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## Palestinian Women's Political Participation

### **Indicators of women's political participation**

Since the beginning of the 20th century the Palestinian woman has been involved in the struggle for political and social independence through different organizations, initiated by charities, which formed the spark for Palestinian women to integrate into life of the society. Later, as a result of political conditions in Palestine, this changed into political involvement in the form of sit-ins, demonstrations and petitions of protest. The first women's political activity was evidenced in 1893 in the city of Afula, where Palestinian women went in a demonstration to protest against the establishment of the first Jewish settlement. In the battle of Al Buraq in 1929, which constituted an important turning point in the lives of Palestinian women, nine women were shot dead by the British army. This urged them to step up the struggle to change the economic and political situation, especially after they found themselves responsible after the executions, arrests and imprisonments, and houses demolitions carried out by the British Mandate authorities. Women started to organize their efforts and mobilize all the available means to face the new circumstances. They held the first Palestinian women's conference in the city of Jerusalem in 1929, which led to the formation of the Executive Committee of the Assembly of Arab Women. In the same year, an Arab Women's Union in Jerusalem and another one in Nablus were created. Both unions, in addition to the Executive Committee of the Assembly of Arab Women, performed a lot of economic, social, cultural and national actions in the form of demonstrations and protests to the British High Commissioner, and sent messages to the Arab kings and rulers.<sup>1</sup>

During the period between 1948 and 1967, active women's charitable institutions such as orphanages and senior centers helped relieve the bereaved families and prepare and equip women professionally. All women's struggles in that period culminated in the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women in 1965. It was a very popular female organization which engaged in social and political activities among women in the occupied territories. This shows that the political awareness of women's movement grew within the Palestinian national-oriented, community-based organizations.

The creation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 formed a political alternative for the Palestinian national movement in which the feminist movement had

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<sup>1</sup> Lima Shafiq, "Struggle of Women in the Occupied Territories for Social and Political Rights", *Arab Women Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 3, June 1985, p. 114.

grown, making it a partner of PLO with a similar strategy designed to politicize the masses and help them participate in the national struggle.

The result was that the first women's movement in the countryside was created in 1978, and by 1982 there were four groups of women representing the main Palestinian political parties at that time. Yet, the activities of those organizations were restricted only to social services. It is to be noted that those women's groups, created by the need to provide social work, drew the attention of the political parties that used to mobilize women for political action. Gradually women's organizations started to adopt the features of the existing political parties until they came to be dominated by political action instead of the community interest, not to mention the fact that the parties did not give the Palestinian women's movement the right to appear and defend its own issues. This had a negative effect on the women's movement capabilities and dispersed its efforts. This ultimately led to the absence of feminist agenda that informed the Palestinian women's movement.

With the advent of the *intifada* (Uprising) the women's movement returned to its usual services – in the absence of the state – to fill the shortages caused by the political circumstances. Consequently, the political actions shifted back to social action. Works of relief, child care services, educating women became again as important as the resistance to the occupation in the agenda of women's organizations of the political factions.

Statistics show that 7% of the Palestinians who were killed during the period between 1987 and 1997, were women, while only 9% of the injured were reported to be women in the same period. In 1996, among the Palestinian prisoners who remained in detention in Israeli jails there were forty women.<sup>2</sup>

However, in that period, the work of those organizations was marked by the absence of a unified strategy until 1990, three years after the uprising started. Then Bisan Center held a conference in Jerusalem entitled "The Intifada and Some Social Issues for Women", at which women of different political orientations tried to evaluate the achievements of women during the previous stages and to draw a plan for the future of the feminist movement. The conference was a turning point in the Palestinian women's movement because it coincided with the start of Madrid negotiations and moving towards the peace process, Gaza-Jericho agreement and the Palestinian National Authority coming to the country. A new phase in the life of not only women but also the entire Palestinian people began. With the formal centre of power and the accompanying political and societal changes, the stress on consolidating and establishing the foundations of civil society that ensures the participation of all women and men in the construction process increased. Hopes were pinned on expanding the possibility of women's participation through creating a democratic atmosphere that allows women to show their efficiency and merits and to express their needs and problems. But these hopes soon somewhat faded because the National Authority did not intend the integration of women in the process of development and construction on a large scale. Only a few leading women were allowed to work for the government. This had a negative impact on the community-based organizations which absorbed a large number of Palestinian women during the occupation before the coming of the Palestinian National Authority. Two aspects should be taken into consideration here:

