



The Political Participation of Palestinian Women in Official and Non-Official Organizations in Limited Horizon

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Importance of Women's Political Participation	3
The Concept of Political Participation	4
Historical Background of the Political Participation of Palestinian Women	5
Proportion of Palestinian Women Political Participation	9
The Obstacles and Challenges to Women's Political Participation in Palestine	15
<i>A Community Related Factors</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>B Political and Economic Related Factors</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>C Self-factors Related to Women Themselves</i>	<i>18</i>
Tools for Women's Empowerment	19
The Future of Palestinian Women's Political Participation	22
Conclusion	24
Recommendations	25
Bibliography	27

Introduction

In 1990, three years after the first Intifada started, a conference entitled “The Intifada and Social Related Issues of Palestinian Women” was held by the Bisan Centre in Jerusalem. It involved the participation of Palestinian women with different political views for the purpose of evaluating the achievements of Palestinian women in the past as well as setting goals for the feminist movement in order to build a better future for them. This conference was a turning point in shaping the feminist movement in Palestine, as it was in line with the Madrid negotiation and peace process, the Gaza-Jericho agreement, and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). As a result, a new phase of women’s life started.

The establishment of the Palestinian Authority as well as the political and social changes that followed increased Palestinians’ attention to the establishment of civil society organizations that guarantee the involvement of both women and men in building a Palestinian state. In the 1990s, women were optimistic as they believed they would have a platform to express their needs and show the issues they faced on daily basis. Nevertheless, this bright picture has since diminished as the PA has not shown any official intention to incorporate women in the process of political development and building a democratic Palestinian state. Consequently, few women have been able to reach decision-making positions in the governmental sector, whilst other women have found their way in civil society organizations.

In 2000, during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, Palestinian women's political participation took another direction, where women fought the Israeli occupation for the sake of gaining their rights and freedom. Their role included political activities at contact points, such as Israeli checkpoints and settlements. As a result 96 women in the West Bank and Gaza were killed.¹ Following that period, feminists and civil society organizations including human rights organizations, were been activated to ensure and support the role of women in the Palestinian community. These organizations used legal and social tools to change existing policies and combine gender issues as part of their agendas.

This paper aims to highlight the political participation of Palestinian women and their capabilities. It will illustrate how Palestinian women made positive changes in Palestinian society in recent history by using lobbying and advocacy tools to overcome the challenges they, especially in light of the current political, social and economic situation that came in line with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the political split (between the West Bank and Gaza Strip) and the Israeli occupation.

1 The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Al-Mintar publication, 2004. p.28

The Importance of Women's Political Participation

Women's political participation is essential for achieving the purposes and objectives of the political system in Palestinian society. It gives the representative and executive institutions a legitimate authority that reflects the democratic choice.² Therefore, the first step towards ensuring the effective participation of women in politics would be recognizing all their rights, including citizenship and full equality before the law, without discrimination. This could be achieved through engaging women in decision-making and political processes, enabling them to set future plans, development programs and policies as well as supervising the implementation of these approaches for the sake of benefiting Palestinian society and the building of a Palestinian state.³

In 1996, five women claimed victory in the first legislative elections, demonstrating the promising ability for Palestinian women to assume political leadership positions. In this process, women participated in the drafting and voting of laws such as the Labor Law and the Maintenance Fund and the Civil Service Act, contributed to the process of detecting corruption and its symbols, and actively participated in policy-making in foreign relations. In addition, the 2002 Palestinian National Reform was one of the most important achievements for Palestinian women. This document emphasized the importance of political, economic, administrative and judicial reform as an internal requirement and included a set of other achievements that confirm the ability of women to meet the requirements of leadership positions.⁴

2 Rahal Omar, The political participation of Palestinian women, Tasamuh magazine, no.2, Ramallah, Palestine

3 The Political Participation of Palestinian Women in the Public and Private sectors. Center for Women's Affairs – Gaza 2013, p.13

4 Musleh, Rose, the Political Participation and Decision-Making of Palestinian Women. The Research Center of the Palestine Liberation Organization 2012: p.56-58

There are still many examples of women's potential and capabilities, but the majority of them are individual cases. Thus, there is a need for tools to support and empower women and to analyse the obstacles to women's political participation in order to identify ways to end them.

