

**Voice of Women**  
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**Editorial: Parliaments against their nations**

It is not surprising for parliaments, presidents and kings to stand against their nation's interests, but this can in turn lead to revolution. To keep this from happening, parliaments find themselves obligated to grant them some kinds of freedom to give lip service to democracy. Parliaments, especially those chosen by their people in a fair election, are supposed to represent their people with honesty and diligence. To see the opposite happening is shocking.

What happened in Jordan recently is clear evidence of the parliament's opposition of its people. The parliament refused to nullify Article 340 that grants a reduced sentence to killers of women who commit their crime on the pretext of "family honour," This happened despite the demands of vast national campaigns, the House of Lords and some members of the Royal Family. In a response to the parliament's decision, huge demonstrations took place, led by Prince 'Ali and Prince Ghazi, creating havoc. Nullifying this Article would protect women who are murdered in cold blood on the pretext of "family honour" when often a violation has not even taken place.

Women are still regarded as the property of men as well as of society, who maintain their honour through women's honour. This perception victimises women and leaves them under the threat of murder. Regardless of who was responsible for a woman "losing her honour" -- if it happened at all - - it is always the woman's fault and killing her relieves her family from shame. This demonstrates the deep connection men still have with conservative ideology. They commit murder and injustice while at the same time claiming to be religious. Religion is clear about its judgements in regards to adultery, but those who claim to be religious follow their own convictions without reference to religion. They regard women as their dependants and sex objects with no rights, notions they insist on maintaining.

**Widows can apply for passports without Grandpa's permission**

## **Waleed Al-Sharfa**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2000 a delegation from WATC visited the Ministry of Interior to insist on equal treatment of women in their regulations and laws. According to Mr. Ahmad Al- Tamimi, Deputy Minister of Interior, widows are allowed to apply for passports for themselves and for their children without their relative's permission.

In reality, however, this does not seem to be the case. Mr. Al-Tamimi attributes this discrepancy to an inadequate understanding of the regulations by the employees who implement them. Foreign women married to Palestinians tend to leave the country with their kids when family problems arise, he says.

The law which forces women to give up their maiden name when they marry and adopt their husband's name was also discussed with Mr. Al-Tamimi. He says that this is required because women have to register their change in social status in their identity cards and passports and this is done with the agreement of Israeli officials.

WATC calls upon all relevant institutions to clearly specify regulations and to properly train their employees who continue to insist that female applicants bring a male guardian in order to apply for a passport.

## **Pressure groups needed to improve gender-sensitivity in the media Ramallah**

A workshop entitled "Press and Publication Laws and Freedom of Expression on Women's Issues" was held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2000. It was organised by the Department of Women and Children in the Ministry of Information.

Clemence Houry, the General Director of the Department of Women and Children, mentioned that many issues and questions have been raised concerning the freedom of expression on issues related to women since the Press and Publication Laws were confirmed five years ago. She questioned to what extent women's equality can be maintained without any discrimination.

Dr. Nabeel Al-Khateeb, Director of the Media Centre at Birzeit University, explained that the Press and Publication Laws aren't without their flaws; for example they restrict the freedom of journalists and their right to work. He called upon officials to institute regulations guaranteeing journalists' freedom of work, stating that the Law protects journalists in some, but not all, cases.

Mr. Hani Al-Masri stated that he considers the Law relatively progressive and democratic compared to legislation in other Arab countries, despite its weaknesses. He said that the Law guarantees the freedom of press without previous sponsorship. It has also cancelled the military orders given by the occupation forces. It grants the right to information and confidentiality of sources and the right of individuals to legal process if their rights were violated. He admitted, however, that the Law has many discrepancies. It has not been approved by the Legislative Council, and official institutions are not bound to any regulations that would prevent them from prohibiting the publication of a paper or from arresting someone. He called for implementation of the Law to guarantee freedom of expression, to protect women from treatment as sex objects.

