

Higher Palestinian Women's Council – visions and challenges

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Introduction:

This meeting was convened upon recommendations from the Sixth National Meeting of Women Leaders, which MIFTAH organized at the beginning of April, 2015. At the meeting, women leaders from the different factions agreed to form a Higher Palestinian Women's Council as a means for intervention and accountability, but not as an alternative for any other body.

Discussion: general framework

The formation of a higher Palestinian women's council vested with duties and powers, as a means of empowering women and allowing their voices to be heard, in accordance with clear laws and jurisdictions enshrined in the constitution.

The history of the women's movement in Palestine verifies the major role of women and their achievements, even if they have not yet reached the aspired level. Palestinian women have been involved at every stage in history, at the national and resistance levels, beginning with the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women in 1965 as one of the bases of the PLO. During the first Intifada, the Higher Council of Women was founded, followed by political negotiations and the formation of technical teams, in this case, the Women's Affairs Team. Finally, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was established followed by the creation of gender units in the various ministries.

There is now a need for a Higher Palestinian Women's Council as a key institution of the state, with its own standing and administrative, financial and technical independence.

The proposed council will have advisory functions that oblige all government bodies, including the PLC, to present any bill to the council before it is ratified. Hence, this council will have legislative and executive powers in addition to development functions whereby the proposed council will put forth issues pertaining to the social and economic development of women. It will also propose policies, programs and projects which will help advance the status of women and will play a role in accountability and monitoring, including monitoring the government's adherence to international agreements.

Recommendations:

- To formulate an overall vision for women's issues; to ensure an ongoing evaluation and monitoring process over all institutions – government or private – working with women's issues,
- To cancel the name “Ministry of Women's Affairs” and replace it with “Ministry of Equal Opportunities” alongside the Higher Women's Council.
- To reiterate the key role of civil society institutions and partnership between these institutions and the government and to find a participatory mechanism between the two.
- To grant an advisory role to this council, including the right of litigation for women to nullify certain decisions or policies that undercut women and their rights.
- That the proposed council is inclusive so it has support and legitimacy. This means the General Union of Palestinian Women must be part of it, and its role developed and put into action. There must also be factional representation so as to empower women politically, economically and socially.
- To reaffirm that women are a force of change and transformation and not the embodiment of complacency and submission.
- The need for a comprehensive evaluation on the status of Palestinian women, with consideration for their most pressing problems represented in assuming higher positions, moving away from the women's platform and the conventional bias prevalent in society.
- To reaffirm the need to reactivate the PLO, the women's affairs ministry and the General Union of Palestinian Women.

- To work towards reassessing school curricula, which reinforces a negative perspective of women in general.
- To reconsider all structures in the PA.
- To call for promoting dialogue between all echelons – ministries, institutions and the PLC
- To call on the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the General Union of Palestinian Women to study and benefit from the experiences of other countries regarding how they deal with women’s issues.
- The need to conduct the necessary discussions over the establishment of a Higher Women’s Council and to ensure the broadest possible participation so as to formulate a final and agreed upon formula.
- To allow the new generation to assume the helm of leadership and to build on the experiences of the older generation; also to build on the accumulative process for the benefit of women.
- To ensure there is no contradiction between the proposed higher council and the General Union of Palestinian Women, given that the latter is an arm of the PLO.
- The best way to form any representative body for women is to conduct a methodical feasibility study that addresses the opportunities and gaps women face. Therefore a sub-committee needs to be formed to conduct this study by a group of researchers with administrative, development and legal backgrounds; time constraints must also be taken into consideration and contrast and comparisons with other experiences made.
- To call for the formation of a drafting committee which would formulate a complete and integral working paper that takes all the ideas and suggestions proposed during the session into consideration, and would propose future steps to develop the most suitable formula.