

Voice of Women
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Editorial: A futile withdrawal

Israel and the U.S.A have withdrawn from one of the most important world conferences on racism, held in Durban, South Africa. They withdrew to cover up their crimes committed against the Palestinian nation -- the massacres, the racist policy of discrimination, and the inhumane treatment of Palestinian people -- unfortunately all justified or overlooked by the USA.

Israel has been refusing for years to implement international declarations and UN resolutions. It continues committing more crimes: building and expanding illegal Israeli settlements, assassinating Palestinian leaders, shelling civilian Palestinian homes and neighborhoods. It is imposing a time of closure around Palestinian cities and towns that unprecedented in the world, dividing the West Bank into 64 cantons, the Gaza Strip into 3 parts, and installing 145 Israeli military blockades between Palestinian villages, cities and areas. Palestinian mothers and women are victims of Israeli racist and discriminating policies, too. Dozens of women have been shot dead while walking down the street, simply do some shopping for their loved ones. The cause of women is interrelated with the national struggle, and cannot be separated. Our children are deprived of education. They cannot even reach their schools due to the Israeli closure.

The Israeli government must understand that the more that Palestinians are pressured, killed, dehumanized, imprisoned and deprived of basic needs, the more determined they will become about winning their rights and the less Israelis will ever be able to live in security.

Israel refuses to face the truth and instead continues to commit more crimes, still insisting on its own narrative, which will ultimately isolate Israel from the rest of the world. Until that time, we Palestinians, aware of the truth and willing to face reality, will continue to survive and to struggle for our dignity.

**Most visitor visas have expired: occupation threatens hundreds of families
Mirvat Sadeq, Palestinian Women Journalist Office, Nablus**

Since the early 1990s there have been an increasing number of cases of Palestinian men marrying Palestinian women, often their relatives, who live outside the borders of Palestine. These women are not issued the identity cards by Israel that would allow them to live in Palestine. Typically they are issued visitor permits which are valid for three months and can be renewed for an additional four months, after which they are forced to leave the country until a new visitor permit is issued for them by Israel, which is often very difficult to obtain. At the end of the four-month period, they are faced with a terrible dilemma. They either leave the country with their children, leaving their life behind, and wait for months or even years before being allowed into Palestine again, or they continue living in Palestine 'illegally,' -- according to Israeli rules -- until some kind of reunification documents are processed, which can take three to five years.

Um Nur from Qalqilia, Um Rahaf from Salfeet, Nujud Shareedah from Nablus and Um Ilia from Tal Village are all victims of this Israeli policy that deprives Palestinian spouses of the opportunity to have a happy, safe, intimate family life. They all share the same suffering. If they choose to remain with their husbands in Palestine, their movement becomes limited due to the risk of being caught by Israeli military forces. They become imprisoned victims, waiting years for their permits to be issued. They are not allowed to visit their families, parents, sisters and brothers, in their country of origin. They are not allowed to attend their siblings' weddings, or family funerals. They are left with neither the citizenship in Palestine nor the opportunity to see their relatives. They feel insecure and disintegrated, having nightmares of being taken away from their children by Israeli forces. If, on the other hand, they chose to leave Palestine once their visitation permits have expired, they will be separated from their husband for an unlimited period of time, possibly years. Usually in these cases children accompany their mothers, meaning that they too are separated from their fathers, who due to either professional obligations or political reasons cannot leave Palestine. Some men, however, do choose to leave Palestine to continue to be with their family.

The Ministry of Interior has announced that for months now, Israeli authorities have not issued any visitor permits, not even to humanitarian or emergency cases. Israeli authorities consider a political solution as a prerequisite for the solution of social matters. As a result, spouses must continue to endure the agony of separation or the suffering of imprisonment within the borders of their cities.

