the physical education program at the university. I also live near the sea in Deer Al-Balah. All this made my mission to convince my family a little easier. During Israeli incursions and closures, I used to swim in the sea for exercise. I like to save other people's lives and feel it is my duty to sacrifice for others and try to save their lives." Doua Ayesh, is a 20-year-old student at AlAqsa University. She says: "I was afraid of the sea. I witnessed the drowning of my 16-year-old cousin and that was the main reason why I decided to become a lifeguard. I believe that it is my responsibility to help and save swimmers especially women. There is also a shortage of lifeguards in general and women lifeguards in particular. The Gaza shore becomes full of swimmers during summer time and these people who do not have other places to go to for fun need to feel safe by having enough lifeguards around. The stereotypical image of male lifeguards is beginning to change." She added: "I was afraid of the sea at the beginning, but this has changed now. We are friends. I talk to the sea. I tell the sea my problems, secrets, and fears."

The director of the Center for Women's Empowerment at Al Nusayrat Camp, Ms. Noor Abo Libdeh, mentioned that there are an increasing number of women and children who drown every year. This was the main reason the Ministry of Social Affairs decided to conduct lifeguard and first aid training courses. Girls between the ages of 18 to 26 were

targeted, most of them students at Al-Aqsa University. Niveen Abo Sleem, the training project manager, mentioned that 20 lifeguards graduated from the program, six of whom have found jobs.

**Female University Graduates:  
A Bitter Reality... and an Absence of Clear Policies**

Mervat Abu Jamea, Gaza

Many university graduates are spending years trying to find work without success. While the Palestinian National Authority receives millions of dollars in support and we try to tackle the problems of corruption and favoritism, the unemployment rises, and these unemployed graduates are left wondering if they will ever find a job.

**Scattered Efforts**

S.Q. is a 28-year-old woman who graduated from Al-Islamiyah University in Gaza five years ago with a major in Education and History. S.Q. says, "When I graduate I wanted to be able to support my family and work for my people. I was full of enthusiasm, but it began to fade as day after day passed while I looked for a job. I took many training courses in human rights, management, and computers. I volunteered in many places and participated in summer camps. All this was in vain and I am still unable to find work while many unqualified people who do not have university degrees or who are still studying manage to find jobs in twisted ways. I once benefited from the unemployment project scheme. I worked as a teacher and became very attached to my students. After three months, all my dreams faded when the project ended and I became unemployed again." Many others have similar stories. The unemployment rate among females who have completed thirteen years of education or more exceeded 56% at the end of 2004, compared to 10.6% among males. One factor is the majors that women tend to choose at university. Subheya Zorob, a graduate of the Faculty of Education and History at the Al-Islamiyah University says: "My family forced me to choose a major that is socially accepted for a woman even though they knew that it would be tough to find a job in the future."

Experts indicate that the causes of this crisis are education that does not meet the market demand, and the economic crisis resulting from the Israeli occupation.

Omar Sha'ban, a lecturer in human development, says: "The problem has been growing for thirty years. Many factors have played a role in aggravating the situation. The Israeli occupation measures have played a major role. When the Palestinian National Authority was established, it did not address the problem but rather focused on increasing the number of the university programs instead of paying attention to the quality of these programs. Most of the programs are outdated and do not fit the market need. Last year for example, the Palestinian university system absorbed 57,000 students while the market need does not exceed 5% of this number. Unless the Palestinian National Authority pays attention to this serious problem and develops a clear strategy to address the market need and the specializations offered at the universities, the problem will continue."

### **Planning problem**

International Relations Professor at Gaza University, Dr. Alaa Abu-Amer says: "The main problem is a lack of planning by the Palestinian National Authority. There is no adequate planning system that is concerned with matching the needs of the market and specializations offered at the university. Many posts at the Palestinian National Authority ministries are offered to unqualified people and this results in more than 70% of the posts being occupied by people who are unable to perform their responsibilities. The Palestinian Legislative Council did not pass laws and regulations to protect employees' rights."

