

Voice of Women
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Nations worldwide are preparing to celebrate the 51st anniversary of the International Declaration of Human Rights and the 20th anniversary of the International Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Violence Against Women, both of which embody human values and concepts based on dignity, justice and equality.

November 25th Marks the International Day for the Confrontation of Violence Against Women

On the occasion of International Day for the Confrontation of Violence Against Women, the National Committee for the Confrontation of Violence Against Women held a number of activities, including a press conference at the headquarters of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC). During the conference, speeches were delivered by Ms. Amal Khreshe, the Director of the Palestinian Working Women Society (PWWS), Dr. Mohammed Haj Yehia from Bisan Research Center, and Mr. Ziad Abu Amer, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

It is noteworthy to mention that the National Committee is a coalition of a number of Palestinian institutions: Women's Center for Legal Advice and Counseling, Women's Studies Center, Palestinian Counseling Center, Palestinian Working Women Society, Women's Affairs Technical Committee, Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees, Palestinian Family Planning & Protection Association, Family Defense Center, and Bisan Center for Research and Development.

In his speech, PLC member Ziad Abu Amer said he considered the 25th of November an occasion to place the issue of violence and women on the national agenda. He also spoke about the different forms of violence against women. Threatening or forcing a woman to marry at a young age or to marry someone that she does not want is one form of violence. Forcing a woman to give birth to a child or to have sex, or depriving a woman of taking part in politics are other forms of violence against women. Violence against children affects women who feel powerless to protect their children. Mr. Amer pointed out that society fails to acknowledge the presence of violence against women. He called on women and men to break the barrier of silence, as the issue of violence is not divided on the basis of gender. Violence is not an issue of a woman versus a man, but rather of two different mentalities, one of which accepts

violence and the other which is completely against it. He also called on society to take prompt action, because women cannot liberate themselves from violence alone, but need the partnership of men who believe in liberation and equality.

A second speech was delivered by Ms. Amal Khreshe who conveyed greetings to the Kuwaiti women who were prevented from participating in the parliamentary elections, as well as to the Algerian women in their struggle to end all forms of political violence. In her speech, Ms. Khreshe pointed out the participation of Palestinian women in the national struggle against the Israeli occupation. Despite their significant contribution, social issues -- especially those related to women -- were raised only in 1989. In 1990, Bisan Center for Research & Development held a conference entitled 'Women and Social Issues'. She stated that a mentality exists that does not consider the violence against women to be a problem and that women's issues are intentionally undermined in order to accommodate this mentality in political contexts.

Ms. Khreshe emphasized the importance of revising laws which are outdated and do not serve the needs of a modern society. She also stressed the importance of punishing men who rape young women and putting an end to the tradition of allowing a rapist to marry his victim in order to avoid legal consequences.

In his speech, Dr. Yehia noted that violence is a psychological, health, and social problem that affects women and children; thus it is the problem of the entire society even though the society continues to behave as if the problem does not exist. While there are individuals who prioritize addressing the issue of violence, others continue to work to silence women.

Dr. Yehia stated that he does not consider violence to be a problem stemming from women, but rather from those who attack women. When a woman goes to the hospital for medical treatment after being attacked, usually there is no investigation into the circumstances of the incident, but rather she is told to be patient if she complains.

He emphasized the importance of transforming the concept of masculinity in Palestinian society. Masculinity does not mean harshness, or violence, or power, but rather love, caring, giving and sharing. He also stressed the importance of shifting all the stereotypes that describe women as weak and fragile. He demanded that individuals who practice violence against women be ostracized.

Following the press conference, the participants headed for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and were received by the head of the PLC, Mr. Ahmad Qurei' and a number of PLC members. Mr. Qurei' announced that the PLC supports women's issues and called on the participants to prepare projects pertaining to women and to submit them to the PLC.

Fourth International Conference: Women in Palestine
Dunia Ismail

The Fourth International Conference, Women in Palestine, which was organized by the Gaza Community Mental Health Program from the 21st through the 23rd of November, addressed the political, economic, social, and cultural issues faced by Palestinian women. The conference was attended by over 800 academics and researchers from Palestine as well as 200 participants from various foreign countries. Papers presented in the conference provided an overview of the status of Palestinian women.