The Concept of Political Participation

The term political participation is relatively recent; it was commonly used in the wake of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where revolution had a major impact on the trend towards political participation and the expansion of the vote after it was no longer limited to the elite. In Britain, for instance, working men in various trades and industries formed trade unions to protect themselves against their employers. It was only towards the close of the nineteenth century that the General Federation of British Trade Unions was established and thus trade unions came to occupy an important position in the political and economic structure of the society.

The concept of political participation also stems from the interaction of the individual with the community through his/her full involvement in the public activities where it can be defined as "public policy practice".⁵ Whereas, Felipe Brow defines it as "the sum of the collective activities carried out by the governed which enable them to impact the functioning of the political system (Felipe, 1998)".⁶

5 Bystydzienski, Jill.m, Women Transforming politics". World Wide, Strategies' for Empowerment, Indiana University Press, 1991, p.1

6 Felipe Brow, Political Sociology, Mohammed Arab Sasila, Beirut, University Institution for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, 1998, p.301.

As for Kaase and Marsh, they view political participation as “... all voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system⁷”. This was confirmed by Margaret Conway where she defined political participation as: “Those activities of citizens that attempt to influence the structure of government, the selection of government authorities or the policies of government, and these activities either support the existence of the government or oppose it”.⁸

In reviewing the aforementioned definitions of political participation, it is clear that the common denominator is a voluntary action, organized or spontaneous, designed to influence public policies and thus support positive change in order to promote stability and public participation process in the society.

Historical Background of the Political Participation of Palestinian Women

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Palestinian women have participated in political and social actions. Women’s charitable institutions, such as orphanages and senior centers, had been the main core of their effective participation, which helped merge Palestinian women into the social issues of the Palestinian community. However, the political circumstances in Palestine, from the British mandate to the Israeli occupation,

7 Kaase, Max and Alan Marsh (1979), “Political Action. A Theoretical Perspective”. In: Samuel Barnes, Max Kaase et al, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*. London, p.4

8 Conway, M. Margaret, *Women and Political Participation*, 2001, p.231.

have contributed to crystallizing the political direction of Palestinian women participation as represented in demonstrations, marches, sit-ins and protest petitions.

In 1893, the first Palestinian political activity carried out by Palestinian women was a protest against the construction of the first settlement in Afula. In 1920, before the official onset of the Mandate, 29 women from northern Palestine protested the Balfour Declaration in a letter to the chief administrator of the region, writing that “we Moslem and Christian ladies who represent other ladies of Palestine protest vigorously.”⁹

Women also participated in other political activities, namely the Wailing Wall incidents of 1929. In these incidents nine women were killed by the British army, which prompted women to increase their political participation in an effort to change the dire situation they suffered from. As a result, in 1929 Palestinian women deliberately launched a movement and the inaugural event was the convening in Jerusalem of the Palestine Arab Women’s Congress. More than 200 women from all over Palestine attended the Congress, which passed resolutions addressing the national problem and pledged to “support all resolutions, decisions, and demands of the Arab Executive.”¹⁰

By the end of the discussion, the women held a concluding session, where an Arab Women’s Executive Committee (AWE) was elected to execute and administer the Congress’s resolutions.¹¹ Although the resolutions of the AWE’s subsequent activities focused primarily on the national issue, the movement clearly situated gender at the forefront of its political consciousness.

9 Letter to the Administrator, O.E.T.A, from Arab Women in the North, 23 March 1920, Israel State Archives, RG 2 30/1.

10 Matiel Mogannam, *The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem* (London: Herbert Joseph, 1937), pp.70-75, for the complete list of resolutions.

11 Mogannam, *Arab Woman*, pp.70-76; Filastin, 29 October 1929; *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, 28 October 1929; *Mirat alSharq*, 28 October 1929; *al-Mawsu’u’a al-Filastiniyya*, vol. 2 (Damascus: Ha’iyya alMawsu’a al-Filastiniyya, 1984, p.212; and Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp.44-47.

