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Abstract Paper: Women and Citizenship: The Local Councils in Palestine a Case Study.

Summary:

The purpose of this paper is to study the Palestinian women movement and contribution to the concepts and practices of citizenship in spite of social, civil and political restrictions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories - OPT. The paper will take the relationship between women movement and the local Councils in Gaza Strip as a case study. The paper will examine relationship from citizenship perspective, theory and practice. The paper will examine the policies of the local councils of women empowerment issue as a strategic issue in implementing its civil society actions and strengthening the concept and practices of citizenship.

The paper will examine the challenges facing women engagement in civil, social and political participation. This includes discussing the challenges and restrictions of public freedoms, political exclusion and domestic violence. This includes examining the traditional and cultural restrictions facing women's efforts and contribution to citizenship. These circumstances and constraints have already made women in a worse situation. Women remain on the margin of the society and used to vote for this party or that movement without a real political participation. Women are used only for political decorations.

The paper will present the impact of the Palestinian women movement on the concepts of citizenship in Palestine. The paper will bring into the attention the contribution of the women movement to the development of citizenship practices and the national identity despite the fact of the paralyzed political system.

Key Words: Women, citizenship, NGOs, local councils, Gaza Strip.

Citizenship Concept:

In theory, Thomas H. Marshall defines citizenship as “full membership in the community”. The full membership refers to the political, social and civil rights and responsibilities.¹ In Palestine, according to Article 9 of the Palestinian Basic Law "the temporarily constitution" makes clearly no difference between men and women in all civil and political rights. There is no difference between them on the basis of political views, disability, ethnicity, sex, color, religion.

Women and Citizenship

The Palestinian woman is a full member and citizen of the society in accordance with the Palestinian basic law. Women undertakes social and traditional responsibilities and duties as similar as man does in the society. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the population of Palestine estimated 4.35 million of whom 2.21 million were males and 2.14 million females at the end of 2012.

These figure shows that women compromise about half of the society; however, the behavior, attitudes and positions of society towards is a very masculine one. It generally prefers man in the public and private spheres. It discriminates against women in different scopes both de jure and de facto. Some women groups do not have the capacity to maintain itself and to challenge the social, economic, financial and political pressures. They do not have even mechanisms to get involved in the policy making process of poverty alleviation and civil society empowerment. They could not even challenge the situations to exist as an effective part of policies and to contribute to the policy making development process. Youser Atrash, a feminist activist confirmed that "the women movement plays a major role in strengthening and activating women political and social arena; however, there are some obstacles and difficulties that hinder woman's participation in different political and decision making process".ⁱⁱ

Women movement still challenges a number of social, economic and political circumstances that hinder woman from obtaining her full rights. Women movement is represented by a spectrum of NGOs and unions operating different programs and actions of capacity building, awareness and advocacy campaigns. They empower women political and social participation at all levels. Women movement seeks to acquire women's full rights and participation in decision-making at all levels in the private and public spheres despite the following challenges:

Political and Civil Challenge:

In 1994, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was established in accordance with the Oslo agreement between PLO and Israel which signed on September 13, 1993 to start an new era for peace in the Middle East. The agreement was formed to bring back the revolutionary Palestinian political system in the exile to the Palestinian Occupied Territories to administrate the security and civil affairs of the Palestinian population. However, the PA still functions under the Israeli sovereignty without any control even over the national number. Israel is the sole responsible as occupier for granting the Palestinian births the national citizenship number even after the United Nations General Assembly recognized Palestine as non member state on November 29, 2012. Palestine state "cannot determine who is Palestinian and who is not under Oslo agreement".ⁱⁱⁱ

This restriction on citizenship number constitutes a big dilemma for society at large. Thousands of Palestinian origin who used to live abroad visited the Palestinian Territories and Gaza Strip. They have been still waiting for the national number to be granted from Israeli occupation. Those Palestinians if decide to leave the occupied Territories including Gaza will not be able to return

back as Israel controls the Palestinian borders. Thousands of families are still divided inside and outside Palestine as a result of the Israeli control for the national number.