**Sanabel / Campaigning with Rural Women Project (WATC):
Women of Zawatah village take action
Iman Abu Al-Rub, Head Project Coordinator**

The women of Zawatah village, like most Palestinian women, have dedicated their lives to providing for their families, spending most of their time trying to bring happiness and contentment to their family members. But when WATC began to work with Zawatah through its Sanabel project, the lives of these women began to gradually change. First they became aware of the project's aims: to empower women's role in changing social perceptions and building a democratic society based on equality and mutual respect. Several meetings were held between project supervisors and women from the village, incorporating them into the project's activities. The meetings resulted in the formation of a group of 25 women from Zawatah, seven of who were women leaders elected as Executive Committee members of the group to guide them. As a starting point, women's needs were assessed and it was determined that a training course on food production and preservation would be of great value, especially under the difficult political circumstances and continuous Israeli closure. The course was implemented in cooperation with Zawatah's local council. The head of the local council sponsored the project financially, convinced of the importance of women's role in society. Another priority was the large amount of time children in the village spent without healthy activities to occupy them. The women suggested starting a summer club for children at which they could spend their time safely and positively. In cooperation with several organizations and the project's field coordinator in Nablus, Ms. Firyal Al-Haj, the summer club was launched for the village's children.

Weddings, graduations, and military barriers 'Azezeh Nofal, Nablus, Palestinian Women Journalists Office

Summer brings with it a sense of happiness, joy and warmth. The season of weddings, engagements and college graduations approaches every year with a special feeling in the air. This year, however, everything has been different. The following story describes the kinds of hardships Palestinians can face just trying to get married.

A young man from Hijah Village was engaged for a year to a young woman from Nablus. As their wedding day approached, they made plans with their families for the celebrations. The tradition in Palestinian society is that the bride moves to her husband's village, or place of residence, where they start a new life together. This wouldn't have been much of an issue, had the political situation been different. The Israeli closure around Palestinian villages, towns and cities, forbidding movement and transportation, has turned ordinary travel into a nightmare. In this case, the bride's journey to her new home meant saying goodbye to her family, leave her decorated wedding car, and walking along a dusty path for 500 meters through a blockade until she could get to another car to take her to her new home. The Israeli military blockade prevented the wedding car from driving from her town to her husband's. The bride's family bid her farewell amidst joy mixed with bitterness, shocked that anything could ever prevent them from attending their daughter's wedding. In a celebration mixed with tears, the bride was sent off walking down the dusty road with her suitcases, which the soldiers emptied out on the

dirty road while they searched her, indifferent to the fact that she was in the middle of her wedding. All this on the pretext of protecting Israeli settlers!

Birzeit University, too, held its annual graduation ceremony in an atmosphere of joy mixed with pain. Hundreds of relatives and parents, especially those from Gaza, couldn't attend their children's long-awaited-for graduation ceremonies due to the Israeli closure. Many students had tears flowing down their cheeks, confused about whether they were tears of joy or sorrow, on such a wonderful and terrible occasion. In an attempt to compensate for the hardship, Birzeit University managed to provide live contact between the students from Gaza at Birzeit and their family in Gaza, through a television channel. After years of separation, it was their first opportunity to see each other. They laughed, cried and waved to each other via the cameras, sending their feelings, joy and sadness, to their loved ones. One mother could not stop ululating in the traditional way, adding a beautiful and tragic element to the whole occasion.

Such stories have become daily experiences for hundreds of Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These are just two of them.

**Palestinian newspapers continue to portray women as weak,
ignoring their powerful roles
Voice of Women, Gaza**

In a study entitled "The Palestinian Media and its Coverage of Women's Roles During the Al-Aqsa Intifada," it was revealed that women are still portrayed by the media in a stereotypical way, as weak and pathetic. The study focused on three levels:

(1) Women's actual roles in the Intifada as mothers of martyrs and wives of imprisoned or killed husbands who are required to endure incredible suffering and struggle for their lives and safety. Women have themselves been victims of Israel's terror. They too have been beaten, injured, killed and imprisoned. In the realm of education, they have proven capable of attaining advanced degrees, insisting on their right to education despite many obstacles. Finally, they have entered the labor market, working long hours to contribute to their families' economic survival.

(2) The portrayal of women in the media of the Arab world focuses on women as sexual and physical images, on fashion, home décor, furniture and the kitchen. This does not reflect the reality of Palestinian women in a time where poverty overrides all other aspects of the Palestinian society.

