

Voice of Women
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In this issue:

What are our reader's opinions of Voice of Women?
Marriage to foreigners
Women's lending program launched in Gaza
Women's participation in economic development is low
Diary of a woman in her forties
Special interview with poet Sabah Al-Qalazin
Coffee shops: An escape from responsibility?
Special interview with Director Azza Al-Hassan
The joy of knowing mentally retarded people
The struggle of Palestinian women
Study of Social Phenomena in Gaza
Kalthum Odeh: The decision to stay in Russia

Editorial: A moment of self-evaluation

This special issue marks the fourth anniversary of the publication of our Arabic bi-weekly newspaper supplement, *Sawt An-Nissa -- Voice of Women*. In every issue, we ask ourselves what we have accomplished in the past in order to evaluate the supplement in terms of its weaknesses and strengths.

What are our reader's opinions of Voice of Women?

On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the publication of our Arabic bi-weekly newspaper supplement Voice of Women, we interviewed some of our readers to ask their opinions about the supplement, its content and the subjects published.

The Secretary of the Laborers Council at the Palestinian Laborers Union, Mohammed Arqawi, said, 'The supplement carries a message that shows the amount of injustice and oppression to which Palestinian women are exposed. The message, however, is supposed to deal with issues related to women's creativity and women who have reached leading and prominent positions in society so that they look at the future with more optimism.'

Ms. Iptisam Al-Yamouni from the Handicapped Rehabilitation Program at the Patient Friendship Society in Ramallah stressed the importance of dealing with women's issues and problems, especially those related to divorce, rape, violence and its dangers.

Women activist Laila Shreim stressed the important role of Voice of Women as a media newsletter that contributes significantly to the awareness of women and

society. She also described the results reached by Voice of Women as excellent because it has been able to reach a wider range of readers.

Ma'moun Iteili from the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights (PICCR) said, Voice of Women carries a significant, purposeful message aiming at upgrading the situation of women and society, because women constitute half the society's population.' With regard to the subjects covered in the supplement, Iteili said, 'The subjects are very good because they deal with the reality of women in Palestinian society. At the same time, I suggest that the supplement includes detailed reports covering all the areas and issues relating to women in Palestinian society from social, economic, health and legal aspects.'

Marriage to foreigners **By Kamil Abu Shami, Women & Family Affairs Center**

The article sheds light on the phenomenon of marriages between Palestinians and foreigners: the reasons, motives, negative impact on individuals and on society, and ways of bringing the phenomenon to an end.

Head of the Sociology Department at An-Najah University in Nablus, Dr. Maher Abu Zant, comments on the phenomenon by saying, 'The phenomenon began with the immigration of Palestinian youth abroad, especially those with compulsory and permanent immigration as a result of the Israeli policies which prevented tens of thousands of Palestinians from returning to their homeland.'

The prevailing political, social and economic conditions, high cost of marriage compared to foreign countries, and the refusal of parents to send their daughters abroad are considered main reasons why Palestinian youth marry foreigners, Dr. Zant confirms.

He adds that divorce rates are high due to the failure of the marriage, resulting in a negative impact on the individuals, children and direct impact on society.

He concluded by stressing the importance of launching special programs to raise awareness among Palestinian youth concerning the consequences and negative impact of the phenomenon on the individual, children and society. He also stressed the importance of reducing the cost of marriage and dowry in order to make it easier for the Palestinian youth.

A research study on 'Marriage from Foreigners and its Relation to Celibacy' was conducted two years ago by the Researcher Iman Al-A'raj. The study included 500 cases of Palestinian youth who are married to foreigners, including 14 cases who are married to Israelis and excluding those who are married to women from the 'green line'. In the study, the researcher stated five reasons why Palestinian youth prefer to marry foreigners. These include nationality, financial benefit, physical appearance, and high cost of marriage and dowry in the Arab societies compared to foreign countries. One or two of these are enough for the person to marry a foreigner, the study noted.