In 1996, the Palestinian Authority ran its first legislative elections to elect 88 representatives for the Legislative Council; only five women elected. It was very weak and low representation for women who composed the half of population. The PA was always under fire from the feminist groups and women movement to improve women's in decision making process at all levels. In 2005, the legislative council made improvements in legislations to increase women representation in the legislative council and Municipal and local councils by endorsing the Cotta system. In 2006 elections, only 17 women of the 132 members of the Legislative Council were elected to the councils. Women's representation also increased by two women in each council in the municipal elections taken place in 2004-2005. In 2009, the government included for the first time five women in ministerial positions. Majeda Albelbeisi , a journalist said "women have the right to involve in political life and decision-making process but they still face a number of major obstacles including social traditions and customs.women quota representation in parliament has been less than needed, despite the fact women quota increased in 2006 elections".^{iv}

More complicated, the Palestinian legal system is controlled by a number of conflicting sources. For example, the legal framework of the West Bank is predominantly by the Jordanian Family and Penal Codes and the Gaza Strip is dominated by the Egyptian ones among others sources include: Shari'a law, Ottoman law, the Israeli military and civil. This state of legal framework complicates the situations of women in terms of family, marriage, divorce, violence etc. In the recent years, the cases of physical violence and honor killings against women have been increased as reported by all Palestinian human rights organisations. For example, 13 women were killed in 2012 for different reasons according to women's centre for legal aid counseling. However; the Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas signed the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on the Women Day, 8 March 2009.^v This step was very positive by the Palestinian President to sign the convention, but the conflicting legal environment in the OPT still striking its implications on the concepts and practices of women citizenship and women political participation.

In 2006, the political and civil rights of the Palestinians deteriorated to a great extent after Hamas had won the general elections and Israel rejected to deal with any government led by Hamas. Israel imposed political and economic siege on Gaza Strip where Hamas is located strongly. The situations have been worsened and political system nearly paralyzed as the legislative council lost its role and power in the political and public life since 2007. The Gaza Strip was separated from the West Bank as Hamas forces defeated expelled the security agency of PA. Hamas imposed its government on Gaza. Citizens including women faced uncertain situations where the PA has no longer physical existence. The Palestinian society divided between two governments under occupation. The takeover also contributed to divisions within the social structure of some small and extended families whose members belonged to both Hamas and the PA. The division deepened the Palestinian wounds and human insecurities at all levels in the OPT and the Gaza Strip in particular. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank were now without a one authority able to resolve issues relating to borders, movement, fuel, energy, electricity and raw materials.^{vi}

In December 2009, Israel led military operations in Gaza Strip left more than 1,300 people dead and over 5,000 wounded and 2,400 buildings were destroyed. The overwhelming majority of dead and injured were children, women and youth. The operation increased the suffering of the Gazan population for years to come including women as vulnerable and marginalised groups. Many wounded and sick were trapped in their homes, unable to get medical care. Corpses were left among rubble and in destroyed homes because Israeli forces denied access to medical crews during the campaign. The war increased the numbers who were displaced or trapped in their homes. Gaza's civilians faced dire shortages of food, water, cooking gas, fuel and medical care due to insecurities, the enforced closure of all of Gaza's borders, and alleged serious violations of international humanitarian law. Electricity was sharply down, and in some places sewage was spilling into the streets.^{vii}