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<sup>2</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistics of Women and Men*, Gaza, 1998, p. 162–163.

1. the tragic loss suffered by these organizations as a result of the lack of women's expertise and competencies in almost all fields (negative factor);
2. these organizations had been active in creating and promoting alternative leaders of different orientations (positive factor).

The time when women's organizations sought to gain a relative independence from the organizations they had grown within was marked by the growing feminist awareness, especially after the previous division into the political factions with their different attitudes towards the peace process and in view of no clear program for those organizations in the face of the changes that had taken place, let alone the dominance imposed by the political parties. Consequently, they started to struggle against this domination and tried to reduce it to the minimum. This led to crystallization of the new goals and development of new programs, since there was a conviction that the basis upon which the former women's organizations had been founded was no longer valid in light of the new variables.

### **Forms of the exercise of women's political rights**

#### **1. Elections**

The participation of Palestinian women in the legislative elections held on January 20, 1996 is considered the most modern form of political participation; it can be seen as an indicator of an increased political activity and social status of Palestinian women. Such participation was expressed enthusiastically in the slogans of their organizations. It was highlighted by Women's Affairs Assembly slogan which said "Women's Participation Makes the Event" to confirm and demonstrate the need for women's participation in political decision-making process.<sup>3</sup>

The number of registered women for the elections was 495,839, compared with 517,396 male voters out of 1,013,235, i.e. 49% women versus 51% men up to December 27, 1995<sup>4</sup>, while the total number of female candidates for the Legislative Council was 25 women out of 672 candidates, that is 3.7%. Sixteen women were independent candidates, 4 represented Fatah, 2 Fida Party, 2 Palestinian People Party and 1 representing the Arab Liberation Front. Only 5 women won; they were:

1. Hanan Ashrawi, an independent candidate from Jerusalem, got 17,944 votes;
2. Dalal Salameh, a Fatah Movement candidate, Nablus, 20,749 votes;
3. Jamilah Saidam, a Fatah Movement candidate, Deir El-Balah, 8,511 votes;
4. Intisar Al-Wazeer, Fatah movement / Gaza, 40,875 votes;
5. Rawya Shawa, independent / Gaza, 18,295 votes.

Mrs. Samiha Khalil Alqubbaj was the first Arab woman to run for the presidency, but she did not succeed.<sup>5</sup>

The winning of these five women in the first Palestinian elections was looked at as a major achievement of the Palestinian women's movement although it was very low and not equal to

<sup>3</sup> Nader Ezzat, "Women and Elections", *Journal of Mowaten Foundation*, Ramallah, Palestine, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Islah Jad, "The Feminist Movement and the Palestinian Legislative Elections", *Journal of Palestinian Politics*, Vol. 10, 1996, p. 19–25.

<sup>5</sup> The Central Committee of the Elections in Palestine, Gaza, 1996.

the amount of the sacrifices made by Palestinian women. Yet, it indicated the growing women's awareness of their importance and presence in the decision-making process and developing goals and visions compatible with the new changes the feminist movement was undergoing. The reasons for the low representation of women in those elections could be sought in the electoral system, the dominance of patriarchal attitudes in the Palestinian society, discrimination against women and the influence of customs and traditions.

