

Palestinian women's rights overlooked in favour of national liberation

Women in Palestine face political and social oppression, but women's rights are consistently overlooked in favour of national rights

RAMALLAH - The Jerusalemite Women's Coalition, a group of Palestinian women from East Jerusalem, released a statement on 24 October calling on the international community for "immediate protection" from the recent surge of violence across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories which they say has caused them to "live in a state of fear and horror".

The coalition "are calling to protect women and girls," as these groups, "are particularly vulnerable to various forms of state violence and mass atrocities".

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the occupation, according to Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who authored the statement on behalf of the coalition.

"Gendered aspects have always been clear in the Israeli occupation," she said.

Families across the West Bank are hesitant to let women leave the house alone due to the deliberate targeting of women and girls by Israeli forces.

Women are unable to reach work, and girls are also missing more days at school than boys, triggering a "reproduction of patriarchy" in Palestinian society, Shalhoub-Kevorkian told Middle East Eye.

Eileen Kuttab, the director of the Institute of Women's Studies (IWS) at Birzeit University in the West Bank, echoed the sentiments of the Jerusalemite Women's Coalition, saying the structural, cyclical and hierarchal nature of violence means women often become "shock-absorbers" in conflict, and women in Palestine are the worst-off under occupation.

The obstacles to the advancement of women's rights, however, run deeper than the gendered effects of the occupation, Kuttab explained. In Palestine, women's rights are negatively affected by the interlocking forces of political and social oppression. These forces are inseparable, and they work together to reinforce and protract one another and create new forms of oppression, Shalhoub-Kevorkian explained.

Instead of finding a balance between national and social liberation, however, "people give more attention to the liberation of the land at the expense of the liberation of women," Rawda Basir, director of the Nablus branch of the Women's Studies Centre (WSC), told MEE.

Women's Rights Under Occupation

The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established as a body of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2003, its *raison d'être* being "the promotion and the empowerment of Palestinian women," according to the ministry's website.

A statement made before the United Nations (UN) in March 2014 by Rabiha Diab, the Minister for Women's Affairs, makes it clear that the ministry sees the occupation as being the central factor inhibiting the advancement of women's rights in Palestine.

"The Israeli military occupation and its oppressive policies and practices against the Palestinian people has significantly affected Palestinian women in the most detrimental way."

Jamilah Abu-Duhou, a gender studies expert sent by UN Women as a consultant to MOWA, told MEE that women "are affected as any other Palestinian is affected" by the occupation, yet, they also "bear the brunt of the backlash of the occupation". In Palestine, and specifically within the PA, "national priorities take over gender priorities," according to Abu-Duhou.

Eileen Kuttab of the IWS agrees with Abu-Duhou. She has observed a mind-set of "our first enemy is the occupation, not the man," which has led many Palestinians to see women's rights as an issue to be dealt with following the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. She stresses that "there are different struggles within the same struggle," and none of these struggles should be sidelined in favour of another.

Palestine's legal system and a "social stigma"

An example of the social oppression of women within Palestinian society is their lack of protection under the Palestinian legal system. Rawda Basir believes that in Palestine "men are always given the benefit of the law". One example of this is relaxed prison sentences for those who kill in the name of family honour.

Al Jazeera reported a rise last year in Palestinian "honour killings": murders carried out most often by family members against women accused of "immoral sexual conduct". Basir also cites the fact that girls under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a man to file charges of rape.

According to Jamilah Abu-Duhou, for MOWA, "the legal system is a major concern," and the ministry has been involved in drafting laws and amendments to improve this system.

However, she asserts that it is not just the legal system itself which needs to be amended, but also court proceedings, along with broader social attitudes.

MOWA has been training judges and public prosecutors to be more gender sensitive with their implementation of laws. Abu-Duhou said that the need for this training is linked to the "social stigma" which is attached to women and women's rights in Palestine.

Another women's rights organisation which is working to challenge this "social stigma" is Sawa, a Palestinian NGO "working against all types of violence against women and children".

Sawa's central strategy is community outreach: the organisation provides training for professionals including public prosecutors, doctors, and the family protection unit of the Palestinian police force. This training aims to make gender sensitivity and women's issues more mainstream in Palestinian society.

Lina Saleh, the coordinator of Sawa's sexual violence hotline, believes that Palestinian society is gradually becoming more aware of women's issues. Since the hotline was established in 1998, more and more women are willing to reach out and trust Sawa, which provides women with advice and assistance.

When asked about the dual effects of political and social oppression of women in Palestine, Flora Salman, a supervisor at Sawa, responded, "[the occupation] might be a factor but it's not the main cause for the violence against women."

Salman instead focuses blame on the patriarchal social structure within Palestine: "The males give themselves the right to behave to the women as if she is his own property." She explained that this core patriarchal structure isn't specific to Palestine: "It's like any other society...we are not different from the other society, it's everywhere and in every society."

A complex context

Due to this intractable crossover of social and political oppression, strategies of women's empowerment must be specifically focused on the local context - a fault many Palestinians see with international NGOs and donors, Eileen Kuttab told MEE.

In their statement released on 24 October, the Jerusalemite Women's Coalition called for "the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security". The Resolution expresses "concern that civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict."

However, Eileen Kuttab of the IWS told MEE, "[UN] resolutions such as 1325 are largely irrelevant. Palestine is not in conflict or post-conflict but in the midst of a national liberation movement in which women's rights are being overlooked."

Kuttab believes that many NGOs and donors take women's rights as an abstract concept, and their actions are "irrelevant to the context". They focus on either the political or social oppression of women, and disregard the manner in which the two work together to reinforce one another.

"To be relevant, we cannot just implement UN guidelines and allow them to trickle down, it loses its meaning at a local level," Kuttab explained. Abu-Duhou echoed this sentiment: "We can't keep thinking that the state of Palestine is a normal state... what works here doesn't work anywhere else, we are unique in that sense."

Within the process of building a state, Kuttab believes it is imperative that women's rights are not forgotten. By combining the struggle for national rights with the struggle for women's rights, there is hope for a future Palestinian state structure based on principles of social equality.

She affirms that Palestine needs "to find a formula where women's rights are on the agenda and not de-linked to the national struggle".

"Women's rights are intertwined with national rights, they should go hand in hand," Abu-Duhou told MEE. "When we're building a state, we know what kind of a state we want: democratic, liberal... within that ideology we build rights, and women's rights should be

at the forefront of the national rights movement... one shouldn't take a precedence over the other."

"[Women] need to be liberated, and at the same time we need to liberate our land."

- See more at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/palestinian-women-oppressed-rights-overlooked-favour-national-liberation-1771812742#sthash.Ui6Qd5Q7.dpuf>