Zahira Kamal, General Director of the Directorate for Planning, Gender and Development in the Ministry of Planning and International Co-operation, highlighted the importance of debating this law to pinpoint its weaknesses and strengths. She called for gender mainstreaming in the media because

of the positive impact it has on social development. She also called for establishing pressure groups to make gender mainstreaming possible not only in the media levels but also in the social arena.

### **Women's right to divorce in Egypt Ruqiyyah Al 'Alami**

The People's Parliament of Egypt has finally confirmed the Personal Status Law, Article 20 of which grants women the right to divorce on condition that compensation be paid by the wife to her husband. This was not previously possible, leaving women subject to the threat of divorce by their husbands. This Law complies with religious laws and regulations, but gives the judge and the law, rather than the husband, the final authority on the matter in a fair and just trial.

This decision is fair and just towards women and grants them credibility and autonomy. The incidence of divorce may increase as a result of this law in the near future, but decline over time because it creates a balance of power in relationships between husbands and wives which will force men to stop considering women as mere objects with no power to protect themselves.

### **Disappointment or adaptation: Foreign wives of Palestinians Buthaina Al-Sarraheen**

Many foreign women who marry Palestinian men abroad face enormous psychological shocks once they come with their husbands to live in Palestine. They leave their mother country, traditions, customs, society, friends and family behind to enter the world of their husband, his family and Palestinian society. In an interview with four foreign women married to Palestinians and living in Palestine, the following problems were noted:

- Language barrier
- Being held accountable by the husband's family
- Interference by the husband's family
- Religious differences: Christianity vs. Islam
- Expectations of Dress and behaviour
- Pressure to have male children
- Boredom
- Fear as a result of the deteriorating political situation
- Accusations of immorality, wrong behaviour and "Western" customs (including by the husband)
- Control of movement
- Disappointment

Some of the interviewed women expressed contentment with living in Palestine, but others expressed regret for having committed themselves to a relationship which ultimately was characterized by betrayal and abuse.

Su'ad Abu-Dayyeh, a social specialist in the Woman's Legal Aid and Counselling Centre, confirms the above problems facing women and explains that such problems are expected to arise in our society due to its conservative and strict traditions that perceive women as weak and inferior

creatures without rights. Local women experience these problems as well, and so the experience of foreign women represents part of a larger social issue.

Many foreign women approach the Centre for help and guidance and receive it, says Abu-Dayyeh. It is the Centre's duty to assist them in finding solutions. However only a minority of the women who are suffering with these problems have approached us for help, she says; many others have not yet found the courage.

### **Oppressed women: Red tape drags out court proceedings 'Itaf Abu-Ghdeib**

Facing constant bitterness, oppression, abuse, humiliation and deception are convincing reasons for women to prosecute their husbands in order to achieve separation of marriage. However this is not so easy under current law, under which men are able to use a number of measures to prevent their wives from exercising their rights. Husbands may lie in courts despite being under oath, avoid paying their wives' alimony, abandon them physically and financially, or leave the country regardless of their marital obligations.

According to the law, a woman has the right to separation if she proves that her husband has abandoned or harmed her. Despite this, courts take years to announce their decisions, due, on the one hand, to weakness in the court bureaucracy, and, on the other, to the oppressive and gender-insensitive Personal Status Law that deprives women of many of their rights.

Attorney Hanan Al-Bakri, Legal Aid and Counselling Centre, attributes the ongoing misery many women experience to their lack of knowledge of their own rights as human beings. Knowing one's rights puts a person in a strong position. She thinks that educating women about their rights is crucial to their emancipation. She also stresses the importance of altering the Personal Status Law and addressing the formal legal religious establishment, possibly leading to positive and stronger results, as in the Egyptian case. She also emphasises the important role of the state in assisting women in cases of the husband's negligence. Without these measures, women can remain in a long and painful legal process dragging on over years through the court system and with no guarantee of a positive outcome.