### **Ex-detainee Amira Abu Zra': I have a brief message: Do not forget those behind prison bars Samer Khwera and Lubaba Toqan, Nablus**

Ex-detainee Amira Abu Zra' is one of four female prisoners who were released on Monday, February 21, 2005. Amira, who lives in Balata Refugee Camp near Nablus, says: "I had a security case. I was sentenced to 20 months of which I only spent 12 in prison. I do not regret what I did because I feel it is my duty to combat the Israeli Occupation. I spent one month in investigation. The Israelis tortured me physically, spiritually and mentally using violence as though I was not a human being in order to force me to talk. The investigation period is very tough and leaves not only physical effects but also deep incurable psychological ones."

### **Living conditions in the prison**

Being free does not make me forget the bitter days I spent in prison, says Amira. She wants to give one message to people: "Do not forget those behind prison bars." She adds, "Telmond Prison is a very bad place and the worst prison of all. The prison administration deals in an inhumane way with prisoners. They practice all forms of physical and mental violence against prisoners. Prisoners are deprived of basic human rights." She continues, "It was not a prison. It was a place where we fought against sickness and death. Each six women are put in one room that does not have windows and sufficient sun light. The daily break lasts 3 hours and each prisoner is searched before taking the break. We used to have 2 meals every day: at 12:00 and at 18:00. If any prisoner objected to the type of food offered she would be placed in solitary confinement."

### **Daily schedule**

Amira says that she followed a strict schedule every day: "We used to attend religious and cultural sessions. There was a time for learning the Hebrew language, time to attend awareness-raising sessions on different topics, time to read the Holy Quran, and time to pray. During meals prisoners used to get together like a family. This made it possible to live through all the forms of violence and aggression in the prison."

### **International and Israeli activists in Kufr Kadum: A journey of a thousand miles starts with one step Hameh Al-Tayeh, Tulkarem**

A group of international and Israeli activists have gone to the village of Kufr Kadum to support the residents of the village, who have been under Israeli military siege for over three years, by demonstrating peacefully in front of the main gate of the village. They expressed their hopes for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. One Israeli activist shouted at the settlers, demanding the opening of the only road that links the village to the outside world. The head of the village council, Mr. Asad Shtewi, said that the presence of the internationals, especially Israelis, is evidence that support exists for the struggle of Palestinians to achieve their rights.

### **Women in the Cabinet: A defeat for the logic of reform and change** **Zalfa Shahroor**

The nine Palestinian cabinets that have existed since the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority have not had adequate representation of women. The various governments have failed to stand by their political rhetoric and the international agreements they signed promising a gender-balanced cabinet. Only two women have been members of the Palestinian Cabinet so far: Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, Minister of Education, and Mrs. Intisar Al-Wazeer, who was Minister of Social Affairs for nine years. In the newly formulated Cabinet, Mr. Ahmad Qurei' failed again when he appointed Zaheera Kamal to the newly-created Ministry of Women Affairs.

What is worth noticing here is the limited role played by women in this ministerial structure. Ms. Dalal Salameh at first was nominated for Minister of Social Affairs but the post was not given to her after that. Then Ms. Hind Khoury was appointed a minister due to religious reasons and not because she is a woman.

Where will the Palestinian women find hope in this situation. The Palestinian President, in his electoral campaign, mentioned that women will be adequately represented but then did not fulfill his promises. The question is: why are women still under-represented in the Palestinian Cabinet?

Meanwhile, women organizations continue to struggle for a minimum quota of 20% for female representation in the local authorities. It is clear that the political game in Palestine is a male game and the role played by women is a mere token representation and decoration rather than a matter of sincere belief in participation and influence. Can we link what happened with the new Cabinet formation with what happened at the Palestinian Legislative Council when the quota system was canceled?

Many questions must be raised about the role played by women in forming policy. Why do women represent only 8% in the ministries at best? Have women made a mistake by giving their energy to the political struggle while they are still denied representation? Why do we not have a greater number of women working in our ministries? Why do we not support women to take on these roles and responsibilities and participate in the decision making process?

Palestinian women were optimistic when we first began to talk of reform, change and a democratic Palestine. Abu Mazen's presidential rhetoric made women think that change is really coming. But now that they see what he has done in practice, their dreams have faded and the struggle of the women's organization to achieve equality has started again.