Dr. Iyad As-Sarraj, the Chairman of the Program's Board of Director, inaugurated the conference, stressing that the purpose of the conference was not to start a revolution but to confront reality.

The Director of the Women's Studies Center in Jerusalem and the Coordinator of the Arab Women's Forum (AISHA), Ms. Sama Eweidah Liftawi, delivered a speech on behalf of Dr. Hanan Ashrawi. In her speech, Ms. Sama stressed the importance of the participation of women in economic development, presenting the difficulties and obstacles that impede women's participation from various aspects of life. She highlighted that women's issues are not issues that concern women only, but also should also concern private and governmental organizations. She noted that the status of Palestinian women is still inferior to that of men despite their great sacrifices and contributions. Women continue to frequently be excluded from holding leadership and decision-making positions.

The three-day conference produced the following recommendations:

Promoting justice and equality

Updating laws pertaining to the status of Palestinian women to insure equality and justice between women and men as mentioned in the document of the Declaration of Independence, the Palestinian Basic Law, and the International Declaration of Human Rights

- Giving women the opportunity to participate in the legislative process in general and in issues related to them in particular
- Increasing participation by women in the political decision-making process
- Amending the curricula in order to enhance the status of Palestinian women in society.
- Putting an end to early marriage because it deprives women of their right to pursue their education
- Establishing centers to follow up on violence in schools in order to put an end to the phenomenon of school dropout
- Confronting political violence to which women are exposed and calling for the immediate release of female prisoners held in Israeli jails
- Protecting women from sexual attacks regardless of who the perpetrators are
- Focusing on community education
- Employing the media to influence public opinion towards changing negative customs and traditions that undervalue women
- Coordinating effectively for the distribution of duties and activities among the private institutions in order to be able to work on all programs

Dr. Ghada Al-Karmi, from Britain, presented a paper on the struggle of Palestinian women, emphasizing the importance of holding the conference in Gaza as a way to

increase public awareness concerning the issue. She added that it would be of benefit to discuss issues in further depth in meetings to as to maximize the impact.

**Conference held by the Higher Council for Culture in Cairo
Ruqia Al-Alami, Jordan**

The Higher Council for Culture held a conference entitled 'One Hundred Years of the Liberation of Arab Women' from the 23rd to the 28th of October 1999 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the publication of the book 'Women's Liberation', which was written by Qasem Amin (1865-1908) and published in 1899. The book was the first to be written on the liberation of Arab women.

Mr. Jaber Asfour, the Secretary General of the Higher Council for Culture, said in a press conference at the conference, 'It was impossible to ignore Amin Qasem's book; he devoted his life to defend women's issues.'

Around 300 Arab and foreign participants, including some from the United States and Italy, participated in the conference, which aimed at reviewing the achievements of women over the past hundred years. One hundred eighty two research studies, 207 papers and 44 testimonies were presented during the conference, in addition to three films about Egyptian women. The conference dealt with a number of issues, including women's movements in the West, contemporary movements for the women's liberation movement in the Third World, and discussion of Amin Qasem's book 'Women's Liberation.' The conference also addressed topics such as women and politics, law, theater, history and education, and women in journalism.

Sawt An-Nissa reporter, Ruqia Al-Alami, interviewed Dr. Faiha' Abed Al-Hadi from the Palestinian Ministry of Planning, who participated in the conference. She commented on the testimonies presented by Palestinian women by saying, 'The number of testimonies presented was relatively small. One testimony was presented by Ms. Laila Shahid, Palestine's Ambassador to France, and another one by Sahar Khalifeh, a Palestinian writer.'

Asked about her participation in the conference, Dr. Abed Al-Hadi replied by saying, 'I participated in a session held on 23 October entitled 'Women's Contribution in Political Life.' The session was headed by Yehia Al-Jamal and attended by Jorjeit Atiya from Syria and Afaf Jadallah from Egypt. I also participated in another session entitled 'Undermining Women in History' in which academics in the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, and arts took part.' Throughout the interview, Dr. Abed Al-Hadi spoke about the struggle of Palestinian women.