

16 March

Meeting with the Jerusalem Center For Women (JWC), Jerusalem

Topic: Assessment of the Palestinian Elections and Women's Role/Participation

Participants: PASSIA Staff; Sherene Abdul Hadi, Program Coordinator, JWC; Maral Kaprielian, Shipment Officer, EU Representation, Jerusalem; Rana Nashashibi, Palestinian Counseling Center; Mihaya Qawasami, Journalist, The Boston Globe; Abdul Rahman Abu Arafah, Arab Thought Forum; Rima Shwaily, Palestinian Counseling Center; Ghada Zughayr, Director, JCW.

SUMMARY

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi welcomed the participants from the Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW) and noted that the original idea from the JCW had been to hold a roundtable discussion on the Palestinian elections and women's issues with more participants, but the currently intensified closure of Jerusalem had precluded this. He therefore suggested that the meeting be regarded as a preparatory meeting for a future roundtable discussion to be held when conditions permit. He then mentioned the common interests of PASSIA and the JCW, such as promoting democratization and the development of civil society, and hoped that the meeting would point out some avenues of future cooperation.

Ghada Zughayr described the JCW's project to document the 1996 Palestinian elections in terms of women, so as to attempt to advance the position of women in future elections. The project, which began in December 1995, entails the study of three elections: the presidential, the legislative and the upcoming municipal. Two opinion polls were conducted before and after the presidential/legislative election, and more are being planned for the municipal elections. This is the first time that polls have included questions on specifically women's issues. The polls have been conducted as part of the JMCC's monthly polls, with four questions per poll being directly related to women's issues, for example the question of a quota system to encourage the election of women to the PLC.

On other activities, the JCW held pre-election workshops and model elections, and also conducted questionnaires, the findings of which will be published in April, with a comprehensive report on the elections from the perspective of women's issues being due by the end of the year.

Issues concentrated on are:

- Strategies adopted by women candidates during the election campaign.
- Difficulties faced by women in participating in the elections.
- The implications of the electoral system for women.
- The implications of the registration system for women.
- Behavior of women voters.

Dr. Abdul Hadi responded that PASSIA welcomes the idea of such joint roundtable discussions. An assessment of the elections from the point of view of women was necessary: for example, how some women activists in the Old City of Jerusalem had succeeded in mobilizing female voters and thereby improved female participation. An assessment and comparison of the various campaigns by female candidates was also necessary. Some female candidates ran very professional campaigns, but were not elected due to the electoral system. *Dr. Abdul Hadi* brought up the newly formed Palestinian Council for Peace and Justice, which includes many Palestinian institutions, representing all political factions as well as independent organizations, and recommended that the JCW become involved with this body.

On the question of municipal elections, *Dr. Abdul Hadi* emphasized PASSIA's interest in Jerusalem and raised the possibility of the formation of a East Jerusalem municipality.

Ghada Zughayr agreed that issues such as this are relevant, but stressed the need to avoid political issues dominating the agenda of the women's movement as had happened too often in the past.

Returning to the subject in hand, the elections, there was no consensus among prominent women politicians as to the desirability of a quota system for women. There was no female representation on the Central Elections Commission (CEC). However, it was to be hoped that momentum from the elections would lead to continued debate in Palestinian society and the meetings of the PLC, for example, over personal status laws. It was also to be hoped that this momentum would be maintained, something which had not been the case following the Intifada. An encouraging sign was that some male candidates had raised women's issues during their campaigns.

Abdul Rahman Abu Arafah mentioned the debate on the issue of a women's quota prior to the election, and the differing interpretations of the election results in terms of the number of women elected. The five female members represent approximately 5% of the Council, which is comparable with the situation in Israel, Jordan, the US and some European countries. Would a quota system therefore still be valid?

Ghada Zughayr responded that there were two assessments of the results:

- Some women feel that the result was good considering there was no quota.
- Some feel that the result was poor, and that women are entitled to a more representative representation than a quota or an alternative electoral system would provide.

Dr. Abdul Hadi raised the question of appointments of women as deputy ministers and to leading positions in the bureaucracy.

Ghada Zughayr responded that here, also, a quota system would be appropriate, but that women lacked a mechanism for lobbying for this.

Rana Nashashibi pointed out that when discussing issues such as quotas or lobbying, it is necessary to bear in mind the local system. A choice needs to be made whether to lobby within the system, i.e., through Chairman Arafat, or to work from below in order to change the system. The former course would be a mistake as it would serve to perpetuate the system of 'one-man' control. The second strategy would require lobbying across a wide range of issues, not solely women's concerns. Society as a whole is affected by such patriarchal mechanisms.

Maral Kaprielian questioned whether there was a 'women's movement,' having the impression that rather there are small groups of women working in different sections of society.

Ghada Zughayr responded that the women's movement suffers from a lack of strategy and insufficient networking, and political factionalism mirroring that of wider Palestinian society. Fatah has historically been the largest faction and is now viewed as the party of government. The perception is that Fatah is patronizing to women. It is necessary for the women's movement to make a rapid assessment of the post-elections situation and to rebuild itself from the grass roots level in order to counteract its isolation.

On the question as to whether the Palestinian women's movement could be described as feminist, *Rana Nashashibi* said this was possible on the political level, in terms of women's participation in the national movement, but not, for example, in terms of women's sexual freedom.

Dr. Abdul Hadi said that the position of women in Palestinian society needs to be put in its regional, that is Arab, context. The women's movement can be an agent for change in Arab society, but needs to operate in conjunction with other forces. One problem is that there is no media coverage of women's issues, and this is one factor to be addressed.

Rana Nashashibi pointed out that Hanan Ashrawi's election campaign and victory had transcended gender, and questioned what had enabled this: media coverage, reputation, successful fundraising, or a combination of all three? It was agreed that Hanan Ashrawi is not a good example for generalizing about the position of women in Palestinian society.

Dr. Abdul Hadi questioned why women candidates in Jerusalem had not run on a joint list.

Ghada Zughayr stated that the open list system had diverted women's votes, and pointed to the example of a Fatah leader standing in Ramallah, who had not been elected because she was a woman.

Abdul Rahman Abu Arafah pointed out that the quota system, whether on

religious or gender lines, contributes to the fragmentation of Palestinian society.

Rana Nashashibi responded that women are in a weak position in Palestinian society, as was reflected by the elections, but this could be remedied by a quota system.

Ghada Zughayr said that instant equality was not possible and pointed out that the CEC had not spent much of its budget on the education of women voters.

Rana Nashashibi responded that there was not simply a failure to educate women: the CEC had often sent male-only teams to register voters, knowing that in the absence of male relatives many women could not receive them in order to register. This led to many women not being registered and was an institutional attempt to reduce the proportion of women registered to vote. Returning to the Arab context, will there be an attempt to change matters from above, as in Tunisia under Bourguiba, or is grass roots action the answer? Voter behavior demonstrated a tendency to vote for those already in power or positions of influence, which does not argue well for reform from above.

The meeting concluded with *Maral Kaprielian* asking what were the aims of the women's movement: to help women into positions of power for the benefit of society as a whole, or in order to advance women's rights in society?