

Report ANVK conference :Untold Stories of Palestinian women Sunday 24 May 2008 at Christus Triumfator Kerk, The Hague

Introduction



This conference was held to commemorate sixty years of "Nakba" and its consequences for the women of Palestine was chaired by Ghada Zaidan and consisted of two panel sessions, the first one led by Leila Jaffar dealing with "Palestinian women under occupation" and the second: "Palestinian women in a patriarchal society", presided by Dr Leila Jordens- Cotran.

This was followed by a documentary film highlighting the issue of honor killings, a series of discussions, an exhibition of Palestinian paintings and a fashion show. In the meantime a Palestinian luncheon had been served.

Attendance amounted to about 150 persons.

Opening speech by ANVK President Dr Tomador Meihuizen- Hassoun (summary)

The main causes of the humanitarian catastrophe to be seen in Palestine can be attributed to Israel: the practice of closures, denial of free movement, continued expansion of Jewish settlements, isolation of Palestinian communities from one another by the apartheid wall, destruction of Palestinian homes and farmland and transfer of population from the occupying state to occupied territory.

For 60 years now already Palestinian women and their families have been under siege and threat of death. They want our support but not in the form of food and drink because all what they need is to continue living with dignity, with their human rights and their right to self-determination.

Palestinian women are involved in the resistance to the Israeli occupation. They are also active through NGO's, where they have established a network of services for women to provide support while the conflict continues, and to help them play a larger role in building a Palestinian state. However these activities cannot be seen as a sufficient proof of their equal status before the law and in the eyes of men.

The main aims of this conference, is to know how women and NGO's can be helped in Palestine to reconstruct their society and the second is to inform Dutch society on how to support them suitably.

Keynote speech by Soumaia Bargouti – Ambassador of Palestine in The Netherlands

In her speech she stated that there should be initiatives to overcome the obstacles and major issues such as women in poverty, violence against women, human rights of women, women in occupation and that the general improvement of their status require peace, development and democracy. Without peace and without stopping the occupation Palestinian women will not be in a position of advancing their situation.

Mrs. Bargouti drew attention upon: The situation and assistance to Palestinian women, which is constantly on the agenda of the United Nations Commission on the status of women. She also elucidated three major points: 1- The Israeli occupation remains a major obstacle for the Palestinian women with regard to their advancement, self-reliance, integration and the development of their society; 2- Israel should comply fully with the provisions and principles of the Universal declaration of Human Rights in order to protect Palestinian women and their families; 3- Calls upon the international community, women in particular to continue to provide urgently needed assistance and services in an effort to alleviate the direct situation or/and financial crisis being faced by Palestinian women.



Sheren Seikaly

Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies and co-editor of the Arab Studies Journal Topic: "Role of Palestinian women in political resistance"

Ms. Seikaly talked about the history of the political role of women who are on the frontlines struggling for their survival in a gender contest. She explained that the activism undertaken by refugee women working for the survival of their communities should be understood as political. In her discourse there was further explanation about the associations and organizations established since the early twentieth century. In addition, the work done by women in the political sphere under the colonial forces and the long history of women's resistance was elucidated. Ms. Seikaly posed the question of how women can

stage the center of gender equality at the same time that they still have to fight for the very existence of their nation.

Afaf Jabiri

Regional coordinator for V-Day's Karama Program, Member of the Central Council of the Jordanian Women's Union.

Topic: "Palestinian women under occupation and facing a patriarchal society".

Ms. Jabiri referred to the Palestinian Nakba, its continuation and the number of Palestinians who were uprooted from their land. She continued stating that Palestine has always been struggling towards ending the occupation. The Palestinian struggle is not finished yet neither in Palestine nor in other countries. When it comes to women, the issues should always be linked to the political situation. She drew up attention to the abuse and violence against women. In this struggle, the international community has a major role to play. There is still an ongoing attack against women, who are being governed by outdated laws. Occupation is undermining their struggle but also causing a major suffering.

Suha Bargouti

Member of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian NGO network (PNGO)

Topic: "Women in political organizations and in NGOs"

Mrs. Bargouti talked about decision making under occupation. She expressed her opinion that women's partnership in the decision-making process requires a change of stereotypes. She talked about women being candidates in the first parliamentary elections and the simultaneous change in social structures. Another topic was that women have been very active working with grassroots organizations and NGOs. Following that, the issue was about positive discrimination and a quota system for women politically appointed. Mrs. Bargouti then talked thoroughly about the quota system.

Husam Zomlot

Political advisor to the Palestinian diplomatic mission to the U.K., Specialist on Middle East affairs

Topic: "The current situation and impact on Palestinian women and children".

Mr. Zomlot talked about the Palestinian Nakba, the State formation and the twentieth anniversary of the Palestinian declaration of independence. He talked about the Zionist project and security. He stated that democracy is what matters and that there is the need for a strong and vivid democratic process. At this point, the question is not about what is done but it is about the cracks in the process. He explained further about Israel having an existential problem and the consequences of this for any decision to manage the conflict, for the endless negotiations and the peace process in general. Furthermore, he talked about the feminist movements facing a growing colonial occupation and how is it that they can aim for gender equality while struggling for their right of self-determination. As a final remark, he talked about the role to be played by the Palestinian people who are living abroad.

Maha Najjar



*Legal Council, Free University of Brussels
Topic: "Behind a triple wall: political, social and legal challenges facing the Palestinian women"*

Mrs. Najjar elaborated about the legal system in Palestine in the past centuries, the British mandate, its direct impact on the legal system and the years of occupation. Other topics were the main difference between Palestine and other post-colonial experiences and women organizations. One of the main questions raised was whether we should first finish the political war and have an independent state and only work on laws for women afterwards. It was stated that many people are in favor of doing both processes at the same time. Ms. Najjar talked further about family law and the implications for women in divorce and custody issues.

Buthina Canaan Khoury

Independent filmmaker

Topic: "Film Maria's Grotto" – Documentary highlighting the issue of honor killings.

Ms. Khoury talked about her motives for making Maria's grotto. She wanted to express views on a taboo subject that is part of a bigger phenomenon that is called honor killings. She wanted to bring the perspective of women in the films highlighting the ones who are politically involved in the struggle against Israel. She also wanted to talk about Palestinian women who experience other sorts of suffering such as being killed by family members.

Movie review

The movie review was followed by a discussion where members of the audience and the panel expressed their views very clearly and openly. Below you will find one of the opinions expressed during the discussion.



Afaf Jabiri

“ ...Honor killing is a result influence of the occupation because of the disorder the Palestinian territories there is no order where people can organize themselves... We would have been able to lobby to change these laws if it wasn't for the occupation...”



Lunch

In the middle of the day a typical Palestinian warm lunch was served. Palestinian women prepared the delicious food and it fit perfectly well with the cultural aspect of the day.

Fashion show

Janine de Poorter, Nawal Al-Baz and Tamaam, Abu Ayyash organized this fashion show which followed the progression from traditional to modern. The amazing looking outfits were shown with an explanation of which time it belonged to. Hints were also given about the modern way to wear them.





Exhibition of Palestinian paintings

By: Finan Ghazal - Time for social gathering

Participants of the conference viewed this exhibition and all of them were impressed by its contents it. It was also a perfect finishing touch for the whole day.