

Voice of Women
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Freedom, knowledge and empowerment of women

***Voice of Women* in the eyes of its readers**

In Bardala, every woman is affected by the apartheid wall

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Um Jamal, a housewife with three children, is one of dozens of women whose daily conversations revolve around the wall and its implications. The Israeli government is squeezing the village into a very a small circle, making their situation even more difficult than what they experienced in the early stages of the Intifada. She recalls that a few weeks before, a special unit of Israeli engineers came to explore the area. They drove around the farms, damaging crops, disrupting the sewage system and terrifying everyone in the village, she says. Months later, the terrible threat became a reality and the villagers witnessed the horrific destruction of their land.

Haja Um Nader Sawafta speaks of the anguish and fear she feels as she watches Israel change the landscape. She worries that history might repeat itself and a catastrophe such as what happened in 1948 could happen again in which she would be forced to leave her land and belongings -- this time, to be devoured by the illegal wall.

According to recent maps produced by the Israeli media, and analyzed by Israeli analysts, the wall is to be built few meters away from the villager's houses and farms. Villagers report that they have already been issued notices by the Israeli government that their land has been confiscated for the building of the wall.

The wall has many implications and impacts on the villagers' lives. A survey carried out by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics on the families that were affected by the wall, revealed that since the construction of the wall, 80.1% of the families who are living to the west of the wall have to travel at least four kilometers to get to the nearest public or private hospital. Statistics also reveal that the medical status of 73.7% of the families residing to the west of the wall has been affected due to the loss of access to medical facilities, and the medical status of 38.6% of the families residing to the east of the wall has been negatively impacted. Moreover, 23.6% of the families residing to the east of the wall have been forced to move, and 19.3% of the families living to the west of the wall suffered complete or partial damage to their property.

Isolation Process

Results of another survey indicate that the 7.4% of the families living in the western side of the wall have had their land confiscated as opposed to 12.3% families on the eastern side.

An eyewitness said that these recent violations committed by the Israeli government are in fact an extension of the racist project that was launched three years ago, sealing villages through military closure or by trenches and fences. She also indicated that students are the group most severely affected by these measures, and that many of their teachers are no longer able to get to the schools. This has had a negative impact on academic performance.

Three biggest needs of the Arab world: Freedom, knowledge and the empowerment of women

The annual report released by the UNICEF on the status of children around the world states that humanity itself is at its stake due to the severe violations of children and women's rights.

The poorest sector in the world: children and women

The report indicates that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, children and women have formed the poorest sectors of society, becoming the poorest citizens of the world. Women and children are continuously exposed to different sorts of oppression and discrimination. The report also indicates that there has been a noticeable increase in different forms of violence against women and children.

Ironically, most efforts to change this reality have been conspicuously unsuccessful. For instance the International Summit for Childhood which took place in 1990 and the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 failed to reduce this phenomenon or the alarming implications associated with it. Creating alternative environments where children and women can enjoy healthy lives with adequate education and social status has also been a difficult mission.

Anti-capitalists attribute such inequality to the capitalist system. Capitalism, according to their claims, relies on the exploitation of the poor as a workforce willing to work for little money and under inhumane conditions. Women and children in this analysis rank the top of the list.

Similarly, globalization is playing a major role in widening the gap between the north and the south. As a result, the majority of children and women in the southern parts of the world are facing poverty, hunger, illness, and a sense of hopelessness about the future.

600,000 Women

According to the UNICEF report; more than 30,500 male and female children are dying every day due to lack of protection. Furthermore, more than 250,000 child and youth

acquire HIV positive status every month. 600,000 women lose their lives as a result of malpractice or complications during and after pregnancy or labor, errors which could easily be avoided if the necessary equipment and knowledge were available. Additionally, hundreds of millions of children and women are deprived of adequate water and electricity facilities, educational and health services in “developing” countries. The International Labor Organization indicates that approximately 250 million children between the age of 5 and 14 work under dangerous conditions.