During the period between 1948 and 1967, Palestinian society witnessed the Nakba (Catastrophe) and its terrible effects on political, economic and social aspects. Women's organizations played a huge role in enhancing social life by providing social care services at orphan centers and delivering humanitarian and aid relief efforts, such as food, water, housing and clothing, to afflicted families.¹²

In 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed – Palestinian women obtained a “quota” in the National Assembly, ranging from 2% in 1964 to 7.5% in the Council session held in Gaza in 1996. In 1965 “the General Union of Palestinian Women” in Jerusalem and Nablus was founded as the official representative of Palestinian women within the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The Women's Union aimed to establish a democratic platform for all Palestinian women by summarizing several goals that it sought to achieve: involving women in all spheres of political, social and judicial life; equality of women in all rights and duties; in addition to raising women's awareness of their legitimate rights gained at the First and Second Palestinian National Conference.¹³ This shows that the political awareness of the women's movement grew within Palestinian national-oriented and community-based organizations.

Also, at that time women participated in military operations and were trained to take up arms, which meant that their role was no longer limited to social work, but expanded to national and militant action. Until the end of 1967, nearly 68 women's associations were working in philanthropy and women's aid relief. The qualitative change of women was in 1978, when Palestinian political parties

12 Ismail, Dunia al-Amal, 2004, The Political Participation of Palestinian Women between Form and Context, Tasamuh Magazine, p.2. Ramallah – Palestine. 2002, pp.2-5.

13 The constitution of Palestinian women Union, 1965, Article no.4.

decided to frame women's political participation and involve women from rural, urban areas and refugee camps into political parties. Women have been active in various spheres of life: political, social, cultural, health and national. In 1987, Palestinian women emerged clearly in their struggle through demonstrations, imprisonment, and participation in some armed operations; women's leaders appeared in a number of left-wing parties, and as members of other parties.

In 1991, the United Nations Development Plan (UNDP) Women's Task Force established a coalition of four women's committees, four research and advocacy centers, two legal aid concerns, and tens of grassroots organizations and voluntary associations. In addition, the Task Force organized three workshops in which hundreds of Palestinian women discussed and produced the Women's Agenda as a strategic vision document for Palestinian women's empowerment. Yet, the activities of those organizations were restricted only to social services. It is to be noted that those women's committees, created by the need to provide social work, drew the attention of the political parties that used them to mobilize women for political action.¹⁴

In 1993, after the Oslo agreement, the Palestinian National Authority was formed as the official representative of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Consequently, the Palestinian situation changed both externally and internally as the Palestinian Authority built institutions, adopted laws, held elections, and established civil society institutions concerning women's rights.¹⁵

14 Rabab Abdulhadi, *the Palestinian Women's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics, and Challenges*, p.2.

15 Nizal, Rima Katana, 2004, *Palestinian Women Between Real Political Participation and Cosmetic Involvement, Urban Dialogue*, p.28

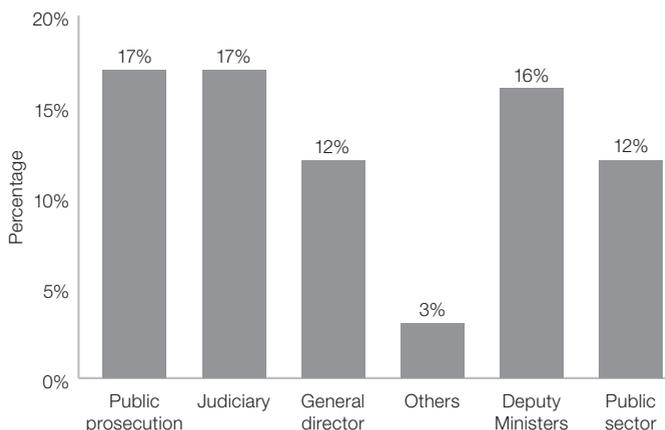
However, despite the importance of the role played by women through associations and unions, and notwithstanding the sacrifices by Palestinian women, the success indicators of women's political participation and representation in political life has remained weak, as shown below.