Women's lending program launched in Gaza **Laila Ahmad**

The Women's Lending Program is one of the Culture & Free Thought Association's programs in Gaza. The program aims at activating the role of Palestinian women in society through providing them with loans to set up income generating projects. To introduce the reader to the role of the program in promoting the development process, *Sawt An-Nissa* reporter, Laila Ahmad, conducted an interview with the Director General of the Association, Maryam Zaqout.

She began by presenting a general view of the program: 'The program was launched in November 1990 with the participation of the American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) after they established a good relation with the local community, especially with children and women as being the most important group in need for care and attention. In addition, the program serves Palestinian women and helps them to achieve some of their goals and ambitions.'

'In light of the difficult economic situation and its negative psychological impact on Palestinian women, we felt the urgent need to help alleviate their suffering through providing loans to set up agricultural and productive projects on the condition that these projects will contribute to the advancement of the development process,' she added.

She went on to say, 'The program aims at increasing women's participation in the economic activity through creating a job opportunity for them. The total amount of the loan ranges between \$2,000 and \$5,000, of which the borrower contributes between 10 and 40% according to the nature of the project.'

'The period of the loan ranges between 12 and 30 months according to the cash flow plan and the nature of the project. The borrower is allowed to apply for a second loan after settling 80% of the first loan. She is also given a grace period, between two and six months, after which the borrower starts settling the loan by making monthly payments,' she said.

Women's participation in economic development is low **Widad Al-Barghouti**

The article deals with women's participation in the economic development and the reasons that limit their participation. These include:

*Education: School dropout rates between male and female students are similar in the early years of school and increase in the secondary and higher education. Male students leave school for economic reasons or due to bad results in school, while female students leave school for early marriage or to help their mothers in the household chores. A small percentage of female students leave school for work.

In the field of agriculture and fishing, there are 45 female students out of 288, constituting 15.6% of the total number of students, and increases to 59% in the field

of education, human and religious sciences. It is noteworthy to mention that the percentage of educated women decreases in the high academic levels.

*Early marriage: According to the 1997 statistics released by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 40% of female students and 2.7% of male students marry under the age of 18 years. This means that a high percentage of female students are deprived of pursuing their education and thus of participating in the economic development.

The article also deals with the issue of discrimination in wages between men and women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Working women in the West Bank earn 66.3% of the total wages earned by men and up to 81.3% in the Gaza Strip. The differences in wages between the West Bank and Gaza Strip are attributed to the fact that the average of wages in the Gaza Strip is less than the West Bank.

Statistics released by the PCBS indicate a low percentage of women working inside Israel as opposed to men. Women represent less than 3% of the total number of Palestinian workers in Israel.

The following chart is a survey of the labor force during 1996.

Economic Activity	City		Village		Camp		Israel	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agriculture	4.3	4.9	31.1	67.0	5.0	3.0	11.7	53.7
Stonecutter & mining	19.3	19.6	14.0	9.1	20.3	27.4	12.4	16.3
Constructions	14.2	1.2	18.6	0.1	17.4	0.4	59.7	6.6
Trade, hotels, & restaurants	23.0	9.4	12.8	3.1	22.5	15.6	10.6	3.1
Transportation	6.5	1.1	5.9	0.0	6.3	1.7	1.3	0.0
Services	32.7	63.8	17.5	20.6	28.5	52.0	4.3	20.3
Total	100.00	100.0	100.0	100.00	100.0	100.00	100.00	100.0

*Source: The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics for the year 1996.

Diary of a woman in her forties By Um Karmel

Household chores are considered one form of violence to which women worldwide are exposed mainly for not being acknowledged as a productive labor. Not surprisingly, in 1976 Cuba was the first country to pass a law mandating men must help their wives and alleviate some of the pressure placed on them.

