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Editorial: Two Female Ministers

On the fifteenth anniversary of the declaration of independence and establishment of the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, a new government was formed by Ahmad Quarei' which included two female ministers, Mrs. Intisar Al Wazir, Minister of Social Affairs and Ms. Zahira Kamal, Minister of the newly created Ministry of Women's Affairs. Is this new ministry intended to be a gift to women on the occasion of Independence Day?

The Declaration of Independence establishes Palestine as a state in which all Palestinians, wherever they may be, have the right to develop their national and cultural identity and in which they will enjoy equal rights. It also affirms the equality of all Palestinians and bars discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, color or gender. This is what Palestinian women aspire for.

Forming the Ministry of Women's Affairs and appointing as minister a woman known for her contribution to the women's movement, is definitely a step in the right direction. It is vital that this new ministry be given enough latitude and an adequate budget to be able to fulfill all its responsibilities and improve the status of Palestinian women.

On the other hand, attention to women's affairs must not be confined to the new ministry; the women's departments in all of the ministries must be mobilized in coordination with the new ministry. Most importantly, women are capable of serving in all ministerial positions and their participation must not be limited to only two ministers.

Female students suffer from both the occupation and from society
Shahenaz Abdelrazik, Toubas

Iman felt afraid as she walked with her friends down an unknown road, trying to get to the village of Aqaba and trying to forget the words prohibiting her from going to university or from even leaving the house.

As the call to prayer, "Allahu Akbar," floated from the mosque in the village of Assera Al Shamaliah, Iman and fifty other people walked through the mountains on foot, the Israeli occupation forces having closed all the roads from their village to Nablus on this day of Ramadan. Iman is studying lab analysis at Al Najah University in Nablus. As if the misery imposed by Israel was not enough, she had to endure sarcastic comments from a man walking along this hard road who considered it inappropriate for a woman to even leave the house. In his opinion, it is more honorable for women to stay at home. Iman thought to herself, "Why should I be deprived of my right to education just because I am a woman? Does it mean that my family doesn't care about me because they allow me to be at the mercy of the occupation forces when I go to university?"

Once she got home, she told her parents what had happened, and they thought it absurd what the man had said.

Iman is one of hundreds of Palestinian women who have to face Israeli closure and other harsh measures as well as the condemnation of some members of their community in order to pursue their education.

As for Soha from Toubas, she has become an expert in the mountain roads, short cuts and bypass roads used to avoid the Israeli checkpoints blocking ordinary roads. She endures having to use these difficult roads because of her determination to pursue knowledge. She is getting excellent marks in the science program.

Nawal from Biet Forik, to the north of Nablus, is also a student at Al Najah University. She thinks that the reaction to women's education differs from one village to another. Her brother escorts her to university to protect her from the criticism of others. Although he does not have classes on the same days, he walks her back and forth to prevent rumors from starting about her.

**Martyrs Samia and Majeda Daloul:
Lived together, died together, buried together
Fayez Abu Oun, Gaza**

The relationship between the two sisters, Samia and Majeda Daloul, was like no other. They lived together and died together. They shared the joys and suffering of life, took several courses together, and were awarded many certificates of appreciation for their commitment to helping the elderly, injured, families of martyrs, orphans and the poor. Samia and Majeda were always involved with charitable work, serving as volunteers in social, psychological and educational programs.

Their mother, Haja Um Hani, holds her head in her hands and stares at the sky when she thinks of them. Her tears overflow; she dries them, and they begin again. She lives for the memory of her two daughters.

Haja Um Hani embraced the certificates that had been granted to her daughters from several organizations. She remembers each occasion, and has memorized the words on the certificates.

Amid her tears, she recalls, "My daughters spent their lives helping others; they always donated their pocket money and their monthly salaries; they had never stopped helping the oppressed and deprived."

She started reading the certificates one by one: One from the Palestinian Red Crescent Society for volunteering with emergency medical services; one for child education certified by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education; one for crisis management signed by Dr. Fadel Abu Hein, a fourth for training in computers and the fifth for training on the internet.

Samia, 21, and Majeda, 25, from Al Zaytoon neighborhood in Gaza, were killed by an Israeli missile strike targeting the car of an Intifada activist on June 11th. They were walking together when the missile was fired from an Apache helicopter and hit the car of Tito Masoud and Suheil Abu Nahl from Hamas. Majeda fell to the ground, covered in blood, like so many other martyrs.

When Samia saw her sister on the verge of death, she was overwhelmed. She tried to find someone to treat help Majeda. The emergency medical staff called for everyone to evacuate the area so they could attend to the injured as well as to protect people in case there was another attack. Samia refused to leave her sister and the other martyrs and injured. She began to administer first aid when the Israelis fired another missile, turning the medical staff into a second group of martyrs and wounded. Many were torn to pieces, including Samia. The two sisters and companions died together as they had lived together. Their blood mingled with the soil of their land where they were martyred.