The absence of both the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front could be noted; it affected the representation of women negatively, although it was expected that their participation might sustain and strengthen the presence of women, and thus increase their chances in the elections. It was reported that Fida Party accounted for the largest proportion of women among the candidates, reaching 18% compared with 12.5% of the Arab Liberation Front, 6.7 % of the Palestinian People Party, and 5.2% of the Fatah movement, while the percentage of independent women candidates was 64% versus 75% for independent male candidates.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Women's participation in political (official and non-official) organizations**

### **A) Official institutions and organizations**

#### **I. Women in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)**

Despite the problem experienced by PLO, especially after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, the return of most Palestinian institutions and a large number of leading Palestinian people to the occupied territories, it is still possible to see the status of Palestinian women in PLO through the interpretation of many of the attitudes and behaviors used against Palestinian women today. The present cannot be separated from the past. The PLO applied, in its institutions, the same policy the parties that belong to it used. This resulted in a decrease in the percentage of women in high positions who were very close to the decision-making and an increase in the least influential positions or centers. The proportion of women in the Palestinian National Council, for example, was 7.5% out of 744 members in 1996; all the 16 members of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLOEC), the highest executive body in PLO, were men.<sup>7</sup>

#### **II. Women as Ministers**

Until 1997, there had been only two women ministers out of twenty five; they were Mrs. Intisar Al- Wazir (Minister of Social Affairs) and Professor Hanan Ashrawi (Minister of Higher Education). The two ministries are traditionally linked to women. Later on, Prof. Ashrawi resigned. On the other side, all deputy ministries were men.<sup>8</sup> Zuhaira Kamal was chosen to represent the Palestinian government of November 2003 as Minister of Women's Affairs, while Mariam Saleh represented the 2006 government. Kholoud Daibes served as the Tourism Minister in the national unity government of the Palestinian National Authority and continues to serve under the current emergency government as both Tourism Minister and Minister of Women's Affairs while Amal Syam, a member of the Palestinian group Hamas, served as the Minister of Women's Affairs in the March 2007 cabinet of the Palestinian

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<sup>6</sup> The Central Committee of the Elections in Palestine, Gaza, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

National Authority. Lamis Al-Alami was chosen to be the Minister of Culture in 2007; she is the Minister of Education and Higher Education in the current cabinet of Salam Fayyad.

### III. Women and local governance

The importance of the elections and women's representation in the Legislative Council is really a matter of concern for the feminist movement in Palestine. Yet, their representation in the local councils is more important as it provides them an opportunity to take part in planning and applying related policies and legislations. It allows them to approach the masses and serves women through:

1. accepting the presence of women in public life and creating a social dialogue based on the principle of participation from both sides, which helps in the formation of a community fabric that incorporates women on the basis of their competence and capabilities;
2. enabling these women to impose their vision concerning women's issues through the available legal channels.

It is known that the Israeli military granted the Palestinian women voting rights in local council elections in 1974, but did not grant them the right to nominate themselves as candidates in the elections for those councils. It should be noted that there had been no elections for municipal councils in the Gaza Strip; the last time such elections were held in the West Bank was in 1977.<sup>9</sup>

Now in the Palestinian National Authority, there are fifteen women among the 3,053 members of the local government councils, i.e. only 0.5%. The domination of men in these boards derives its importance from the direct role these councils play in education, health and social services programs.<sup>10</sup> Ms. Suheir Ahmad Khan is the first Palestinian woman who headed a council in Khirbet Qais in Salfit District.<sup>11</sup>

### IV. Women and diplomacy

There is only one Palestinian woman acting as an ambassador. Mrs. Leila Shahid was appointed in August 1993 the ambassador in France as a culmination of several important positions she had occupied. 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 a representative of the Palestinian Authority in Ireland, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Finally, she ended as Commissioner General of Palestine in France.