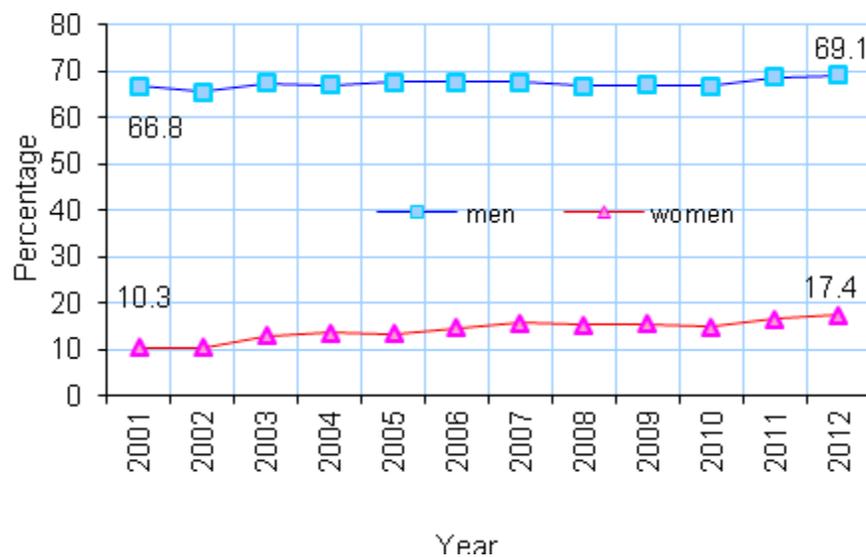
These insecure circumstances reflected at all spheres of life. It left the critical social and deteriorating human security circumstances, which sweeping Gaza Strip, in addition to traditional, cultural restrictions and stereotyping on women. These circumstances and constraints have already made women in a worse situation. Women have already practically excluded and marginalized in many key issues. Therefore, there are urgent needs for well-designed actions to empower women's community leadership, stop restrictions on public freedoms and protect women from exclusion and domestic violence. This includes advocating enforcing and implementing policies and practices to stop this sort of exclusion and marginalization. This also needs to undertake a series of actions to establish viable grassroots engagement which reach local people and enabling marginalized women of society to gain voices. In addition, Palestinian women were worried about their future after the eruption of the "Arab Spring" in 2011.^{viii}

2. Social and Economic Challenge

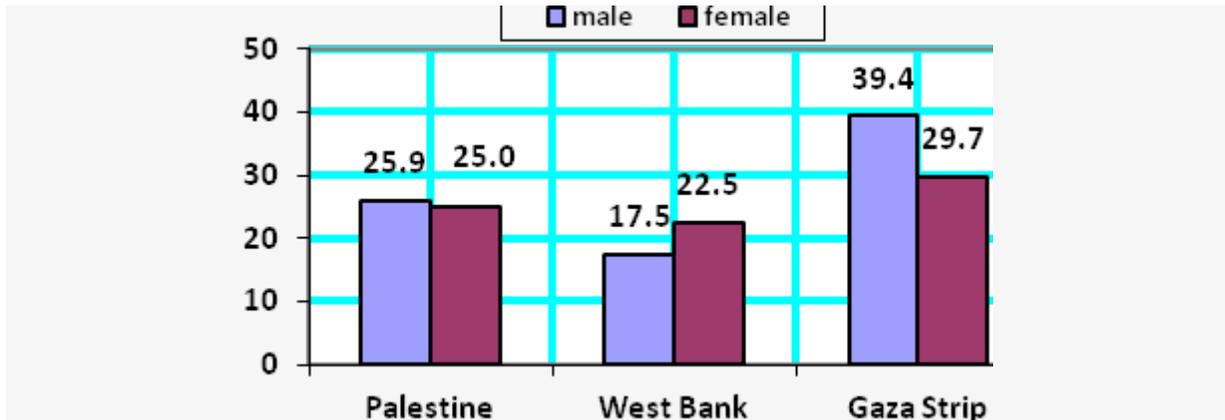
The society generally characterises women for household work and bringing up the children. There are some groups including women who believe that the proper place for women's is the house to clean, taking care of children and preparing the food. Some women also have suffered social pressure and violence as Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) reported in its national survey, 2005 that approximately 66% of the women in the OPT were subjected to psychological violence and almost 25% were subjected to physical violence from the husband. Majority of men believe that women could not deliver and contribute to the social development policies and political process in the society. However, there are very little numbers of women leaders and local organisations in society who attempt to change the circumstances and constraints that have already made women in a worse situation. Those women still fight to improve their position to move from the margin of the society to be a key decision makers in the civil, political and community work. These situations have not been changed in 2013 as the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) reported on the International Women's Day 2013, that the illiteracy among females was three and a half times higher than among males: illiteracy among males was 1.8 percent compared to 6.4 percent among females in 2012.^{ix}