Proportion of Palestinian Women Political Participation

Palestinian feminist and human rights movements have registered a number of important achievements over the past few years in terms of addressing legal and structural discrimination and advancing equality among various social groups as a major principle of democracy. These achievements include the amending the Palestinian Election Law, securing a 20% quota representation in local councils and the Legislative Council, and ratifying without reservation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Despite these achievements, gender disparities remain significant in numerous aspects of life, including political participation and access to decision-making positions. This has resulted in discrimination against women in terms of access to equal political opportunities.

For example, among the public sector the proportion of women who occupy decision-making positions is restricted to 11.7%, with females comprising only 16% of deputy ministers, 3% of assistant

Proportion of Palestinian Women Political Participation



Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016

undersecretaries, and 12% of general directors.¹⁶ This figure rises to 22.7% in terms of the proportion of women assuming the position of minister, with 5 out of a total of 22 ministers being women. There is only one female governor amongst a total of 16. Figures do not improve significantly on the judicial level, as only 17.2% of the judiciary,¹⁷ and 16.7% of the public prosecution staff are women.¹⁸

The participation of Palestinian women in the legislative elections held on January 20th, 1996 is considered the most modern form of political participation; it can be seen as an indicator of increased political activity and social status of Palestinian women. Such

16 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics* (in Arabic, 2016), p.55.

17 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics* (in Arabic, 2016), p.61

18 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in Palestine*, p.63

participation was expressed enthusiastically in the slogans of their organizations (see below: slogan 1, slogan 2). It was highlighted by the Women's Affairs Assembly slogan – "Women's Participation Makes the Event"¹⁹ – to confirm and demonstrate the need for women's participation in political decision-making process.



Slogan 1: Union of Palestinian Women Committee



Slogan 2: General Union of Palestinian Women

The number of registered women for the elections was 495,839, compared with 517,396 male voters out of 1,013,235 (49% women versus 51% men up to December 27,1995),²⁰ while the total number of female candidates for the Legislative Council was 25 women out of 672 candidates (3.7%). Sixteen women were independent candidates; four represented Fatah, two Fida Party, two Palestinian People Party and one representing the Arab Liberation Front. Only five women won; they were:

1. Hanan Ashrawi, independent candidate, Jerusalem, 17,944 votes;
2. Dalal Salameh, Fatah candidate, Nablus, 20,749 votes;
3. Jamilah Saidam, Fatah candidate, Deir El-Balah, 8,511 votes;

19 Nader Ezzat, Women and Elections, Journal of Mowaten Foundation, Ramallah, Palestine, p.14

20 Islah Jad, The Feminist Movement and the Palestinian Legislative Elections, Journal of Palestinian Politics, Vol. 10, 1996, p.25.

4. Intisar Al-Wazeer, Fatah candidate Gaza, 40,875 votes;
5. Rawya Shawa, independent candidate Gaza, 18,295 votes.

Mrs. Samiha Khalil Al Qubbaj was the first Arab woman to run for the presidency, but she did not succeed.²¹ Although it was very low, the success of these five women in the first Palestinian elections was seen to be a major achievement of the Palestinian women's movement. The reasons for the low representation of women in those elections could be put on the electoral system, the dominance of patriarchal attitudes in Palestinian society, discrimination against women and the influence of customs and traditions.

In the Palestinian Legislative Council, a 20% representation quota is only imposed on the proportional representation component. This quota has led to the election of 17 women out of a total of 132 seats (12.9%) on the council and in the municipal elections; both the 2012 and 2017 elections rendered a 21% representation of women, with over 55% of those women winning by acclamation.²² In addition, the disruption and ineffectiveness of the Palestinian Legislative Council raised tensions in legal reform strategies. In terms of the impossibility of amending legislation through democratic channels, the women's movement and stakeholders are left to confront the dilemma of whether they seek promotion and improvement of women's rights through presidential decrees in view of the absence of democracy and the principle of separation between the three authorities: legislative, executive and judicial.

It is worth noting that the political and administrative procedures of the two governments in Palestine: Palestinian Authority (Fatah) in the West Bank, and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip,

21 The Central Committee of the Elections in Palestine, Gaza, 1996.

22 Central Elections Commission, Palestine, 2017 Local Elections Report (CEC 2017), p. 306

since 2007, has led to the termination of political pluralism concept. In addition to that, the voice of the political affiliation has been shut down; where the freedom of expression of the political affiliation has been restricted in each area.²³

As a result of the political split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the democratic processes have been restricted to only the 2005, 2012, and 2017 municipal elections and the 2006 legislative council elections. Furthermore, the split has had a compounded impact on Palestinian women in Gaza, since the 2012 and 2017 municipal elections only took place in the West Bank.