#### **Can women's political participation be considered as an example of quota?**

Since its beginnings, the Palestinian national movement has applied the principle of "quota" in women's representation for the sake of increasing women's participation in the national action and political struggle. The reasons for using this method can be sought in the objective conditions experienced by this movement, which was marked by geographical dispersion and the inability to communicate among the Palestinians inside and outside Palestine. But the new political circumstances that affected the national movement and the emergence of the Palestinian National Authority invite us to reconsider the feasibility of

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Program for Development, *The Challenges and Options for Women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip*, Cairo: Arab Women Publishing House, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Ayyam Daily Newspaper*, Ramallah, 15/8/1999.

the quota. Consequently, a number of questions arises. Should the quota be supported at the current stage as an expression of genuine participation? Should it be adopted for good or just temporarily? What are the consequences, positive or negative, it might have on Palestinian women's movement?

Some women leaders supported the idea of quota on the premise that discrimination against women still exists in the Palestinian society and derives its strength from cultural and religious dimensions (customs, traditions, etc). They viewed it as an opportunity to increase the chances of their presence in the local communities.

Women's participation in political life is weak in terms of the role they play in the decision-making process and formulation of the general civil law. Women are a minority according to various statistical and substantive criteria; they are also a political minority.<sup>12</sup>

## **B) Non-official institutions and organizations**

### **I. Women's participation in the political factions and parties**

Despite the participation of women in the early political parties and factions, they did not manage to increase their political impact and remained weak in comparison with men, in addition to their exclusion from the high decision-making positions in those parties. Some of the Palestinian parties overtly adopt an ideology which promotes the integration of women in political and public life, but the gap between theory and practice remains wide. The domination of the political factor in the history of the Palestinian people has made the leaders focus on the identification of objectives and strategies related to the issues of freedom, postponing other issues until achieving the political objective. However, despite the failure of the national project and the emergence of new political parties, experience has proved that women's affairs are not central to the parties. This explains the low activity of Palestinian women at the present stage, especially in the absence of a clear strategy, of those parties, concerning the status of women and the lack of clear visions that would determine their positions.

The data indicate an inverse relationship between the proportion of women and the level of power; the number of women in senior positions in the parties decreases. For example, women make up 5% of the members of the Central Committee of Fatah movement, compared to 4% of the members of the Revolutionary Council. In the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine women represent 10% of the Central Committee; 30 % in the Executive Office of Fida Party compared to 19% in the Central Committee. This is the highest proportion of women's participation in political parties, although Fida Party is small compared with the other parties.

The rate of women's participation in the structure of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the West Bank is higher than that in Gaza; the proportion of women in the Central Command in the West Bank is 18%, while it is 13% in the Gaza Strip. It is 19.5% in the Central Committee in the West Bank and 16.5% in Gaza. Although the representation of women in the central committees, the most important decision-making bodies for the different parties, is higher in the left-wing parties, it has remained a small proportion compared with the total percentage of women's representation. Furthermore, the presence of women in such

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<sup>12</sup> Hussien Abu Rumman, *Jordanian Women and the Election Law*, Jordan: New Jordan Center, p. 35.

committees has not led to the imposition of policies and programs which would adopt a feminist agenda in parallel with an agenda for national action. Women continue to adopt a national project, which accounts for the priorities in their activities.<sup>13</sup>

## **II. Women's participation in trade unions**

Trade unions are modern institutions brought about by the civil society; they are an indicator of prosperity of the civil society itself because they affect the behavior and concepts of broad sectors of the society. All individuals can join them regardless of their sex, customs, religion or political affiliation; they are based on the will to work in public interest, and thus represent an important support to civil society until it establishes the values of pluralism and democracy. Yet, the Arab world does lack the infrastructure and the suitable conditions for trade unions to carry out their duties. This weakens not only the structure, coherence and effectiveness of its trade unions, but extends to the structure of civil society as a whole. Trade unions, as institutions of popular masses, can play a major role in evaluating community awareness about women's issues through its extension to large segments of the public.<sup>14</sup>

If we look at the Palestinian case, we find that the number of members of trade unions is 63,054 persons, 11.4% of the total workforce in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>15</sup> This indicates a general decline in the number of workers (men and women) in the unions. Women account for only 7.6% of the total membership of trade unions, which shows the low participation of women in the workforce, with a 14.9% of the labor market. Data show that there is an increase in the number of women entering the labor unions in the Gaza Strip, particularly in the villages, despite the lack of women's work and the insignificant increase of the labor force there. This may be due to the difference in the attitude towards women's work under difficult economic circumstances, on the one hand, and to the shortage of work opportunities for women and reliance on trade unions to provide them, on the other.

