

Palestinian Women: Achievements and Prospects

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We cannot measure the progress of the Palestinian people without appreciating the role and participation of Palestinian women. Since the British Mandate times women participated in the political and social activities intended to oppose the policies of the Mandate on the Jewish National Home and to support the nationalist movement to highlight Palestinian Arab rights and aspirations in Palestine. True, the involvement of Palestinian women at the British Mandate time was more restricted to the elite and higher class women who belonged to the urban notable families. Their example, nevertheless, emphasized that Palestinian women shared with the men the same predicament and worked for the same goals and objectives of affirmation of Palestinian national rights.

Since the model of Palestinian ‘notable’ women in the thirties of the last century, women in Palestine have come a long way. An impressive record of education reflects the fact that Palestinian women today are as well, if not more, educated than their male counterparts. Recent figures show that enrollment in basic and secondary education reflects a positive percentage for female students: 92.1% to 90.5% males in basic education and 79.5% to 69.8% males in secondary education. At the university level, there are currently 93,000 female students to only 75,000 male students. Salim Tamari, a well known Palestinian sociologist has argued that universities in Palestine serve a social function as well as an educational one. Young women attending these universities similarly to men use the university as a social venue, according to him. Whereby separated systems of high school education have not allowed social exchange across gender lines, the Palestinian universities offer the possibility of engaging in this kind of exchange as one gets an education. Thus, the social skills of young women as they go through four years of education at the university level are advanced through participation in the various activities on campus, including political parties, cultural activities and sports activities, among others.

Women prevail in the formal educational system as 12,000 of them are teachers to only 10,000 men. While this may reflect the fact that the society likes to see women employed in “socially secure or acceptable” occupations, the record of women involvement in different professions shows an increase in their participation in all of the key professions in Palestinian society. According to reliable figures published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, women have made progress in the following professions between 2000-2009:

Profession	2000	2009
Dentists	16.4%	23.1%
Doctors	10.7%	16.7%
Pharmacists	32.8%	51.5%
Nurses	53.8%	62.7%
Lawyers	9.0%	14.9%
Prosecutors	0%	5.0%
Judges	4.5%	11.7%

While the percentages of Palestinian women in both the pharmacist and the nursing professions are a reflection of the concentration of women in these two professions, one must remember that at a certain point in our past, the society rejected the idea that women be engaged in nursing. In fact, when Bethlehem University was established in 1973 and an excellent nursing faculty was started, some of the administration and faculty wondered if women students would come in enough numbers to warrant the establishment of such a faculty. Accordingly, the faculty was opened to both men and women and the success it has seen since is a reflection not only of its excellence but of the changing attitudes of the society in general to the profession of nursing and to the admittance of women to this vital profession. The argument against nursing for women is that it made the nurse come in contact with different patients and necessitates undertaking physical contact which goes counter to society's norms and cultural precepts. Apparently, the more professional aspect of nursing is more accepted now in Palestinian society as men and women nurses join together in the important task of caring for the sick and handicapped.

But clearly the figures on the professions point to a weakness of the participation of women in the legal and judicial professions. The percentage for women lawyers, judges and prosecutors are the lowest percentages in all of the professions cited. To ensure, however, that women were more represented in the Legislative Council (the Parliament) and in governmental positions, an election law necessitated the inclusion of women in secure positions which led to the increase of women representation in the Palestinian parliament from 5.9% in the first parliament elected in 1995 to 12.1% in the second parliament elected in 2006. Today, there are 16 female members of parliament, out of a total of 132 members, representing all the political groups. They are an active group of legislators and no one can think of the Palestinian parliament functioning without these women. Hopefully, the future will herald more numbers of Palestinian women serving as legislators. The Palestinian National Authority has also insisted on the inclusion of women in local and municipal councils elections. This step has seen a remarkable increase of women participation in local municipal affairs. At the government level, there are four women ministers serving the Ministries of Women Affairs; Education; Tourism and Social Affairs.

The transformations taking place in Palestinian society also point to a tendency of women to decide for themselves on marriage issues. In a recent survey conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 56% of women respondents stated that decision on marriage was primarily a personal decision to 40% who said that marriage decision was their parents'. More impressive perhaps is the fact that 84% of women respondents said that decision making at home was a joint undertaking between wife and husband and only less than 9% said that it was a decision made by the husband. A quarter of women polled said that they have some form of inheritance which reflects a changing practice in Palestinian society which used to unequally favor the male in inheritance matters.

