

Voice of Women
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Editorial: March 8th and the culture of dialogue

Eyes and ears have been focused on the recent political developments and specifically the Jospin issue that arose at Birzeit University. Jospin, the French Prime Minister, has been issuing provocative statements with regards to South Lebanon, describing Lebanon's resistance as terrorism. All social and political parties, including the women's movement, have expressed resentment to such announcements, which according to official French announcements do not represent France's official position. France has been the strongest Western supporter of the Arab cause against Israel and has offered a great deal of psychological and financial support to the Palestinian nation.

However, the reaction of Birzeit students to these statements, although they were provocative, was unacceptable, both because it contradicted the concept of democratic dialogue and because it took place on university property. One might wonder why the students responded as they did. It can be attributed both to social and cultural concepts of dialogue and also to the culture of protest and expression of dissent which has constituted one of the primary means to resist occupation.

Unfortunately, the Palestinian Authority's response to the students' protest has not followed, on its part, principles of democratic dialogue or employed conflict resolution skills, but instead demonstrated an ideology of oppression and lack of freedom. Its answer to the students was to enforce public punishment, arresting students and threatening further consequence.

In fact, the whole issue should have been dealt with within the confines of the university, utilising democratic dialogue skills, because academic institutions must maintain their independence from governmental intrusion.

Speaking of democratic dialogue, it is worth commenting on the achievements of women, especially considering the upcoming International Day of Women. The women's movement, in contrast to previous years, has achieved some of its goals, granting that they are limited. Now the movement has the capacity to participate in the nation-building process, in social dialogue, and in influencing legislation and policy. The movement engages the society with its demands for social justice, equal opportunity and women rights. Even so, a long journey lies ahead on the road to full emancipation of women, because the movement must challenge complex existing social beliefs and perceptions.

Women's demands, there, face challenges from one side by the needs and perceptions encountered in development, and on the other, from traditional and cultural perceptions. The

importance of women's education and health is socially recognised and accepted, but other issues, such as women's participation in decision-making, their rights to freedom of movement, freedom of marriage and divorce are matters rejected due to social concepts of manhood and womanhood and the roles attributed to each.

Ultimately, women have a long and difficult distance to travel before bridging the social and sexual gap, but there is encouragement in knowing that they are on their way.

Excluding gender results in lopsided development 'Itaf Abu-Ghdeib

In a seminar held on the 26th of February 2000 about gender issues, Legislative Council members were given a briefing session which provided statistics about inequalities between the genders. This was done in an attempt to bring into focus the important role of women in the development process, equal to that of men, with an aim to implementing gender mainstreaming in the strategies and policies of the entire development process.

Gender gaps exist on demographic, health and educational levels:

- 52% of the marriages in 1995 took place between relatives, which increases the possibility of disease
- 6% of women of working age participate in production in comparison to 34% of men of working age
- Women comprise only 12% of the labour force

The legislators were requested to take gender mainstreaming into consideration and work to increase women's participation to promote a healthier development process.

Women's Rights Declaration of Principles (Preface)

Under the umbrella of the Palestinian Woman's General Union (Jerusalem-Palestine), a Women's Rights Declaration of Principles was announced to contribution to the establishment of a democratic and just Palestinian constitution for the future Palestinian State. This Declaration was based on the 1988 Declaration of Palestinian Independence, which states the following:

The State of Palestine is for every Palestinian, regardless of his/her place of living. In this State, Palestinians have the right to develop their own national and cultural identity. They have equal rights and are granted freedom of religious and political beliefs. Their human dignity will be preserved under a democratic parliamentary system, based on freedom of expression, the right of founding political parties, the majority's respect of the rights of the minority and vice versa. It is also based on social justice and equality, with no discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, colour, sex, etc.