On another level, it has also been documented in the report that during the ten year span between 1989 and 1999 -- in other words, in the ten years following the declaration of children’s rights in 1989 -- two million children were killed and more than six million were injured or/ an disabled due to wars, conflicts and landmines. Moreover, tens of millions of children and women, particularly in the impoverished south, are forced to work under conditions which threaten their lives or their health, include having to work in militias and armed groups or criminal gangs. As a result, innocent children become involved in illegal activities such as drug trafficking, thievery, the black market and prostitution.

Arab Human Development

The report also discusses the situation in the Arab world. It indicates that the humanitarian situation in the Arab world deteriorated severely during 2002 including degeneration in the status of women and children in terms of lack of freedom, lack of empowerment and lack of knowledge amongst females.

The Arab Human Development report for the year 1995 introduced a criterion for measuring the empowerment of women in order to assess their contribution to the political and economic sectors which impact their standard of living. Surprisingly, it has been found that the Arab world ranks the lowest in the world with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, of women empowerment. Additionally, fifty percent of Arab females in the Arab world are illiterate; in total there are 65 million illiterate people in the Arab world, of which two-thirds are women. The death rate among pregnant women before and after labor in the Arab World is double that in Latin America and four times that in Eastern Asia. Twelve million Arabs are unemployed, most of them females.

Voice of Women in the eyes of its readers

Voice of Women has acquired a significant status amongst local media. It is considered one of the most important media bringing the issues and concerns of women to the public domain and to decision makers.

Voice of Women is dedicated to exposing to the public the social and institutionalized oppression to which women are subjected. Such oppression includes social discrimination, traditional stereotypes which stem from hegemonic patriarchal discourses in society, in addition to other forms of oppression manifested in physical and psychological abuse. Moreover, *Voice of Women* is considered a forum for female and

male writers to express their thoughts and opinions on the role of women in society, and the promotion of gender equality and justice. These writers have also highlighted the importance of women's roles in building society and their participation in the decision making process and strategic planning.

Important Forum

Mahmoud Ziyadeh, project coordinator of Right to Work and the social programs at the Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre said that *Voice of Women* is considered an important reference for women's issues and concerns. It provides a forum for the expression of women's opinions and thoughts on general issues and on the multi-faceted oppression and abuse women face. He pointed out that in order for *Voice of Women* to be effective it has to target and influence decision makers in the governmental and private sectors. He also added that the information collected by *Voice of Women* should be used to influence and exert pressure on decision makers and officials to take necessary action. Ziyadeh also said that it is very important at this stage for *Voice of Women* to begin organizing special sessions to address the issues raised in its publications.

Variety

A journalism student at Birzeit University, Maram Totah, said that *Voice of Women* tackles a variety of issues on the individual and the societal levels. It spotlights the role of women in their local communities as it points out its importance to the formation and construction of a society that maintains gender equality and democracy as its basic foundations. She elaborates that this newspaper should develop its capacities and presentation to the level of the change that it aims to create.

Furthermore, Najd elaborates that *Voice of Women* presents social issues that reflect the reality of the Palestinian society through analysis and critique which explores political and social concerns and issues.

Pioneers

The writer and novelist Hassan Abdullah described *Voice of Women* as having played a pioneering role. He pointed out that *Voice of Women* has helped writers and journalists to clarify their own positions.

Like others, he mentioned the significance of *Voice of Women's* work to showcase a variety of political, social, literary, humanistic and feminist issues. He added that such variety enriches the debate as we cannot isolate women's issues from the socio-political and economic issues in society.

On another level, the director of Al Haq, Randa Siniora, criticized *Voice of Women* for utilizing male writers to the exclusion of female writers, saying that the newspaper should maintain a feminist perspective that exposes to the readers the oppression and discrimination that women experience. She feels that *Voice of Women* maintained this focus for a short period of time then became distracted by general issues.

Siniora stressed that the newspaper should preserve its feminist approach and originality in terms of focussing on the issues of violence and equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination.

Defying taboos

On another level, Nojood Alqasem indicated that *Voice of Women* has opened new spaces for addressing socially taboo issues. It has also demonstrated the suffering of women under the Israeli occupation throughout Palestine and their capacity for resisting these assaults and violations.