### **Reasons for the low participation of women in trade unions**

1. The situation of the trade union movement in general; they undergo division and fragmentation, internal and organizational conflicts.
2. Women's doubt in the ability of unions to serve their interests.
3. The objectives of trade union were set by the political factions despite the changed political circumstances. The rights of women have been ignored for the sake of political activity.
4. Women's absence in decision-making positions in trade unions and the male predominance there.
5. The supremacy of customs and traditions that prevent women from joining trade unions for familial considerations.
6. Community attitudes towards women's participation in public sectors and their presence in public places.

It is worth mentioning that the Department of Women's Affairs in the General Federation of Trade Unions in Palestine has been created to take care of the issues and concerns of

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<sup>13</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, p. 171–172.

<sup>14</sup> Arab Organization for Human Rights in Britain, *Freedom of Expression and the Right of Political Participation*, London, August 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, p. 174–176.

women workers, enhance their participation in the trade union movement by raising their efficiency and skill and qualify women to lead the trade union movement. It can be a positive step, if the set purposes have been achieved and efforts are made to increase the participation of women and help them achieve a better position. This would mean a development policy which does not exclude their presence as real participants in society building.<sup>16</sup>

### III. Women's participation in non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

The participation of Palestinian women in non-governmental organizations is the largest, the oldest and most versatile and effective, despite the decline in this participation in terms of both quantity and quality. Palestinian women have found a real outlet in these organizations that have arisen in the absence of the state institutions. They have given the Palestinian woman the opportunity to prove her existence as an active member in the community and a real participant in handling the issues and problems despite the various difficulties the Israeli occupation caused. NGOs used to be seen as institutions of a political nature, carrying the issue of national liberation as a priority.

During the *intifada*, women accounted for the work of these organizations, and often managed most of them because they had more freedom than men who were targeted by the occupation forces or because of men's absence due to detention or deportation, etc. Therefore, we can look at these institutions as a product of the political realities and an answer to an urgent need for social support. It goes without saying that at the stage when political action dominates women's issues do not become a top priority. Women were accepting jobs in the non-governmental organizations motivated by national and patriotic considerations. But gradually, with the decline of the Palestinian national project, and the stagnation of political parties, especially the leftist ones, women's interest in national action began to fade out and was replaced by a new sense of retreat, frustration and uselessness of any activity. A sense of shock caused by the sudden political changes made individuals and institutions seek an answer to a very urgent question: What is the point of what we do?

After Oslo Agreement, women's organizations in particular, and the feminist movement in general, faced a confusing situation because they had to operate within the new agenda that differed from that previously settled, especially in light of the transition towards the state, i.e. the move to legislations and policies that do not adopt ideas about the national liberation. The feminist movement was then compelled to find its own identity and voice, under circumstances that distorted the historical role of these organizations. It did not form – despite its plurality and differences – a vision and clear strategic dimension of its future work under the new conditions imposed by agreements with the Israeli occupation. The lack of a unified vision made it react in an opposite direction to the pre-Oslo era. Thus, it confined to itself and adopted work policies isolated from the social and political reality of the Palestinian society.