(3) The portrayal of women in Palestinian media, which has been affected by the Arab media, fails to represent Palestinian women's core issues and needs. It has been demonstrated that all local Palestinian newspapers, if they address women's issues at all, do not dedicate space in their papers to the needs and concerns of women. Newspapers haven't portrayed the true role of women at the grassroots level. They tend to focus on the activities of women's organizations, women leaders and the weekly protests planned calling for the release of Palestinian political prisoners from Israeli jails, especially

women prisoners. Local papers have also tended to focus on news about international and local women actors. All of these other images of women are used by the media, but not the image of real, struggling, determined, persevering women which most accurately represents the typical women of Palestine.

**Rabitat Al-Tashkeeliyyeen Al-Filasteeniyyeen teaches art to
handicapped and injured children of the Intifada
Ahmad Saleem, Ramallah**

At the end of a two-month training course on plastic arts, conducted by the Palestinian Union of Plastic Arts, a group of 12- and 13-year-old Palestinian children with handicaps and disabilities were given the pleasure of participating in an exhibition featuring their unique artistic pieces. During the course they were trained in the arts of mosaic, pottery, ceramics and drawing. Musa Samara, a 12-year-old from Al-Am'ari Refugee Camp, 'Ala' Mahmoud, 13, and Muhammad Abdul-Rahman 'Eid, also thirteen, have expressed their appreciation and gratitude for having been given the opportunity to participate in such a program. They consider it a way to fill the long, idle hours they face as refugee children, and a way to earn some money from their hand-made products.

The exhibition presented 150 ceramics and mosaic pieces, made by children. Many visitors attended and bought a variety of the exhibition pieces. There were beautiful vases, ash trays, a model of old Palestinian homes, and others. 'Ala' Mahmoud proudly explained that out of the money he made he will be able to buy school supplies and new clothes for the new school year.

Nabeel 'Anani, Director of the Union, explained that "we are trying to help children become aware of the artistic aspects of their personalities, and convey to them that life is not only about political struggle against Israeli occupation. In addition to their political and national obligations and roles, they have a very important social role to play, as well."

**Nadia, A Palestinian Child: The soldiers won't leave my school things alone!
Juthur Lil-Khadamat Al-Sahafiyyah, Gaza**

On the 19th of December, 2000, Israeli military forces occupied the roof of nine-year-old Nadia Abu-Khusa's home, near the Israeli settlement of Netzarim in southern Gaza. When asked for the reason, the Israeli soldiers claimed that they had been shot at from that area. Their occupation of the house continued for six consecutive months, during which the whole family was terrorized, threatened with death, inspected and controlled. Family members were only allowed to leave their home or enter it again according to regulations set by the soldiers. Relatives and visitors were also forced to follow these regulations, even on feast days. It was a long and agonizing period, during which Nadia, most of all, longed for it to end as soon as possible. She said, "At night I would wake up to terrible sound of firing from the top of the house. I was terrified. I closed my ears with

my fingers, tried to bury myself underneath my blanket, yet to no avail. Bullets were striking everywhere."

When she finally decided to leave her home and go to school, two days after the Israeli occupation of their home, she was terrified and shocked to see how "Israeli soldiers made it a daily habit to inspect my school bag closely, tampering with my notebooks, whenever I left or approached my own home!" For a period of two weeks, her father explained, Nadia refused to eat or drink more than she had to to stay alive. One time she saw the soldiers try to kill her 17-year-old brother, Samer, by throwing a bag full of sand on him from the top of their roof. Another time they tried to shoot him, then denied it.

For the Israelis, the security of the nearby Israeli settlement is an adequate justification for terrorizing the surrounding Palestinian civilians and children. How can Nadia help but hate the Israeli soldiers and policies, after all that she has experienced? The feelings of fear, the trauma, the laughter of the Israeli soldiers' at the misery of Palestinians, are now deep engraved within Nadia, and it will be a long time before they disappear, if they ever do.