And yet with all these achievements and accomplishments, motivated by women groups, political parties and factions and civil society organizations, there are some indicators that still point to the unequal situation of Palestinian women, especially in terms of access to the labor force and overall economic activity. As someone has argued previously in this conference, women conditions improve with their access to economic activity and the acquisition of wealth, independently of men. In Palestine, with the impressive statistics on education and what has been achieved there, only 15.5% are in the Labor Force in comparison to 67.0% of men. When we look at the sector of employment, we find that 62% of women are concentrated in the services, such as education and nursing, to only 35% of men. One interesting statistic shows that 21% of Palestinian women to only 10% of men are engaged in Agriculture. In this particular sector, women working conditions and wages are particularly worrying as women are asked to undertake some of the more demanding tasks and are recompensed at a much lower wage than men. Even women university graduates find it harder to find employment as the market and the social expectations are geared towards male employment and as society is more accepting of a woman graduate staying at home than a male graduate. Unemployment among women in the Labor Force is slightly higher at 26% than that of men at 24% while overall average daily wages favor men with 95 NIS (approximately 19 Euros) to women's' 77 NIS (approximately 15.4 Euros).

But what is of special concern, in spite of all the achievements mentioned above, is that domestic violence is experienced by a high percentage of women with 62% of them reporting psychological violence to 26% of men reporting such violence. When it is physical violence almost one quarter of the women polled said that they experienced it to only 4% of men. The political situation also makes itself felt as 77% of women report violence from the Israeli military and the settlers while two-thirds of women report Israeli violence against possessions and agricultural produce and other economic goods. On ownership indicator, only 5% of Palestinian women report land ownership and close to 8% report home ownerships while only 0.2% report any form of investment. In this context, it must be remembered that 10% of all Palestinian households are run by women. Accordingly, it is not surprising that 8% report home ownerships but at the same time these women-run households experience poverty and other social hardships much more so than the men-run households. The fact that women report practically no investment activity is also reason for concern as it indicates that they are not likely to be in an economic position of influence and that their conditions remain determined by economic powers stronger than them.

But let us not end on a dismal pessimistic note.

The educational achievements of women in Palestinian society get reflected in advancing changing attitudes in the overall population towards more gender openness through acceptance of the new roles of women and of their participation in the public sphere. University women in Palestine are, like in other countries, known to be high achievers and this fact should be a basis to open up the appropriate economic, political and social possibilities for them. The gains in the educational achievement of Palestinian women get also reflected in more women making personal choices rather than accepting prescribed choices and decisions. As important educated mothers tend to influence the attitudes of their children in various areas from political involvement to social engagement. Studies have shown that the Palestinian mother has become a key figure in determining family attitudes towards politics and society.

The economy in Palestine remains influenced by the ongoing Israeli occupation and the settlers encroachment in the West Bank. The World Bank and other international agencies have pointed to the bad effects on the Palestinian economy of the hundreds of Israeli military checkpoints crisscrossing the West Bank territory. These checkpoints cause restrictions on free movement and hence inhibit the economic pursuits of the population. Women suffer in proportionately greater extent as they are, in the first place, in an inferior economic position. While the Palestinian economy remains a small scale economy when compared to some European countries and even some Arab economies, the almost complete dependence on Israel for the economy and the Israeli hegemony on Palestinian economy through exports and other means make the feasibility of an independent thriving and prosperous economy something to dream about. But the vision of a future Palestinian state should include ways and means on how to reshape the economy in order specifically to include more women and to offer opportunities that are equal to all citizens.

In conclusion, Palestinian society is on its way forward. The most important lesson of the “Arab Spring” is that irrespective of who has power in society, without offering human security to the citizens of the state this power remains doubtful and precarious. Human security through ensuring the chances for equal opportunities, gender parity, provision of basic services such as education, health and housing is an essential requirement for the popularity of any regime. Those in power now, and those aspiring for power as a result of the Arab Spring, cannot any longer impose their narrow agendas and ideologies with prescribed views of life and limited choices. As people of the Arab Spring aspire to live with dignity in free societies so do the Palestinians as they aspire to be free of Israeli occupation and to live like normal neighbors with the Israeli people. Palestine cannot achieve human security and true independence for its people without the active involvement of women side by side with men. The role of women cannot be underestimated as we strive to gain independence and to join the community of nations. Women will remain the key to our progress in Palestine.