Among women in diplomacy, the proportion of female Palestinian ambassadors has remained low with only 5.8% of women in 2016, compared to 94.2% of men.²⁴ In August 1993 the first Palestinian woman Mrs. Leila Shahid was appointed as Ambassador to France. She was the first student to head the General Union of Palestinian Students France branch in the 1970s; in 1989, she was appointed by the Executive Committee of the PLO as a representative of the Palestinian Authority in Ireland, the Netherlands, and Denmark.

Currently there are nine Palestinian women serve as ambassadors and they are:

1. Dr.Mai Kilah, Ambassador of Palestine in Italy.
2. Hala Freez, Ambassador of Palestine in Sweden.
3. Marie Antoinette Seddine Ambassador of Palestine in Hungary.
4. Kholoud Dibais Ambassador of Palestine in Germany.
5. Rawan Suleiman Ambassador of Palestine in Netherlands.
6. Linda Suboh, Ambassador of Palestine in Venezuela.

23 Beige,Hussein Aloj, Democracy and the Problem of Sequence on Power, p.95

24 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Women and Men in Palestine, p.58.

7. Taghreed Al-Sinwar Ambassador of Palestine in Zimbabwe.
8. Dr. Amal Jadou Assistant Minister on European Affairs and head of the European Department at the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ramallah.
9. Fiada' AbdulHadi the acting head of the Permanent Observer Mission of the State of Palestine to the United Nations in New York.

As for women's presence in political parties, women make up about 25% of members of the Central Committee of Fatah Movement, 33% of its Revolutionary Council, 40% of its Supreme Movement Committee.

Additionally, women in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) represent 10% of its Central Committee, while women in the Central Committee of the Democratic Front (DFLP) in the West Bank make up about 19.5% and 16.5% of its central committee in the Gaza Strip.

In Fida, 30% of the Executive Office and 19% of the Central Committee are women. Hamas has no specific percentages of women's participation in its various bodies and there is only one woman among the 18-member PLO Executive Committee.²⁵

It is to be noted that Fida party has the highest proportion of women's participation in political parties, although its small political party compared with the other parties.

²⁵ Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, Palestinian Women's Bulletin (PASSIA, August 2015), p.10.

The Obstacles and Challenges to Women's Political Participation in Palestine

There are several factors that hinder and decrease women's political participation in Palestinian society:

A Community Related Factors

The political climate caused by the split between the West Bank and Gaza Strip combined with the Israeli occupation in Palestine has led to frustration, apathy and futility among all Palestinians. Consequently, many have lost hope and faith in their ability to influence or be involved in policy-making and decision-making processes. This is evident through the decline in popularity of factions and parties, and their inability to renew themselves because of their members' inability to put forward alternative policies or solutions to the problems faced by the public. Besides that, the internal problems faced by these parties, such as failure to exercise democratic methods, the hegemony of the party leaders in decision-making processes within it, have led to a state of apparent unwillingness by the public to join and participate in these parties, on the one hand, and the migration of their members, on the other.²⁶

²⁶ Nobani Yamen, The status of Palestinian women in the political parties, 2007, Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation

Thus, women, as part of society, are affected by this situation, since these parties, in addition to bureaucracy, do not pay enough attention to the concerns of women, whose needs and aspirations are not included in their programs. A 2008 poll indicated that 76% of Palestinians believe that internal conditions, especially factional fighting, have an important negative impact on the status of Palestinian women.²⁷ Moreover, the absence of a general tendency, of the Palestinian state, to adopt policies and programs that would support women in the formal and informal policies, has weakened the role and participation of women. In such cases, the influence of male society's perception of women – where women are considered less capable of leading Palestinian society than men, and consequently, not recognizing women's entity, rights and their active role in society – cannot be ignored. In addition to that, customs and traditions shape male culture as well as negative perspectives, which affect the role of women in Palestinian society.²⁸ For example, 28% of men support keeping laws that allow honor killings; 18% of the woman share their view. Plus, 8% of women and 18% of men are against women working outside of the home.²⁹