By taking a quick look at the human development report for the year 1998, we can notice the amount of violence and oppression to which women all over the world are exposed. According to the report, the total annual expenses spent on reproductive health equal to \$12 billion. At first, this figure seems to be huge, but diminishes when

compared to the \$17 billion which is spent on the food of domestic animals in Europe and the United States and the \$35 billion on the entertainment of businessmen in Japan.

The report adds that \$6 billion is spent on primary education worldwide, which is equal to 1.5% of the total expenditures spent annually on drugs in Europe and the United States and 35% of total expenditures spent annually on the food of domestic animals in the same areas. Despite these realities, women continue to face accusations of magnifying their concerns when raising women's issues.

Special interview with poet Sabah Al-Qalazin

Sabah was born in 1973 in a Bedouin community. She studied art at the Islamic University in Gaza and later became an Arabic language teacher at Al-Rimal Girls Preparatory School. She published a collection of her poems, titled 'Sparkling Confessions', which received the admiration of many readers. She won the second prize for a women's creativity contest organized by the Ministry of Youth & Sports in 1999. While in university, Sabah participated in a number of poetry evenings. She regularly publishes her poems in the Arabic daily Al-Ayyam, Al-Hayyat Al-Jadideh, and Al-Karameh. Women are the main focus of her poetry due to her personal experience in Palestinian society, especially in the Bedouin community, where women face severe restrictions which limit their ability to express their humanity. For this reason, Sabah works to oppose prevailing customs and traditions with the aim of freeing all women to be effective members in society and to participate in all spheres of life.

Coffee shops: An escape from responsibility? Wisam Abdullah

There are coffee shops all over the world where people can spend some time for pleasure and enjoyment. The situation in Palestine is completely different. Coffee shops, in many instances, are a clear indicator of the fact that men and women live in separate worlds. Instead we need to create common ground for a new type of relationship between men and women.

The article presents samples of men who go to the coffee shop either for entertainment or to evade responsibilities either temporarily or permanently. Thirty-nine-year-old Mohammed works inside the 'green line' goes to the coffee shop every day immediately after work. 'My father married another woman after my mother's death. Since my father registered the house in the name of my stepmother five years ago, I have been facing problems with her. She wants me to leave the house. So, I come to the coffee shop everyday immediately after work and stay until it closes,' he said.

Asked about the possibility of moving to a house of his own, he replied by saying, 'I wish I could, but I cannot afford paying the rent and other expenses needed in the

house. So, I have to accept the situation until I can afford to buy a house. Then my stepmother won't see my face again.'

A father of four children, the eldest of whom is 14-year-old, leaves the house at six in the morning and returns at nine in the evening. He goes to the coffee shop everyday immediately after work to smoke arghillah and to play cards with some friends. His wife does the household chores after returning from work in the afternoon hours. When he returns home he does not have time to take care of his children who are in need of love and care at their young age. 'Their mother is responsible for them. I told her a thousand times to leave her job, but she claims that my salary is not enough,' he said.

Special interview with Director Azza Al-Hassan Najwa Al-Qasem

Azza Al-Hassan is 28 years old and holds a master's degree from Britain in directing documentary films. She has directed a number of films that depict various aspects of Palestinian life. She participated in directing the film entitled 'Women Talk', which was screened in a number of Arab countries, including Tunisia, Yemen, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine. The film tells the story of two women. One first is from the town of Tamoun in the district of Jenin where women are not allowed to pursue their education. She becomes the first woman in her town to study. The second woman is from Jerusalem and lives in Nablus. She ends up divorced after being put in jail. The story also deals with violence to which she was exposed by the Israeli prison authorities. In her work, Azza focuses on the social and humanitarian aspect of life to a greater extent than she does political aspects. 'Dealing with Palestinians and their daily life is much better than dealing with politics,' she said. Azza was awarded a prize for her film entitled 'Koshan Mousa' during a festival for short stories and documentary films which was held in Britain recently. The film is about 'Ma'eli Adomim', the largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank, and the suffering of the Palestinians whose lands were confiscated to build the settlement, an experience shared by thousands of Palestinians whose lands were confiscated by the Israeli occupation authorities. 'The film was a turning point in my professional life because I was in charge of the shooting myself.'