In spite of these hard circumstances, there are a number of women groups and local NGOs delivering assistance to empower women leadership. The NGOs seek to increase women’s community engagement in activities of leadership, voluntary and local councils, free of expression through media and advocacy to eliminate technical and cultural obstacles of violence against women, inheritance deprivation, discrimination and unemployment to face economic challenges. The economic deterioration has imposed real threat on women's lives and their families. Women are considered the most vulnerable and marginalized groups that could face the difficulties of life in a conflicting areas such as Gaza Strip since 2007. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics the estimated direct losses in infrastructure and buildings at Gaza Strip reached up to \$ 976.4 million and the economy sector losses reached to 1.4 billion published on January 28, 2009. The daily losses of economic activities reached to 4 million dollars and the total of gradually losses for the next year estimated by 717.3 million dollars. So, the grand total of losses in economic activities during the Israeli aggression and the follow year estimated by 804 million dollars. The majority of women are located in the vulnerable and marginalized areas of Gaza Strip. The Gaza strip lives on the donations of international aid organizations.

Women movement alone could not even challenge these situations to contribute towards an equitable, open and democratic society through raising public awareness of development issues and promoting education for development, to mobilize greater support for actions against poverty. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) reported that the female participation rate remained low at 17.4 percent of females in the labor force in 2012 compared to 10.3 percent in 2001. The male labor force participation rate was still around four times higher than that of females. There was a gap in the average daily wages of men and women: the average daily wage for women represented 86.8 percent of that of men's in 2012.^x This diagram shows that the males and females labor force participation aged gap



Women still seek to play a major role in the market, fighting poverty, inheritance deprivation, fighting domestic violence and unemployment as the diagram of (PCBS) shows the proportion of poor families headed by a female is higher in the Gaza Strip at 29.7 percent compared to 22.5 percent in the West Bank. This shows also the percentage of deep poverty by sex of household heads in 2010.



These circumstances also imposed huge challenges and restrictions on the local councils to improve the practices of citizenship in general and women's social and political participation in particular. The councils have faced problems in empowering women's social and political participation after the last elections when women had already joined the councils as members.

Women and Local Councils

In 2004, the PA conducted the first round of local elections after years of appointed committees. In December 2005, the PA conducted the second round of elections in 10 local and municipal councils over the Gaza Strip. The big cities were left for the last round of elections that it has yet taken place in Gaza Strip due to the Palestinian division. At least two women were elected for every local councils in the Occupied Territories.^{xi} Women's representation came as a part of Cotta system imposed by the late Palestinian election law, but women still have no real power or voices within these councils. Some of these councils are rural and traditionally controlled by families and dominant persons. Ibtesam Za'neen, a former member of Beit Hanoun local council said "women political participation is not only to run for elections or vote to parliamentary or municipal elections, but women should participate effectively in decision-making process of all institutions".^{xii}

The problem is still a huge gap between women and the local councils/municipalities despite the fact that the citizens elected their councils. The women and vulnerable segments of the society are still marginalized and excluded from the decision making process within these councils. Hanan Abu Mashayekh, member of Maghazi Local Council said 'we are individuals and citizens in this community, we have to work together to develop and activate strategies and programs to

increase women awareness of political and social rights in order to promote their community engagement at all levels^{xiii} Mohammad Alnajjar, mayor of Maghazi municipality confirmed "women should learn about their own basic rights to be employed in the right direction..... women have played a great deal of success throughout their municipal work experiences."^{xiv}