Women's organizations treated gender issues away from the social and political context in which they operated. Consequently, they have lost much of their popularity, especially that which was gained during the uprising. They have raised issues of interest to women

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<sup>16</sup> Amenah Rimawi, "Arab Woman and Political Participation", *Journal of The Voice of Women*, Vol. 43, p. 23.



who were no longer associated with real work of these organizations. Gradually women's organizations have confined themselves to meeting the demands and interests of the donors and helping the community in the implementation of programs and activities that do not have anything to do with politics. The result is that these organizations have become isolated from the masses through avoiding the national liberation issues, which are still vivid in Palestinian reality, and therefore one cannot find organizations dealing with the issues of women in the camps, for example.

Active women have contented themselves with carrying banners that included the word „women” or „feminism”; they have chosen to stay calm under the law of the authority that overlooks them, and marginalizes any role they could play in the society. They have started to act in training and planning workshops and confined themselves within very narrow topics that are repeated on every occasion. The masses have always been far from all activities devoid of the element of aspiring to the national liberation. Despite all these activities, women remained far from decision-making positions in health, education, population policy and development sectors.

It is worth mentioning that 23% of the administrative staff of the NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are women.<sup>17</sup> According to a study funded by the United Nations Development Program, there were about 174 organizations in the occupied territories in 1993, of which only 34 in the Gaza Strip. At the end of 2005, “there were at least 1,200 Palestinian NGOs operating in a geo-political space equivalent to the size of Washington DC and Delaware combined. According to the World Bank, 200 of these are foreign run, 400 are local and organized under the umbrella of the General Union of Charitable Organizations, 90 are organized under the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations' Network (PNGO) and a couple hundred others are divided among 4 other NGO Unions”.<sup>18</sup> One cannot ignore the role played by these institutions in the service of women's issues, especially in the absence of the breadwinner.<sup>19</sup> Such a role was of a social nature, mainly in a form of temporary relief.

#### **IV. Women's participation in public sector jobs**

Not many women work in the leading positions, have direct impact on decision-making process, or influence the public opinion. For example, there are only two women working in the judiciary sector, Saud Dajani, and Salwa Sayegh; there is no female district attorney because men monopolize this position as well as that of the Attorney General.

It must be noted that despite the absence of explicit discrimination against women in the judicial system, there is almost a complete exclusion of them. The question is: “was it sufficient not to have an explicit discrimination against women in the law?” Experts maintain that more effective measures are required to guarantee women's right to participate because having women working in the judicial system does not, by itself, guarantee the protection of their rights and women must have the ability and willingness to strengthen their presence and their rights to work in the judicial system.

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<sup>17</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, p. 173.

<sup>18</sup> Uda Olabarria Walker, “NGOs and Palestine”. Left Turn. Retrieved, 28. 8. 2009, <http://www.leftturn.org/?q=node/471>

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Program for Development, *The Challenges and Options for Women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip*, 2004, p. 109.

So far in the occupied Palestinian territories there are no women chief editors of daily or weekly newspapers; yet there have emerged chief editors of weekly or monthly magazines run by women organizations which focus on news reports that lack intellectual analysis.

### **Reasons of Palestinian women's apathy as regards political participation**

#### **A. Reasons related to the community**

1. There is no doubt that the reluctance of Palestinian women from political participation is inseparable from the reluctance of the society as a whole, where the flabby political climate diffuses an atmosphere of frustration, apathy and futility, thereby generating a disbelief in influencing or getting involved in policy-making and decision-making processes. This is evident in the decline of the 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, not to mention 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, which have led to a state of apparent unwillingness of the public to join and participate in these parties, on the one side, and the migration of their members, on the other. Therefore, women, as part of this society, also are affected by such a 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.

2. The absence of a general tendency, of the state, to adopt policies and programs that would support women in the formal and informal policies. This has caused women to lose much of their prestige and has weakened their role and participation.

3. The existence of laws and legislations that allow discrimination against women.

4. Society's perception of women as its members of the second rate, and consequently, of their role as subordinate to that of men.

