

# Let's talk about Gaza

## A glimpse into the situation of women in the Gaza Strip

March 2016

In light of the International Women's Day, Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip talked to Heba Zayyan who works as a program officer at UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Heba described the situation of women in the Gaza Strip, how she attempts to overcome gender inequality through her work and the obstacles she faces during her work.

### **Heba, how would you describe the situation of women in Gaza from your experience?**

The situation for women in Gaza is definitely not easy. I'm really unhappy to say this again because we have been repeating this at least for the last decade. Yet, it does not mean everything is just bad or that we don't have any positive achievements. But it also means that the challenges prevail.

Going into details and characterizing the situation, I have to say that women barely participate in any public sphere. Public participation of women here is one of the lowest in the whole world. Let me explain this: We have very little economic participation in Gaza. Unemployment rates among young women are notably high, and women only find employment in very few sectors, namely the service sector and agriculture. When it comes to the service sector, we find many women in particular professions related to teaching, nursing, secretary work and accounting. But when we have a look at higher levels of the career ladder where positions are related to leadership and decision-making, you will find less and less women.

Women working in agriculture are almost exclusively considered informal participants. This means that they are not protected by any law and are most of the times even unpaid. Overall, women in Gaza have been telling us that their economic rights are not equal to their economic participation. This means that if a woman is the head of the household supporting her family through a small business, a venture or formal employment, most of the times, she does not have any control over the assets she buys with her own money. Women here are facing one million challenges on this level, and this is why a lot needs to be done. Why? We see women's economic participation as the main pillar of women's public participation in general because it definitely enhances women's empowerment.

Of course, when we go to political participation, our understanding to this particular dimension goes beyond women in politics. We see women's social participation as a good form of political participation. So any type of engagement outside the domestic sphere, may it be in a community center, volunteering or trying to find employment, are all forms of civic participation that are

somehow considered as parts of political participation. However, if you want to talk about women in politics particularly, we are all aware that the Palestinian Legislative Council ceased to function<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, we know how much is associated with having a high percentage of domestic violence, so we are aware of the fact that the situation is far from ideal. The last information that we received in 2011 said that 51% of women in Gaza were subject to at least one type of violence. This information is quite outdated. Now, women's organizations indicate through their own research that violence rates are on the rise.

**What obstacles do you face during your work, taking into consideration that Gaza is a conservative society controlled by a conservative government?**

There are definitely obstacles, but I see them as most likely related to the overall political context, rather than the conservatism of the government. To be clearer, I find it extremely difficult to implement a project that focuses on women's economic security and rights within this large number of limitations. Even when we have the funding and the project implementation was successful, the results most of times differ from what we aspired. This, I see, is as related to Gaza being sealed off, related to the occupation and how all these dynamics play role in making it difficult for everyone. However, we know from a gender perspective that women are disproportionately affected by this context because there is a structural bias that makes women more vulnerable to the situation.

**Do you have any collaboration between UN Woman and women organizations? How do you support them? How do you see them?**

Definitely. Today, we see women organizations as our main partners in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We are investing a lot in these partnerships, as we understand that we need to support civil society organizations and we need to be very well advised about their understanding of the overall context. We collaborate with civil society advisor groups on the country level with representatives from different organizations such as PINGO, Al Aml, Al Muntada, and so on. We regularly hold meetings and discuss everything. Unfortunately, due to the factional split most of the work we discuss is done in the West Bank.

Currently, we support the implementation of the national strategy against violence and the national action plan on the 1325 resolution. We are trying to ensure that there are representatives from Gaza on the table. We also try to enhance the dialogue between Gaza and the West Bank by facilitating permits to women leaders from Gaza to participate in the West Bank. We have for example 17 women leaders from Gaza participating through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the rest of women leaders from the West Bank to discuss the draft of the UN Convention on the

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<sup>1</sup> The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), the parliament of occupied Palestinian territories, has been unable to properly govern following the 2006 elections and the subsequent split of Fatah and Hamas.

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, given by the government to the civil society. These visits between the West Bank and Gaza have enabled us to see what is happening on the ground. It allowed us to exchange with organizations in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, area C, and even Ramallah. It is very important that all women's organizations have a unified vision in order to work together effectively.

Furthermore, we have a whole programmatic approach to mainstreaming gender in humanitarian action. It started in 2009, after the first major violent escalation against the Gaza Strip. We are trying to provide information and evidence that shows how war affects women and children and how this is related to analysis and planning.

**From your own point of view, which kind of problems do you see as a priority to be solved in order to improve the situation for women in Gaza?**

That is a tricky question. I do see very strong support from several stakeholders regarding women's rights; this is not negotiable. All of these efforts are very important but I do believe that an improvement will not happen within this stagnant political context that we currently have. So the context has to change somehow in order to improve the situation for everybody, and this improvement will automatically reflect on women. As long as everything stays the way it is, we must be able to prioritize. Maybe this relates to your question.

There are vulnerable groups that we cannot neglect and that need our support. Their participation, whether it is economic or civic engagement, is crucial so we need to find entry points ensuring that they are given space even if it does not reflect directly on their economic situation, but at least it will help them cope from a psychosocial perspective. We need to support people's coping mechanisms. They are overstressed already, so we cannot keep these things completely unattended. Otherwise, the situation will become extremely difficult.

**As a Palestinian woman from Gaza, what are your hopes in this society?**

I am amazed by the positive energy of our people here in Gaza. It wows me how people of no or little income still keep going on. This is exactly our resource. The human resource is THE resource in Gaza. My hopes are for the political situation to become better and for people to have an enjoyable life.