The joy of knowing mentally handicapped people

In its last issue, Sawt An-Nissa' raised the issue of the mentally retarded people, drawing the attention of a number of concerned institutions, especially human rights organizations and media institutions. The supplement presented cases of mentally retarded people who are treated harshly by their families. This article, on the other hand, covers positive examples of handicapped people who are provided with loving care and attention by their families. The article presents the case of Um Mohammed, a mother of seven children, one of whom suffers from Downs Syndrome. 'From the beginning, I felt that the pregnancy was not like the previous ones. When Rawan was born she was very quiet and slept a lot. A week after her birth, I took her to Dr. Amin Thalji who diagnosed her with Downs Syndrome,' Um Mohammed said. What disturbs Um Mohammed is the view of society toward the handicapped people. 'It

disturbs me very much when people blame me for spending money on the treatment of my daughter as though she does not have the right to be loved. Besides, people keep comparing my daughter with normal children. That's why I do not like children of my daughter's age to visit us,' she said bitterly. Um Mohammed takes her two-year-old Downs Syndrome child regularly to the Childhood Center for Private Care, the first of its kind in Palestine. The Technical Supervisor, Iyad Al-Halaq, was interviewed to provide the reader with an idea about the center, its nature, and its services. 'The center deals with all types of mental disabilities. Mild cases are treated in the center, while severe cases are referred to the Swedish Organization for Individual Relief (SOIR) in Jerusalem or to Jabal An-Nijmeh Rehabilitation Center near Bethlehem because they are furnished with advanced equipment and qualified specialists. The center also receives cases that suffer from learning difficulties, limited cognitive abilities and language disorders, such as stuttering,' Iyad said. He went on to say, 'In addition to treating the above cases, the center treats children who suffer from behavioral and psychological disorders, such as aggressiveness, hyperactivity, fear, incontinence, shyness, and introversion. The center also provides family counseling to enhance cooperation between the family and the center.' Iyad pointed out that the problems of children are sometimes caused by violence, excess care, discrimination between children, lack of awareness among families concerning proper ways of treating their children, and the hesitancy of the parents to replace traditional ideas of child rearing with new concepts.

The struggle of Palestinian women Suheir Shbeita, Women & Family Affairs Center, Nablus

The article sheds light on the significant contribution by women to the national liberation of the Palestinian people against the Israeli occupation, especially during the intifada which erupted throughout the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in December 1987. The article also deals with the suffering of Palestinian women as a result of Israel's harsh measures aimed at suppressing the national resistance by all means, such as imprisonment, killing, arrest, expulsion, deportation, house demolition, ID confiscation, land expropriation, and others.

Hundreds of women were arrested by the Israeli occupation authorities and tens were sentenced to life imprisonment. Some of them were released through an exchange of prisoners or following the signing of the Peace Agreements between the Palestinians and the Israelis on 13 September 1993 in Washington. Israel currently holds nine female prisoners.

The article concludes by saying, 'Despite the difficult economic and political situation faced by the Palestinian people, Palestinian women have been able to pursue their education and to challenge Israel's illiteracy policy practiced against the Palestinian people.'

According to the 1996-97 Statistical Guidebook issued by the Public Administration for Planning & Development at the Ministry of Higher Education, the number of female and male students in the Palestinian universities was 14,319 students. This

represents 7,923 male students, constituting 55.3% of the total number of students, and 6,396 female students, constituting 44.7%.

According to the guidebook, there were 1,729 female and male teachers in the Palestinian universities during the 1996-97 academic year. Of these, 1,510 were male teachers, constituting 87.3%, and 219 were female teachers, constituting 12.7% of the total number of teachers.