#### **B. Reasons related to women themselves**

1. Many women do not realize their ability for political action; they consider it a detracting element which cancels their femininity. This may be due to the way of socialization which supports this view, and emphasizes the primary function of a woman as a wife and mother.

2. Women's lack of interest in developing their political awareness through participating in political matters. They content themselves with practicing a role in the community far from decision-making process.

3. Lack of confidence among women, and lack of voters' support to women candidates. Women prefer to vote for men, on the premise that they are more appropriate for political action and holding responsibility.

4. Low level of education among women, which is reflected negatively in their lack of readiness for political as well as social participation.

#### **C. Reasons related to the concept of political participation**

There is no doubt that finding an inclusive definition of the concept of political participation is almost impossible; this has led to further confusion about this concept, sometimes enigmatic, and sometimes loose. It is known that most of the definitions focus on participating in elections, nominations and party membership. These are indicators that usually reflect the reluctance of women from participation. But with the reduced role of political parties and mass electoral apathy worldwide as a result of international developments, a new concept

has been introduced, i.e. popular participation, which focuses on the importance of NGOs and their role in development. Palestinian women, here, are a key element in these organizations, where women manage most of them. It must be emphasized that the lack of participation through voting and nominations does not hinder political participation through other channels, such as institutions of civil society or non-governmental organizations. However, during the *intifada* and after the many political changes that happened in Palestine women's influx into the civil work would suggest something different.

It should be noted that a large number of women who worked for long periods of times for parties or factions has moved to work in the field of non-governmental organizations. Thus, another political participation has begun to replace the old limited understanding of political participation as a result of many political, economic and social factors. Hence, there emerges a need to re-consider the former definition of political participation, and not to focus on voting and elections or membership of political parties. It is necessary to take into account the political participation of women in the informal areas, where many women preside and manage many societies and organizations, and participate in the training of their members to take the initiative and not to rely on formal institutions to solve their problems and discover the methods and techniques to overcome these problems.

### **The future of the political participation of Palestinian women**

Is not easy to describe or even predict the future of political participation of Palestinian women without knowing the identity of the Palestinian Women's Movement, in terms of features and the nature of the determinants and aspirations that control it. But an accurate reading of the identity of the political realities of the Palestinian community helps predict that future. The Israeli occupation still constitutes the greatest dilemma for the Palestinian society; it controls the land and natural as well as human resources; and it even becomes more sophisticated as a result of the processes of peaceful settlement which coincides with the transition towards the state with all its complexities and difficulties. The feminist movement found itself within the historical mess when the National Program of the PLO was replaced with that of Oslo Agreement, creating a sharp division that led to the fragmentation of the Palestinian national cause and the collapse of consensus to resist the occupation. As a result, the feminist movement has lost much of support of the masses.

This has affected negatively the women's movement that suffered confusion between the two programs, the National program and the social program. The debate, often sterile, about the priorities of action posed by the political changes continued for a long time.<sup>20</sup>

However, the orientations of donors and the status of Palestinian women under the new situation, i.e. the settlement peace process, have not given Palestinian women's organizations an opportunity to choose or even to wait. They have chosen the social program on the assumption that the process of change allows a room to negotiate about social rights – which were previously overlooked – within the emerging structures of the state.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the women's movement is trying its best to influence the social policy and the legislations that

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<sup>20</sup> Rima Nazzal, "Palestinian Women's Movement: Is it a fate?", *Royya Okhra Magazine*, Vol. 11, 1999, p. 19–21.

<sup>21</sup> Quttab Eileen, Quttab & Reema Hammami, "New strategies in the work of the feminist movement", *Royya Okhra Magazine*, Vol. 11, 1999, p. 16.

support these policies. It has dealt, excessively, with gender issues and thus has become isolated from the major challenges posed by the occupation and democratization. It is also to be noted that the Palestinian Authority tends to contain important women leaders within its organs and institutions as supporters of its attitudes and policies. This has distorted the image of the feminist movement and marginalized women's issues and concerns.