The Declaration adopts the UN's Manifesto, the International Declaration of Human Rights, all international agreements and declarations related to political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights, such as the International Declaration for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial

Discrimination and the International Declaration for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Women in municipalities 'Itaf Abu-Ghdeib

Municipal councils are very effective and influential on a social and individual level, therefore women's participation in these councils and their membership is crucial if women's rights and needs are to be addressed. Women have participated enormously in the struggle for independence through political, social and economic work and are still doing so, yet haven't been given equal opportunity in decision-making positions after the process of social development started.

However, women have been appointed in a few municipal councils in Palestine, such as in Nablus, Jenin, Bethlehem, Salfet, Qalqilya, Betunia and 'Anabta. Their number is extremely limited, with only one or two women at the most in each council. When interviewing some of these women they all stressed the importance of the role of women through these councils to address women's issues and seek solutions. One woman said that women in the councils are respected as members and accepted, which is highly encouraging. Yet, they also explain the difficulty of being members, for example, the male members prefer to hold meetings night, which in our conservative society creates a barrier for women members. One woman considers this a means to exclude women, because the men must take such social matters into consideration.

These women also complained about the fact that their membership came as a result of appointment by high officials, which makes them wonder whether they would have been chosen had there been an election process. They hope, however, that this experience with appointing women, which until now has proved positive, will influence future decisions and social perceptions. Women are capable of fulfilling such positions in the same way as men.

Working together to improve women's status Widad Al-Barghuti

Voice of Women interviewed Hassan 'Asfour, Minister of Non Governmental Organisations' Affairs (NGOs Affairs).

When asked why such a ministry, considered to be one of the first in the world, was established, he answered that similar organisations exist in France, Canada and the United States. He believes in the importance of such a ministry to play the role of a mediator between the NGOs and the Authority, to prevent duplication in work, and to bridge the gaps between the two sides. The Ministry's role is to support and develop NGOs, as well.

One of the main requisites of NGOs is voluntary work, he said. The Ministry will strengthen this sector through focussing on university students who are requested to fulfil certain hours of voluntary work as a condition for their graduation. He also hopes that the previous tensions between NGOs and the Palestinian Authority, on the one hand, and among NGOs

themselves, on the other, will cool down with the start of a new era. He sees the ministry as the medium through which to establish good cooperation between all parties.

His objective with regard to women's NGOs, of which there are many, is to focus on amending the Personal Status Law and to follow the precedent set in Egypt as a starting point from which women can achieve their goals. He is disappointed by the relationship between these NGOs and the ministry because of lack of cooperation on the women's NGOs part. He also stressed the need to include women's rights on the agenda of each organisation, regardless of whether it is specifically a women's organisation or not. All must work for women's rights and enhance their status in society, he said.

The Palestinian Authority, as a major body, does not adopt a fixed stance towards the rights of women because the laws themselves are not fixed yet and everyone has his/her own position.

Recommendations for women's development **Ruqiyah Al-'Alami**

In a pre-Beijing +5 initiative, Arab NGOs held a regional meeting on the 10th and 11th of February 2000, in Jordan, to review the status of Arab women and the achievements gained since the 1995 Beijing Conference. This meeting was organised by UNIFEM in cooperation with the NGOs Co-ordinating Committee of the Jordanian Woman's Affairs National Committee. Thirteen Arab countries were represented, in addition to several other regional and international organisations. Discussions focused on a strategic initiative to develop women's status within the five coming years. Mainly, the following issues were discussed:

- Military Conflicts
- Women and Poverty: the role of service and loan institutions in developing women's status
- Media: its role in enlightening societies as to violence against women, especially in Palestine and Lebanon, and to allow equal opportunities to women without misusing them
- Women and Environment
- Violence: establishing special institutions to care for the victims of violence
- Women's rights as part of human rights
- Women and economics: helping women to face economic and global challenges
- Women's integration in the activities of the League of Arab States and reduction of economic sanctions on women and children
- Educational curricula: including women's human rights, removing the stereotype of women as weak, capable only of work as service providers, and granting women better opportunities in professional training
- Health: providing women with better health care through guaranteeing a comprehensive health insurance
- Protecting children and prevent abuse
- Quota for women to guarantee women a role in decision-making