Study of Social Phenomena in Gaza

A recent study of social phenomena was conducted by the Community Training Center in Gaza on a sample consisting of 1,889 individuals throughout the governorates of Gaza. The sample included 1,333 women and 556 men. The study produced the following ranking of social issues in Gaza in terms of their severity:

- Unemployment constitutes 78.3%
- Environmental and social pollution constitutes 39.6%
- Population growth constitutes 22.1%
- Nepotism and bribe constitutes 11.8%
- Early marriage constitutes 11.3%
- Divorce constitutes 8.5%
- Family problems constitute 8.4%

The Director of the Community Training Center, Dr. Fadel Abu Hein, warned of the dangerous impact of unemployment on the social and psychological condition of the residents. He confirmed that the high level of pollution has negatively affected the social relationships between people, resulting in problems such as drug use, domestic violence, divorce, school dropout, rape, kidnapping, suicide, delinquency, and others.

The study reveals that 83.5% of those surveyed do not support the practice of intermarriage and 91% do not support early marriage. 50% of those surveyed identified the ideal age of marriage for females is between the ages of 19 and 21, while 35% of those surveyed considered the ideal age of marriage for males to be from age 22 to 25.

The study confirms that 51% of the female residents and 45.6% of the male residents suffer from psychological disorders as a result of the above-mentioned social problems.

This study is considered one of the few to deal with the social problems faced by the Palestinian people at this critical stage. It highlights the importance of confronting these phenomena by specialists and the importance of creating a mechanism to avoid a crisis.

Kalthum Odeh: The decision to stay in Russia

Kalthum Odeh embodies an important example of an educated, intellectual woman who rebelled against parental authority and challenged her society's customs and traditions. She chose to determine her life and future according to her own wishes instead of accepting a reality imposed on her by the society of the early twentieth century.

Kalthum lived through the Belfast Revolution and the Civil War in Russia. She studied Ethnography and was active with Russian Communist Party. When she returned to Palestine, she conducted a number of studies and research in Ethnography. It is worth mentioning that she was the first woman to look at Palestinian women from a 'gender' perspective as a means of working for the defense of their rights and the removal of all forms of discrimination and injustice against women.

Kalthum was born in Nazareth in 1892. At an early age, she became aware of the differences between the way males and females were treated in her community. She was the fifth daughter in a family that was not enthusiastic about having more girls. Her mother's continued demeaning remarks about her physical appearance motivated her to invest her energy in education and in becoming independent. She worked as a teacher in one of the schools in Nazareth. 'My mother was not happy when I was born. She always used to tell me: 'Who is going to marry you? You will spend the rest of your life as a servant for your sisters-in-law.' This statement encouraged her to pursue her education and to work in teaching in order to become independent,

In 1908, Kalthum finished her high school education at the age of 16 years old. She immediately began teaching in the Girls Elementary School in Nazareth. While working, she met her husband, Krachoviski, a Russian doctor and an expert Arab civilization. When they met he was working with the Palestine Russian Orthodox Society. They decided to marry, but her father, who had not expected her to marry, objected strongly. Kalthum, who was determined, financially independent and believed in her right to determine the course of her own life, insisted on marriage. After the intervention of some of her relatives, the marriage took place in the summer of 1914.

In 1914, Kalthum traveled with her husband to Russia in order to spend what was supposed to be a short honeymoon, but the trip was fateful and constituted a turning point in her life. Odeh says on that period, 'In 1914, my husband and I came to Russia to spend two months. My arrival to Russia coincided with the beginning of the World War I, and I stayed the rest of my life.'

She devoted much of her writings to defending women's right to marriage regardless of religion and race. In one of her articles entitled 'Meditations in the Daily Life of Arab Contemporary Women,' she strongly supports the right of Arab women to marriage on the basis of love and mutual understanding.