Therefore, all endeavors to improve women's participation should begin now. Women should try their best to avoid the sense of satisfaction about little gains they achieve here or there. They should have a clear strategy that ensures a greater participation of women and seeks experienced members with high merits and qualifications that are ready to serve the purposes of the feminist movement in general.

### **Conclusion**

1. Women of Palestine are part of a whole; they cannot be separated from the society in which they move in. What affects the community affects them too. Consequently, activating the role of Palestinian women entails activating the society which represents their real work environment.

2. The political circumstances gave the Palestinian women an opportunity to go to the public life by engaging in the national movement, but they did not make use of it. This delayed their access to the essential rights, including equality, freedom and non-discrimination.

3. Palestinian women's top priority, even before Oslo Agreement, was centered on the national cause; they overlooked a lot of social demands. The result was that women remained in their place and reduced their chances to achieve a higher status in society.

4. The Palestinian *intifada* was a powerful factor that urged women to reconsider the role assigned to them in the community through improving the community's perception of them by activities imposed by the circumstances. Yet, women's organizations did not make sufficient advantage of this and consequently did not adopt a satisfactory strategy of reaching consensus about priority issues.

5. The orientation of women's institutions has changed, especially after the Madrid Conference and Oslo Agreement; they have indulged in cases isolated from the issues of women's liberation and rights.

6. The first Palestinian elections marked the first real form of women's political participation after the entry of the Palestinian National Authority. When five women became members of the Legislative Council, they paved the way for a greater representation of women in various social or political arenas.

7. Women participation in governmental positions, diplomacy and municipal councils does not meet the principle of equality, nor is it commensurate with the size of women's presence in the national authorities.

8. The debate about the legitimacy of women's quota is still hot; should it be adopted, or is it no longer compatible with the most recent phase, which rejects the old qualifications for nominations such as the history of struggle, and party affiliation? It is necessary to answer this question.

9. Despite the fact that political parties and factions have been adopting progressive attitudes and strategies about the status of Palestinian women, the status of women in these parties shows that there is a great difference between the theory and practice.

10. The participation of Palestinian women in the non-governmental organizations is the most widespread, and the most capable of achieving a good status for Palestinian women that would enable them to influence the public policy.

11. There is complete absence of women in public jobs which are directly related to the formation of public policy and decision-making processes.

12. Palestinian women's participation in decision-making processes and in high government positions is still weak and limited and hinders the integration of women in the development process and the possibility of influencing the policy-making or introducing amendments to the existing legislations.

13. The existing concepts and norms and, sometimes, the lack of women's awareness of their rights and potentials constitute an obstacle to women's access to senior positions of leadership in the legislative, judicial and other fields.

### **Recommendations**

This 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. There is a need to consolidate and strengthen the foundations of democratic life, until it becomes a way of living, by adopting the principle of political pluralism and strengthening the role of institutions as well as the rule of law.

2. Women should be treated as active members of the society and they are important in building and developing it. The whole community should overlook certain traditions and attitudes that encourage and provoke the conflict between the two genders in the Palestinian society.

3. There should be statistical data bases based on gender to give greater opportunities to conduct specialized researches on issues and problems related to Palestinian women, which would enable the community to develop policies of integrating women, effectively, in all areas.

4. The image of women should be improved in the media and school books, and the role of their struggle and their contribution to the public life must be highlighted.

5. The inherited norms and conceptions need to be adjusted by highlighting the positive and suppressing the negative ones.

6. Equality in employment opportunities should be maintained.

7. The community should raise women's awareness and develop their skills and abilities to increase their participation in public life through providing sufficient training in the fields of politics as well as moral and material support, in addition to training programs that enhance their skills.

8. People should respect the rule of gender equality in practicing political rights and participating in legislative institutions and councils.

9. The government should reconsider the curricula to include civic education which contributes to the development of awareness, deepening the concepts of democracy and human rights and strengthening civil society institutions.