Many people including women are still not satisfied about the delivered services of these councils and their efficiency. Society Voice foundation conducted a field study in 2010 to assess the process of accountability, monitoring and transparency on the municipal services of Maghazi as a sample. The survey assessed the relationship between women and the local council. Fida Sada participated in conducting the survey says "woman is mainly marginalized in the decision making process in the municipality, on the other side, the women unit of the local council has no activity on the ground". The survey shows that 81.5% believe the low participation of women in decision-making process within the municipality is due to the societal perception for women, while 74.2% said that the reason lies behind women's keeping away from decision-making center is due to the marginalization of the role of women and inequality between men and women. 56.5% expressed their satisfaction regarding the level of women working in the municipality, compared to 43.5% expressed dissatisfaction with the level of working women. 46.0% said the main reason lies on the marginalization of the role of women in municipal work, and 18.6% said the exclusion of women from decision-making process in addition to the inefficiency of women in dealing with the problems of citizens. 50.4% only know the number of elected women members in the municipal council, while 49.6% of the majority referred that they have no idea about the number of the elected women members in the municipal council - Maghazi

62.3% of the majority of the study group indicated that women's participation in the council has a significant impact on decision-making process, compared to 37.7% denied any influence of elected women's participation in the process of decision-making in the council. 77.7% believe that the presence of women in the council means strengthening their role in the community, and 71.9% said that their participation in the council means that it will support civil society, while 71.5% said that women's participation is important to implement development plans and 63.5% said women's participation promotes the values of pluralism and democracy. 36.9% indicated that they have never received any information on the municipal structure, while 63.1% confirmed that the information about the council and its structure largely available to the citizens through various tools. while 68.9% believed that information about the council and structure are available on the website of the local council, and 64.6% said that they got information from the members of local council, 54.3% said they got it from the hall town meetings, 52.4% said from the meetings of neighborhood committees.

The study shows that local councils still play an important role in the life of women and citizens at large. The study shows that the local councils could contribute to enrich the values of respecting human rights in general and women rights in particular if the role of women is improved to add to the society's values of development approaches, involvement in supporting participatory, transparent and accountable governing bodies.

Way Forward

The civil society organisations including the private sector in cooperation with the Palestinian government have to build a national plan of engagement and empowerment young women leaders to campaign and influence the policy makers. The national plan will encourage engaging the media agencies and civil society to ensure that development priorities are based on a broad consensus in society. It should also entail that the voices of the poorest women and most vulnerable are heard in the development decision-making process.

Women will engage in a full participatory process as an integral part of women agenda for democracy. A major methodology is to empower participants' by planning, designing and implementing women national plan will reply mainly on participatory approach and process from down to up. It will start from women grassroots and CBOs to advocate the public on their needs in the policy making process. Women leaders, young graduates, other direct and indirect women and CBOs will get involved in the implementation.

The civil society organisations have to cooperate together to empower women intervention and contribution to improving the situations of the target groups on the concept and practices of empowered citizens. Women would contribute actively to promote society's values and practices of respecting empowering women's equal social and political participation at all levels. Women would put into practice their new skills and knowledge of empowerment women social and political participation. Women should elect their representatives in different positions in the social and political life. They would contribute to improve the social delivery of local organisations from gender and social accountability perspectives. Young women leaders would have a worthwhile opportunity to empower their political practices through community work and participating in social accountability campaigns.

This will contribute to promote democratic participation and good governance programs that include anti-corruption and transparency components, empowering women participation and citizenship. This process will contribute to empower the society to elect more adequately professional and well representatives councils in the near future after those years of deadlock and suffering.

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Bio

Ibrahim Natil holds PhD in Politics and MA in Diplomatic studies from the UK based universities. Dr Natil is the founder of Society Voice Foundation. Dr Natil is also an independent researcher and writer. Natil served a consultant and employee for a number of international and national organisations. Natil managed various programs in the fields of human rights, peace building, community development, women empowerment. He also attended and presented papers at many international organisations. Natil's most recent publications: the Chapter: Turkey's Human Security Agenda in the Gaza Strip (book: *Human Security in Turkey Challenges for 21 Century*, 2013) and the chapter: *Hamas between Militarism and Governance: (Book: Peace-Building and Reconciliation*, 2012).