27 AWRAD, 20 February. 2008. p.2

28 Muheisen, Taysir, The Situation of Palestinian Women in the Gaza Strip, Working Paper, Gaza, p.7

29 AWRAD, 20 February. 2008. p.6

B Political and Economic Related Factors

In terms of political factors, there are several factors that minimized the effective role of Palestinian women's political participation; among them the external factor represented in the Israeli occupation. The oppressive practices and policies, carried out by Israeli army, against Palestinian women such as violence, restrictions on freedom of movement, and the presence of the Israeli military on checkpoints between the Palestinian cities have limited Palestinian women's movement within the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as their political participation.³⁰

Nevertheless, the political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the consequences of this division – such as arbitrary political detention – has contributed to the reduction of the effectiveness of the participation of Palestinian women in politics. The patriarchal mentality and authority in Palestinian political parties play a negative role in the direction of women's issues, as the Palestinian political parties did not sufficiently focus on the promotion of gender representative within them.³¹ In addition to that, women's issues in Palestinian political parties are used as a tool to attract the attention of women voters- who aspire to build a Palestinian state where women are part of decision-making processes and self-determination – for the sake of achieving the various aims of these political parties.³²

30 Gender-based violence report, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Palestinian National Authority, 2009, p.12-13

31 Shafi'i, Kamal and Nasreen Awad, *Palestinian Women in Political Parties between Presence and Absence*, 2009, Center for Palestinian Women, p.68

32 Haneen: *Formal Planning for the Development and Activation of the Political Participation of Women in Palestine 1996-2006*, MA Thesis, An-Najah National University, Nablus, 2007, p.68

As for economic factors, the high rate of poverty, 13.9% in the West Bank and 53% in Gaza Strip,³³ and unemployment among Palestinian women, 39.2%³⁴, has contributed to limiting Palestinian women's access to the decision-making process. It should be noted that by increasing Palestinian women's participation in the labor force, the social status of women would be more stable; therefore, they would have the ability to overcome economic challenges when involved in the political process,³⁵ i.e. election publicity, nomination fees and other electoral requirements. This is what the vast majority of Palestinians agreed on, where 80% believe that economic conditions constitute a very important obstacle in the face of women's right.³⁶

C *Self-factors Related to Women Themselves*

Many women do not realize their ability for political action; they consider it a detracting element that cancels their femininity. This may be due to socialization that supports this view, and emphasizes the primary function of a woman as a wife and mother.³⁷ Besides that, women's lack of interest in developing their political awareness through participating in political matters has contributed to the low participation among Palestinian women as they are content with practicing a role in the community far from decision-making processes.

33 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics* (in Arabic, 2016), Indicators of living standards report.

34 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics* (in Arabic, 2016), p.50

35 A'my Amin – Sami Sahwil – *Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women – Goal 3 of the Millennium Goals*. Ministry of Women Affairs, 2012. p.14-15.

36 AWRAD, 20 February. 2008. p.2

37 Ismail, Dunia Al-Amal, *Palestinian women political participation between form and context*, p.31

The lack of trust among women, and gender bias measures represented in the lack of voter support for women candidates, where women prefer to vote for men, on the premise that they are more appropriate for political action and holding responsibility, promoted this view among the Palestinian community.³⁸ What boosts this view further is when Palestinians were asked an important question on gender bias (if two equally competent persons, a man and a woman, were considered for the position of a minister, who would you choose?), the vast majority – 73% – said they prefer to choose a man, while 18% said they would choose a woman.³⁹

The researcher believes that women's interest in social work rather than political action reflects the Palestinian society-specific view of women, in which Palestinian women have the ability to deal with social issues, but otherwise, they remain unable to engage and merge on the political issues of Palestinian society.

Tools for Women's Empowerment

It is essential for women to have a platform and framework to support their issues, in which feminist and civil society organizations has played a role in shaping and addressing Palestinian women issues in order to contribute to development processes at all levels.