Even five months after the tragedy, their father was still unable to come to terms with his loss.

Samia and Majeda are not the only victims of Israeli aggression against Palestinian civilians. Statistics of the Ministry of Health published last October showed that more than two hundred female martyrs have fallen as a result of Israeli attacks.

How long will Palestinian women be a target for Israeli snipers? How many women, men and children will have to die in the mine fields planted by the occupation in the Gaza Strip? And how many souls will have to leave us before we can have peace?

Wives of prisoners: Lives of never ending sacrifice I'timad Rizq Naslallah, Gaza

He was arrested seventeen years ago. She had always stood by him. She often risked her life to keep watch for him, before he was arrested. She assures him that the bond between them will remain forever.

When the Israeli soldiers arrested him, she began a long journey of suffering and waiting. She was pregnant at the time. She gave birth to a baby girl, and took her to see her father. He was sentenced to seventeen years in prison. She waited, and waited. She raised their daughter, never failing to visit him. She lived many lonely years waiting for him, and then the day arrived. She called the whole family to welcome him and celebrate together. She bought new clothes and painted the house. She even managed to secure him a job to help him reintegrate in the society. At first was kind to her. Then he began to make friends at work and started staying out late. He began to complain about everything. When she confronted him, he replied that wanted to start over a colleague at work, a much younger woman. She tried to remind him of how had she stood by him, but he went ahead and divorced her, turning his back on her and their daughter. Why is it that in our society a man is allowed to separate from his wife and even his family if he wants to? And why is it than when the wife of a detainee seeks divorce, she is blamed? Why is it that the widows of martyrs are expected not to remarry even if they don't have children?

Women's projects suffocated by the siege Aziza Noufal, Palestinian Women Journalists Office, Nablus

When she opened her store in the city center, she considered it an achievement. She had invested all of her savings in it before the Intifada. She opened a store for baby clothing, Al Ameerat (The Princess) that became well-known and developed a large clientele. She tried selling baby shoes and had the same success. She even had Palestinian clients from inside the Green Line.

But, it did not last forever. The siege imposed on Nablus for the past three and a half years caused a sharp decline in her sales. Nobody had imagined the Intifada would last so long and have such negative and destructive repercussions. It became harder and harder for clients from outside Nablus to visit her store and the living standards were deteriorating. She returned to her village.

Nablus is the largest city in the West Bank and the hub of economic activities. It was the main markets for the residents of Qalqilia, Tulkarem, Jenin and Salfit for the past ten years. Many Palestinians inside the Green Line used to do their shopping in the city. Now with the siege, it has lost its economic status. Many shops are like Amal's boutique. They sell almost nothing, but stay open hoping that things will one day improve.

Women's status in the Samaritan community

Attorney Sana Aranki

The Samaritans are a part of the Palestinian people. They live on Mount Jirzim in Nablus and many people mistakenly believe that their religion is Judaism. Although their community, barely more than six hundred people, they have preserved their Samaritan religious identities for many generations as Israelites rather than as Jews, as mentioned in the Old Testament. Some of them moved to the nearby Holon Settlement tempted by what the Israeli government offered them. Most of the Samaritans in Nablus work in government positions, private businesses and trade. They share the social life of their neighbors. Their boys and girls go to government or private schools, and go on to attend Palestinian universities and institutes. They consider it taboo to eat food cooked outside of their homes. They eat meat slaughtered according to their tradition and do not serve meat and yoghurt on the same table.

A study was conducted on the status of women in this sect from the personal status perspective. It revealed that Samaritan women are governed by a social system subject to the traditions of the Palestinian society in general and of their limited community. They are expected to obey their fathers and brothers as long as they are not married and are totally under their husband's 'custody' upon marriage. If a woman becomes a widow or gets divorced, she returns to her father's house. Samaritan women do not inherit any property or assets. However, they have the right to alimony from their parents' inheritance.

A Samaritan man can only marry one woman and cannot live in polygamy. He can only marry someone from the same sect. All marriage procedures and terms are regulated by a contract prepared by the priest. Any woman wishing to pursue her education or to work can prescribe such conditions in her marriage contract. Women, upon marriage, have only three rights: clothing, a bed and family relationships. If a man violates any of these rights, she has the right to file for divorce. However, men can file for divorce in many other cases: if their wife is sterile or turns out to not be a virgin upon marriage, incompatible cohabitation, lack of virginity upon marriage, adultery or disobedience on the part of the wife, or contracting a communicable disease. Wives have no rights after divorce except for their alimony. Mothers have custody and alimony of children until they are old enough to care for their basic needs, at about 5 years of age. At that age, they return to their father's custody. Inheritance goes only to male children and the oldest son inherits twice as much as his other brothers because he is to become the head of the family.

There is clear discrimination against women in the Samaritan community. Their rights and status are subjected to the interpretation of the Torah by males and to social traditions that give them second class status.