

Watan for Palestinian Women



SUMMARY REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP - JULY 5 AND 6, 2011

Frustrated by the stalemate that is the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, the Palestinian government decided to move forward with a plan to appeal to the United Nations General Assembly in 2011 for recognition of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, the women of Palestine are largely missing from the statehood conversation.

To support dialogue on the kind of state that would best deliver to women, UNDP-PAPP organized a workshop on July 5th and 6th 2011 which linked together women from all over Palestine. The aim of the workshop was to give Palestinian women a space to voice their concerns and opinions on a future Palestinian state, to learn from experiences of women in state-building efforts in other transitional societies, and to propose approaches that women could take in the coming months to ensure that their opinions are reflected in public debates.

About seventy Palestinian women gathered in parallel workshops in Ramallah and Gaza City, with video-linkage to enable them to speak to one another. Also present were two international experts on state building and female participation. Professor Shireen Hassim, a South African expert from the University of the Witwatersrand, spoke on post-conflict state building and female participation. Clare Castillejo, from the Spanish think-tank FRIDE, presented a global study on governance and women's rights in fragile state contexts. Thanks to the efforts of the international women's peace organiza-



Professor Shireen Hassim and Mr. Frode Muring, UNDP Special Representative at the opening session

tion, Kvinna till Kvinna, some women from Gaza were able to obtain permits to attend the workshop in Ramallah.

After introductory comments, the two experts presented their papers. Clare Castillejo focused on research she conducted on female involvement in the statehood process of five different countries. She provided her main findings and lessons learned (her paper, *Building a state that works for women: Integrating gender into post-conflict state building*, was provided to workshop participants in English and Arabic). State building consists of brokering power, she explained. Women have been largely without formal power in transitional countries because they lack political access and funds. Women have been excluded from high-level positions even in countries where they were highly involved in the liberation movement.

Ms Castillejo's key message to the workshop attendees was that women needed to become unified and organized and begin immediately the critical task of lobbying for equal leverage and power in a future Palestinian state. Women activists should not lose their political agenda even if the international community is pushing toward this. Instead, they should ensure that the Palestinian leadership and the international community understand that there is an array of experienced women to work with. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on engagement with the pluralistic women's movement, not just the small elite in the major cities. Additionally, members of elite women's organizations and grassroots women's organizations should work together, while including young women in the process.

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Professor Shireen Hassim, author of *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa* and an expert on post-conflict state building and female participation, presented the experiences of South African women in the 1980s and 1990s in helping end apartheid. She pointed out that the 1980s formation of unified grassroots women's organizations and the study of women's issues at the university level, both of which have also been happening in Palestine, were extremely important in the transition period. Hassim said that female organizers in South Africa focused on bread-and-butter matters such as transport, electricity, and water since these were concerns women had to deal with on a daily basis. She spoke about the impacts of institutionalized racism in South Africa and described how women needed their own reconciliation process in order to act together to promote women's rights beyond the differences brought about by race, class and geographical divides.

Hassim told participants how, in 1991, the Women's National Coalition was created to bring South African women

together. While they were divided on many political, social and economic issues, they were able to agree on one unified action point: achieving a clause in the constitution that guaranteed equality between all South Africans regardless of race, sex, class, age, or sexual orientation. She proposed that unified activity on the Palestinian Constitution might be a helpful point on which to focus women's attention and activism as the Palestinian statehood debate moves forward.

After the presentations, the groups in Ramallah and Gaza City brainstormed on the aim of the workshop. The women posed the following questions: What can be learned from women's experiences in other political transitions? Is it possible for women to have a unified voice on the nature of the Palestinian state? What would that statement be? Would women actively participate in the state recognition process? Why have women been absent from the high-level national unity talks? What are the implications of their absence? How can the representation of women be better in the national unity government? What is the role of women in political parties? How can the international community and donors participate more effectively with these political parties to address the concerns of women? What is the role of women in the forthcoming electoral process? How can donors assist them in achieving their goals?

The following were the main points of day one's discussion: first, Palestine continues to be in a conflict situation due to the Israeli occupation and therefore is different from post-conflict examples. Emphasis must continue to be placed on ending the occupation. Second, the Palestinian women's movement consists of the elite and does not represent all women; therefore women's groups must work to bridge the gap between the privileged



Chart of priorities

and the average women – a difficult prospect given the territorial divisions and restrictions on movement in and between the parts of the occupied Palestinian territory, and the large refugee and diaspora populations. Third, Palestinian political parties severely marginalize women and this has prevented women from reaching the decision-making levels of government.

Both the Ramallah and Gaza groups agreed that Palestine, when it is finally born, should be a secular, democratic civil state that provides equal rights for all its citizens. They decided to develop a plan to work on pressuring and influencing the international community and the UN to accept the bid for the recognition of a Palestinian state.



Some of the Participants at the workshop

Some of the women propose that a drafting committee or a taskforce be established to work on creating a statement that would be issued by the Palestinian women's movement and delivered to the UN General Assembly. In addition to the statement, the taskforce would organize delegations to embassies and countries to lobby for UN recognition of a Palestinian state with an emphasis on the demands of Palestinian women. Delegations of women will meet with international officials and ask for assistance to amplify their voices. The group would also work on activating women in the media.

By day two of the workshop, participants agreed that developing an action plan would be impossible without further consultation. They agreed to outline the way forward and decided that, even if the September bid for UN membership is not successful, the process of involving women in matters of the state is critical and should begin in earnest. While the international experts had placed particular emphasis on the need for a unified women's voice and suggested ways in which internal divisions can be overcome, some participants, especially in the West Bank, argued that the divisions between and among women should not be discussed in this forum but left to a later and private meeting. Women from the Gaza group disagreed, arguing that women need to be unified on their demands before discussing statehood matters.

Many ideas and concepts were discussed at the workshop such as the need to work on a completely new constitution that would guarantee gender equality and how to review family law and amend it to be more gender neutral. Both Hassim and Castillejo cautioned the women against attempting to tackle more than one concern.

By the end of the two-day workshop, the Ramallah group could not reach a consensus on a plan of action. Initially the women agreed that the issue of Israeli occupation needed to be addressed before Palestinians could tackle statehood matters. Then, however, focus shifted to whether a group of women should lobby the UN and the international community for recognition of a Palestinian state. This conversation led to the idea of a setting up a taskforce that would be responsible for drafting a statement to the UN stating the position of women on the issue of statehood. However, by the end of the workshop, this idea was also abandoned because some attendees feared that such a statement could be easily co-opted by international donors, including UNDP/PAPP. Though UNDP/PAPP representatives at the workshop tried to assure participants that their process would be autonomous, with the UN supporting it only if requested to do so, a decision was taken to continue an action discussion in additional meetings organized by participants themselves. In Gaza, participants decided they would move forward by working on developing an equality clause for the constitution with the help of a legal expert. They propose to present the draft clause for Palestine-wide discussion.

In the weeks following the workshop, women have continued to discuss the question of what kind of state will deliver to Palestinian women? Valuable insights were gained not only on how Palestine differs from other conflict zones, but also on the similar ways in which women experience exclusion and marginalization in all transitional states. A great deal of work still lies ahead of all those who wish to see a strong, unified Palestinian state emerge, one in which all its citizens enjoy equality.



Dr. Zahira Kamal, former Minister of Social and Women Affairs



Group of participants at the workshop



One of the participants from Gaza taking notes