38 Studies centre- Aman- Website http://www.amanjordan.org/aman_studies/wmview.php?ArtID=1177 2

39 AWRAD, 20 February. 2008. p.4

Legal, academic and planning frameworks are also extremely important tools that can be used to contribute to the development of women and their issues. For example, in 1994, the General Union of Palestinian Women issued a document of principles on the continuation of the struggle for national liberation, as well as a document on women's fundamental rights in an effort of feminist movement's leaders to unify women's demands in the establishment of the National Authority.⁴⁰

Discrimination against women has been and continues to be in the structure of Palestinian society and its culture, so that quota has become an electoral and political demand for the women's movement and civil society organizations in general and for many official figures and institutions. The starting point in the claims of quota is that it would be a positive step for women towards having equal rights with men, even for a limited period of time. It enabled and assisted women to gain access and reach out to decision-making positions; it has also constituted a factor for gender equality and promoted a culture of women's acceptance of decision-making positions.

Despite the Palestinian Authority's various attempts to engage women into political life through the formation of gender units in ministries, such as the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in March 2003, the main role and tasks of Palestinian women are still clearly concentrated on human rights and women's studies institutions. It's worth noticing that the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs – in accordance with its objectives in promoting the status of Palestinian women and activating their role – has contributed to the creation of an effective tool that enables Palestinian women to participate in political and social life.

40 The Political Participation of Palestinian Women in the Public and Private sectors. Center for Women's Affairs – Gaza 2013, p.13

Therefore, developing and adopting such tools would promote the adoption of legislation and laws in favor of women i.e. national plans established for the purpose of incorporating women in the process of decision-making and building a Palestinian state.⁴¹

A 2008 poll carried out by the Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) on the status of Palestinian women and gender relations, shows that 27% of Palestinians oppose the allocation of a quota for women in the electoral law.⁴² The low percentage could be due to the social and gender norms that have been developed from Arab traditions and cultures and Islamic values. Women are mothers, wives, and caretakers of the family who stay at home, and are not to be seen by non-relative men. Furthermore, the demographic aspect has considerably affected based-gender issues; as the Palestinian community composed of different groups: rural, urban, Bedouin and Palestinian refugees. Because of this, variables that determine gender situations are diversified, and each group in the Palestinian community has its own particular sets of these variables. This could be partially referred to in the lack of clarity of the Palestinian Authority's policies on the Palestinian political parties regarding women's issues, where political participation is limited to the elite with powerful political or family affiliations in each group.⁴³

41 Abu Daho, Rola, 2004, *Women in the Leadership of the Palestinian Resistance Movement 1967-1992: (Between the Sands of Moving Reality and Wings of the Left)*, MA thesis, (unpublished), Birzeit University, Ramallah, Palestine

42 AWRAD, 20 February. 2008

43 Jamil, Hilal, *Palestinian political parties*, Dunia organization, 2006, p.84-81.

The Future of Palestinian Women's Political Participation

The promotion of women's political participation is an integral part of human rights, democracy and community development. It is therefore necessary to consider the current political situation in order to understand the obstacles and challenges to gender equality that will determine the future of women's political participation.

The continuity of the Israeli occupation still constitutes the greatest dilemma for the Palestinian society; it controls the land, natural and human resources; and it becomes more sophisticated as a result of the processes of peaceful settlement, which coincides with the transition towards building a Palestinian state with all its complexities and difficulties. Besides that, the negative role played by the Palestinian Authority in shaping the current and the future participation of Palestinian women cannot be denied, where the PA used arguments to postpone implementing – or neglecting – its obligation regarding the effective protection of women's rights and supporting their participation in politics and public affairs.⁴⁴

The amendments to a number of laws on the status and rights of women in the Palestinian society, such as the election law, came after repeated demands and lobbying campaigns led by the feminist movement during the early years of the formation of the Palestinian National Authority.⁴⁵ This means that the PA had no official intention to incorporate the principles of equality addressed by the Basic Law

44 Ismail, Dunia Al-Amal, Palestinian women political participation between form and context, p.31

45 Ismail, Dunia Al-Amal, Palestinian women political participation between form and context, p.30

and the Declaration of Independence in Algeria. Consequently, any changes the PA is expected to take regarding the legislative and judicial process would not be voluntary. On the contrary, changes will require intense pressure by the feminist movement along with other organizations specialized in enhancing women's equality.

