

Voice of Women
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Challenges facing the Ministry of Women's Affairs

The Palestinian Ministry of Women Affairs is in the process of planning its strategy. Many NGOs have been working and fighting for women's rights in the absence of a Ministry. These NGOs have been monitoring laws related to women and proposing revisions, empowering women, ensuring women's participation in decision making and working to transform society's perception of the role of women in its development.

What will then be the relationship between the Ministry and these organizations?

The question today is whether the Ministry will choose a strategy focusing on developing women or on addressing our social context? Both strategies are essential and crucial for women's empowerment and their role in decision making. We do hope that the presence of such a Ministry, specialized in women's issues, will play a fundamental role in social inclusion in policies and plans in the other Palestinian Ministries. We also hope that the Minister of Women's Affairs, who has worked for a very long time for women's rights, will work in close cooperation with women's organizations in order to avoid redundancy.

Study: The health needs of youth

A recent health study has shown that 42.38% of Palestinian youth from both sexes are in need of psychological and health services, especially in the area of awareness. The study, titled *Health Needs of Youth*, was conducted by Binan Association for Training, Evaluation and Social Studies in cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Health, and sponsored by the German Agency for Arts Cooperation.

The report focused on young people between the ages of 15 and 25, during the period from August through December of 2003. The study was conducted on a random sample of 2594 young people, 1269 of whom were females.

The objective of the study was to explore the health situation of Palestinian youths in order to determine their needs with an aim to developing recommendations that can guide new programs and projects for youth.

The study was conducted in the villages, refugee camps, and cities of the Gaza Strip using surveys, workshops and personal interviews.

61.44% of the youth interviewed said they are in need of educational health services, 65.5% said they need health awareness campaigns and 63% believe that the political situation has negatively affected health services.

The report produced the following recommendations for improving the health of Palestinian youth in the occupied territories:

1. Provide mental health programs to address the stress and psychological trauma experienced by youth due to the current political situation (56% suffer from psychological problems)
2. Organize workshops focused on youth to teach skills for coping with stress and anxiety.
3. Organize health support courses in hospitals, health centers and clinics
4. Address the problem of unemployment
5. Organize awareness courses on:
 - a. Health concepts
 - b. Health food
 - c. Health practices
 - d. Early analysis
 - e. Environmental issues
6. Improve coordination with the Ministry of Education in order to include health subjects and related topics in the curriculum
7. Organize awareness campaigns through conferences and debates on TV to be held on a regular basis, in coordination with schools, universities and educational institutions
8. Coordinate with all media outlets in order to promote health issues

Quality of Education and Development Requirements

Sana' Assi

Palestinians have achieved great successes in the educational sector, among both sexes. During the last three decades, the numbers of males and females who have

enrolled at primary schools have doubled. For many families, education has become their only hope for a secure future and a steady income: especially after many have lost their lands or been displaced, education has become their only weapon and investment for survival.

Because of the yearly increase of the number of students, policy makers have prioritized the challenge of integrating new students at the expense of the quality of education. This has had a negative impact on the educational system as a whole. From a developmental perspective, it is necessary that we improve the quality of education provided to students at the same time as ensuring that have planned for the numbers of students. Quantity and quality should go hand in hand.

The 2002 Arab Human Development Report indicates that education in the Middle Eastern countries has failed to empower students' analytical and creative abilities, a sign of deteriorating educational programming.

By pursuing an advanced quality educational system, social issues, such as gender, could be included in the curriculum, facilitating the participation of both male and female students in debate and discussion. The dangers of early marriage could also be incorporated. If we want to change our social reality and the stereotyping of women, we must start from the schools. Inclusion of social issues in our educational system is an important tool for positively changing our social reality. Our teachers need awareness training in order to be able to educate their students about these issues. By encouraging such debates we also help our students to develop their critical thinking skills. These issues have a direct impact on their daily lives and through discussions they will be able to generate solutions applicable to their individual situations.

The Human Development Report for 2003 indicates that the greatest challenge we face in education is a deterioration in quality. To reverse this, we need to focus on improving our educational policies, the situation of teachers, the curriculum and the methods of education.

March towards freedom: the reality of Palestinian women

Palestinian women have played an active role in the current Intifada in working for independence and freedom. They have provided medical treatment to the injured, violated Israeli curfews reaching order to get to school or farm their land, and continued to raise their children.

Samia Bamieh, from the Governmental Coordination Committee for Women's Empowerment, believes that there are three tasks on which we should focus: combating unemployment among women, providing women with psychological support to build their self-confidence and marketing women's products by organizing exhibitions.

Zuheira Kamal, Minister for Women's Affairs, states that it is impossible to talk about social justice as long as women have still not won the right to live alone and own her propriety. It is essential to ensure equal opportunities for both men and women, in order to attain social justice within the Palestinian society.

Dr. Hassan Abu Lebdeh, President of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and General Secretary of the Council of Ministers, said that decision makers should bridge the gap between the situations of women and men in all fields and give women the right to participate in the building and developmental processes in their society. If women are marginalized, we will never achieve an independent and free state. It is well documented that a society which tends to ignore or minimize the roles of a particular sector based on their gender, or ethnic, religious backgrounds, will never represent its interests in a just manner.

Thuraya Al Wazir, female judge

At first, people could not accept having to deal with a female judge. But Thuraya has proven her skill and competency to make sound legal judgments and eventually gained the status of a celebrity. Her reputation and qualifications finally convinced society to forget about her gender.

Thuraya affirms that the current Palestinian Civil Laws offer women their full rights, equal to men. But what is needed, she argues, is for women to exercise these in practice, working alongside men in all domains. It is important that women practice their rights through work and concrete, creative achievements.

Foreign women in Gaza

Mirvat Ouf

Palestine is our Home, is an organization that aims at integrating foreigners married to Palestinians within the Palestinian society, based on equality, justice, equal opportunities and respect for democracy and human rights. The association was founded by Sika Sharafi, who came to Palestine with her husband, the former minister Kamal Sharafi, in 1986. She lived with him in Jabalya refugee camp. With other women who are married to Palestinians, Sika organized letter-writing campaigns to the UN Assembly General to protest the events in Palestine and the world's complete silence about the Israeli aggressions against the Palestinian people. The group then formed this association not only to build Palestinian bridges with their countries, but also to empower them to integrate into the Palestinian society and participate in the Palestinian public life. This came after consideration of the cultural differences and customs which led these women to build communication channels with the Palestinians.

The first task was to learn the Arabic language. As mothers of Palestinian children, they felt it was a priority to learn their children's first language. The second important issue was to learn more about the Palestinian cause. To do this, they organized workshops to learn about Palestinian history. They faced the following problems:

1. There are no official statistics on the number of foreign women in Palestine. Some unofficial records state that their number varies between 500 and 600, most of whom are from Russia, Ukraine and Romania.
2. The same problem faced by Palestinian organizations is also faced by this organization: the Israeli occupation hampers movement, preventing them from meeting or communicating efficiently.
3. 95% of these foreigners do not have an ID because Israel refuses to give them one. Like Palestinians, they are not allowed to travel! The problem is even worse because these women have families abroad and are not allowed to visit them.