

Bridging the Gender Gap

Palestinian Youth Leaders Call for Efforts to Bridge Gender Gap, Empower Women

Courtesy of
UN Women



According to young leaders from various Palestinian areas, there is a great need for concerted efforts to support the empowerment of women and girls and bridge the widening gender gap in Palestine. In

an online meeting convened by UN Women on February 15, 2021, members of the Palestinian Gender Innovation Agora affirmed the importance of coming together to work towards supporting the empowerment of women who “were marginalized for long” and to ensure that they be represented fairly in various walks of life, most importantly in political and leadership positions. Such steps are presently paramount as the country gears up for general elections, said members of the group, which is a consultative forum that was set up in January 2021 by UN Women Palestine as part of a regional endeavor that aims to conduct regular dialogue and advocacy on gender issues. The Palestine group includes 32 young female and male leaders who were selected from various Palestinian areas based on their leadership roles and their contributions to the promotion of gender equality.

“Gender equality is a basic human rights principle; it is about justice and fairness in offering equal political, economic, social, and other rights to women and men,” affirmed Mustafa Alqut, a field researcher in children’s

Set up by UN Women, Palestine Gender Innovation Agora conducts regular dialogue on gender issues.

rights from Nablus. Enas Dajani, a reproductive health expert from Bethlehem, agreed, saying that although women enjoy rights in health and education, there are other rights that still need to be fulfilled, including having equal opportunities in life. “The social burdens shouldered by women are much bigger than those shouldered by men... women still have the responsibilities of caring for children, preparing food, and carrying out all other household chores,” she said, noting that this deprives them of having equal opportunities and the right to make choices in life. “Women should be allowed to choose what to study, which jobs

Equality is a basic principle of human rights.

to take, and who should be their partners in life.” Izz Aljabari, a trainer in cultural and heritage fields in Hebron, affirmed the importance of widening the scope of choices offered to women in all walks of life.

Samar Thawabteh, a radio presenter from Ramallah, said that because women shoulder more responsibilities and face more hurdles than men, they need to exert more efforts to achieve their goals, even when they have the same capabilities and qualifications as their male counterparts. “We need equality in various fields of life: Equal opportunities, rights, social justice, leadership positions. All these are contained within the equality we are demanding,” she said. According to Osama Naim, a law student at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, the



stereotypes that wrongfully depict women as incapable have made many of them afraid of assuming leadership positions.

Bissan Ouda, a content writer from Gaza, said that discrimination and marginalization are problems faced not only by older women but also by young males and females. Izz Aljabari blamed this discrimination on the political system, which, he said, works to hamper the progress of youth. Mustafa Alqut put the blame also on political parties, religious ideology, and the prevailing masculine mentality: “Women’s participation in political life and their numbers in leadership positions remain limited. In the municipal councils where they are represented, their participation can be described as symbolic.” According to Alqut, political parties minimize the chances of independent candidates, mainly youth and women, in any elections. Tamara Altibi, a lawyer and trainer in the field of gender from Tulkarem, added that the civil service law impedes the progress of talented young people, particularly women.

Ahmad Yassin, who works at a cultural institute in Ramallah, said that women carry part of the blame for the drop in leadership roles, particularly when compared

to their active participation in the earlier years of the struggle against the occupation in the 1970s and 1980s. "We blame our leadership, masculinity, and society, but we overlook the fact that women themselves are not doing enough in this regard," he said. Aya Abu Mayyaleh, a media professor at Palestine Polytechnic University in Hebron, voiced agreement but reminded us that even when women are qualified for leadership roles, many still lack family support. This family support, mainly provided by fathers and husbands, is highly needed to enable talented, qualified women to succeed in assuming senior government and political positions, according to Enas Dajani, who pointed to the existence of traditional gender roles that impose burdens on women and girls.

women and youth. Osama Naim called for breaking discriminatory stereotypes by encouraging and highlighting women's success stories and enhancing their role in civil society organizations. He also called for boosting women's representation in university student councils, which can prepare them for political and leadership roles later on in life.

"Meanwhile," Aya Abu Mayyaleh added, "for women to succeed, they need the support of other women in addition to that of men. Women should work on enhancing their roles and capabilities and should not wait for others to support them. Educational resources are available online now. So women can work to empower themselves."

Both young women and young men are being marginalized.

Participants in the meeting agreed that change could also be achieved through elections, particularly as the country is heading towards general polls this year. Bissan Ouda said that more efforts should be exerted to encourage young women and men not only to register to vote in the elections but also to run as candidates, suggesting that the Agora members pay visits to qualified candidates and that social media be utilized to raise awareness in this regard.

UN Women Special Representative in Palestine Maryse Guimond said that the country office supports such efforts by young leaders: "The skills, talents, commitments, and inspiration of young women and men represent critical drivers for accelerating progress on sustainable development and gender equality in Palestine. They are key partners in the achievement of an equal future. Young Palestinian leaders, such as the Palestinian Agora members, have the potential to serve their country and people and should be given all possible support to contribute to positive change in Palestine."



Members of UN Women Palestine Gender Innovation Agora act as a consultative forum and platform for regular dialogue on gender issues.

Enas Dajani said that there is a dire need to move towards a redistribution of gender roles and start educating children from a young age on these issues. She pointed out that school curricula have to change and take gender mainstreaming into consideration. Mustafa Alqut called for launching advocacy efforts that affirm the need to activate the role of

Palestinian youth stress that there is a great need to find solutions.