It is assured that the status of women in constitutions and legislations will assist in locating women on the map of the community, as the constitutions and legislations are important tools for determining the legitimacy of rights, duties and responsibilities for the individuals as well as determining the future of women's reality and status in the Palestinian community. Hence, the application of national legislations and its implementation mechanisms have to be always activated, even in situations of instability or political transformation i.e. Israeli occupation and political split.

Overall, the researcher believes that the future of women's political participation, if current legislation remains unchanged or modified, might be reversed negatively. The absence of Palestinian Authority institutions and the intense political distrust expressed by Palestinians constitute a serious obstacle to Palestinian women's political development.⁴⁶

In addition, the emergence of political Islam movements and some radical and extremist groups – in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in particular, and in neighboring Arab society in general – is considered a serious threat to women's political participation. As the Islamist ideology of these groups would definitely affect the future of Palestinian women political participation by reducing and weakening women's role in Palestine.

46 Palestine country report ABIII July 2014 p.13.

Conclusion

The political participation of Palestinian women plays a major role in ensuring full rights, including citizenship for women. This could be achieved by adopting the principle of equality between men and women as a prerequisite condition for building a democratic Palestinian state. Nevertheless, the legal status of Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip reveals the gap between the legislation that advocates for equality and the current situation of Palestinian women.

As a result of the social, economic and political situation in Palestine, women cannot reach decision-making positions in high government institutions, which affects the integration of Palestinian women in the development process, and minimizes the possibility of influencing policy-makers for the purpose of modifying the existing legislation.

Moreover, the strategies adopted by the Palestinian political parties regarding women's political participation remain unstable, as there is still a great difference between the theory and practice of these political parties upon women's issues. Therefore, achieving a fundamental change in the kinds of women's participation and various rights requires the adoption of a comprehensive and integrated vision that is not limited to the role of the Palestinian National Authority, including political parties and institutions, but also extends it to the role of civil society organizations, especially women's and human rights organizations.

In conclusion, a political atmosphere in which men and women have full citizenship, without distinction in the context of a democratic Palestinian society based on freedom, equality, justice, development has to be established. As a further step, PA institutions and civil society organizations have to work on a multi-level strategy i.e. amending laws and legislations that do not get along with the concepts of equality between women and men.

Formulating a supportive national policy of women's political participation has to be taken seriously. This could be achieved through changing procedures affecting behavioral change by raising awareness of women's rights, reforming the educational system, and utilizing the media to support the positive change towards equal rights in the Palestinian society.

Recommendations

This research paper has been an attempt to portray the political participation of Palestinian women. In order to support their participation, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Women should be treated as active members of the society and as an important element to building and developing it, which also falls on women's responsibility where they should be the first to initiate working towards eliminating the negative norms and conceptions towards them instead of participating in it.
2. The principle of political pluralism and strengthening the role of institutions as well as the rule of law needs to be adopted in the Palestinian society until it becomes a way of living.
3. The rule of gender equality in practicing political rights and participating in legislative institutions and councils should be respected and implemented on the ground, thus, civil society organizations including human rights and feminist organizations are expected to take a serious step towards framing national strategies against gender bias through lobbying and advocacy campaigns.

4. The Palestinian political parties need to re-evaluate and prioritize the partisan agenda of social, political and national issues by working to rehabilitate the feminist cadres and leave a space for them to practice leadership roles within the political parties.
5. The image of women should be improved in the media and school books. The role of their struggle and their contribution to the public life must be highlighted.
6. The government should reconsider the curricula to include civic education that contributes to the development of awareness and deepens the concepts of democracy and human rights and strengthening civil society institutions.
7. Awareness programs and sufficient training for Palestinian women in the field of politics have to be produced to define women's political rights and guide them towards participating and integrating into political parties, which in turn will enhance their presence in these parties and thus strengthen their ability to make a change within the political parties.
8. Special funds and loans for electoral and partisan purposes should be established in order to help support women candidates running for elections, regardless if they are running independently or through their political parties, and provide opportunities to enhance the economic situation for women, which would lead to political development.

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