

Women's Voice
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Women's Day

Having a special day of the year to celebrate a particular group within society is evidence that this group does not have the recognition it deserves, despite its importance. For example, Labor Day reminds us of the importance that labor plays for social development. Mother's Day also reminds us of the role of mothers within our families, of their hard work managing homes and raising children. March 8th reminds us of women and their endurance and contribution, whether in the work place, in society, in the national struggle, or on other fronts. Understanding the role of women and appreciating what they do beyond the sphere of the family is very important. In fact, women deserve double the appreciation and recognition given to men, because women are not only effective in their roles at home, but they also succeed in fields such as art and literature. The fact that March 8th has become an official holiday in Palestine is a sign of the importance given to women by our government. We are, however, looking forward for the day when social justice and equal opportunity prevails and we do not need a special day to remind us that there is still a category of people who suffer discrimination.

Statistics on the status of Palestinian women

Sanaa Assi

The status of Palestinian women has improved remarkably in several areas. In education, 94.6% of female children attended primary school during 2002-2003, while 93.6% of male children did. The number of females accessing health services (especially pregnant women) increased by 26% from the year 1996 to the year 2000. Medical assistance at births had increased to 97% in 2000, from 93% in 1996. Studies have also shown that awareness among women as to the need for reform in various sectors has also increased.

However, women still face a considerable challenge in their struggle to participate in nation-building process and to hold decision-making positions. The

participation of women in the institutions of the Palestinian National Authority is still limited: of the 672 members of the Palestinian National Council, 56 are women; 5 of the 88 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council are women, 2 out the 24 cabinet ministers are women, and 63 women serve in the local councils across the West Bank.

In view of the continuing Israeli attacks against the Palestinian people, women in Palestine have celebrated Women's Day with sadness because of the terrible impact of these attacks, such as home demolitions, in which Israel breaches international law which requires that civilian populations, including women, be guaranteed safety and respect.

From 2001 to 2004, the Israeli occupation army prevented 55 women in labor from reaching hospitals. They had to deliver at Israeli checkpoints, in front of the heavily armed Israeli soldiers. This is only one instance of Israel's violations of human rights. Israel's policy of closure has caused the deaths of 30 babies at the time of birth. As of the end of the year 2003, 90 women are in the Israeli jails, some of them having given birth inside their cells, others of whom are deprived of seeing their children. Israel has killed 348 women, some of whom were pregnant.

Life under occupation has deeply affected Palestinian women. They have now to carry a greater burden financially at home, after the loss of husbands and/or fathers who used to provide them and their children with emotional as well as financial support. Palestinians in general, and women in particular, need their basic human rights to be granted and call for the implementation by Israel (as an occupying power) of the Fourth Geneva Conventions which ensure the protection of civilians.

Survey: Students hold a traditional view of women

New survey results have revealed that school students hold a traditional view of women and their role in society. The survey was conducted by Alpha International Company for Information and Research. The poll was not limited to students' views of women and their rights, but also included other aspects of civil life in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Results were surprisingly negative. The research aims at studying the impact of Palestinian curricula on students' civic behavior.

When asked about the preferred jobs for women, the answers were as follows: 97% opted for teachers, 96% for doctors, 74% for civil engineers, 70% for company managers, 47% for judges, 56% for party members, 16% for taxi drivers. 73% said that women may work outside home as long as their job falls within the range of traditional jobs. To our great surprise, 31.6% said that beating women could be justified in some cases, and 13.9% said that insulting women could be justified in some cases. 16.3% said that all kinds of work related to the home are the sole responsibility of women. The researchers recommended the amendment of the curricula to promote a more positive view of women.

Forum on Women and Law in Amman

A conference on women and law held in February, 2004, in Amman, produced the following recommendations:

- Embark on regional debates to encourage progressive voices
- Establish local associations and unions for female judges and link them to existing international associations
- Include women's rights in the curricula
- Design a web page for female workers in the legal field to exchange their opinions
- Design a newsletter specialized in the legal aspects of female professionals

- Queen Rania Abdallah inaugurated this 3-day-event which was attended by 70 female lawyers, judges and professionals in different legal sectors.

The Palestinian team made several presentations focusing on the situation of women under the Israeli occupation. Despite the current harsh circumstances and the Israeli army's daily violations of International Law, women in Palestine have been able to make advancements in various sectors, including the legal one. There already are 8 female judges in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Some laws enhancing women's rights are also in the process of ratification at the Legislative Council.

Increasing women's participation in political life

The Human Research and Social Development Center (Gaza) has started an awareness program to support and activate the participation of women in political life through empowerment projects. Dr. Sufian Abu Njela, head of the center, told *Voice of Women* that the project aims at developing women's skills and involving them in political spheres of life, especially in vulnerable areas. The project also intends to train women in skills for participation in decision making processes. "This is how we build a democratic society: through giving equal opportunities to all layers of society," said Dr. Sufian. The project is carried out through training courses and awareness programs. The objective is to guarantee the long-term participation of women on political issues – in other words, practicing the principles of democracy on a daily basis. The target group is 9440 women from the refugee camps of Gaza. The project will last for nine months.

Appeal by Minister of Health on Women's Day

Dr. Jawad Tibi, Minister of Health, calls upon the international community to provide international protection to Palestinian women and to the Palestinian people in general. In a statement by the ministry, it was announced that no less than 205

Palestinian women have been killed and 55 forced to give birth at Israeli checkpoints because they were not allowed to reach hospitals (33 babies died in these cases). Thirty-one other women have died due to prevention of medical treatment by the Israeli army. The statement highlights the fact that it is only Palestinian women, in the 21st century, there are forced to suffer from these unnecessary health problems and deliver their babies at army checkpoints. Sometimes, the soldiers not only prevent women from crossing checkpoints to access health centers, but also shoot at them. The statement concludes with an appeal to the UN, the WHO, UNRWA, UNICEF and the entire world to immediately intervene to stop the Israeli assaults and these oppressive forms of occupation against Palestinians. The appeal calls on the entire world to put pressure on Israel so that it will have to abide by international law and agreements, such as the Fourth Geneva Convention, to protect the civilian population, especially women and children and to stop house demolitions.