



Palestinian Women's Role in Leadership and Participation in Decision-Making during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Women's right to participate in public life, political, administrative, and legislative decision-making processes, is not only a constitutional right but is also based on the recognition of the role that women played in the national struggle and the institution-building process in Palestine. Such participation is even more crucial in times of crisis, due to women's ability to reach out and express the needs and expectations of the different groups within the community.

In the Palestinian context, women have actively participated in decision-making positions and in the democratic process, in addition to their engagement in other spheres, albeit in limited numbers that are inconsistent with their history of struggle. The 2019 data issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics has indicated that women form 11% of the Legislative Council members, and 5% of the Central Council. Women constitute 14% of the Council of Ministers, 11% of the ambassadors in the diplomatic corps, and only one woman sits in the Executive Committee of the PLO. Moreover, the percentage of women assuming positions as Director Generals or above form about 13%, while their participation in the public sector is 44%.

Women's Participation at the National and Local Decision-Making Levels during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The lack of gender equality has escalated since the emergence of the pandemic. This comes in consistency with the warning UN Women raised regarding the threats COVID-19 pose to further marginalize women, which consequently exacerbates gender inequality worldwide.

Despite the efforts exerted by the successive Palestinian governments, in cooperation with women and human rights organizations, to mainstream gender in their national plans and programs, yet, the state of emergency which was imposed by the government following the outbreak of the pandemic, has demonstrated the need to take further actions at the executive and operational levels. This was especially important in terms of ensuring that emergency and recovery plans were gender-sensitive, that women are represented in emergency committees, and that services provided to them are considered as essential services.

At the level of women's representation in the committees, women's participation in the central emergency committees in the West Bank Governorates and the 400 support committees that were formed by the local councils, ranged between 14% - 16%, where women mostly played a predominant role in providing social, psychological, and awareness raising services. While in Gaza, women were not represented in the emergency committee which was formed upon the outbreak of the pandemic.

As for "Waqfet Izz" Fund, which was meant to support the most marginalized groups, women's participation in both its Board of Directors and executive staff was limited to the participation of the Governor of Ramallah and Al-Bireh in a 30-member committee.

Despite the limited participation of women at the official level, they played a role at the local level whereby they implemented collective and individual initiatives to support local communities. The "Analytical Study: Political and Economic Reality of Palestinian Women after the State of Emergency was Declared," issued by the Palestinian Initiative to Promote Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), indicated that despite the discrimination practiced against women during the state of emergency and their exclusion from participation, yet they were undeterred and played a role in encountering the COVID-19 pandemic, by designing awareness raising and supportive programs to the community.

The study indicated that women's efforts were serious, had clear national and social objectives, provided awareness information of the health risks of the pandemic, extended psychological and financial support; and followed-up on women's issues such as violence, equality, and social justice inside the family. However, these initiatives were hindered by the lockdown procedures, movement restrictions, and oftentimes by the lack of government's guidance to facilitate the work of women on these initiatives.

Decisions Taken by the Palestinian Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- At the beginning of the pandemic, the Palestinian government adopted procedures and policies to counter the spread of the virus. However, these measures did not consider some of the emerging issues such as violence against women a priority, either at the policy, legal or service levels.
- The government's response to encounter the pandemic included the directive issued by the Ministry of Local Government on March 12th, 2020, for Local Councils, requesting them to form volunteering committees comprised of individuals, organizations, and community and national stakeholders. Such directives, which called on the committees to support the central emergency committee in each governorate, did not call for women's participation. The situation in Gaza was not much different compared to the West Bank; for a crisis committee was formed to follow-up on the health status of returnees coming from abroad, yet it did not include any women.
- Most ministries and government agencies have developed emergency response plans, however, few of them incorporated a gender-sensitive perspective, or segregated data and indicators. On the other hand, the government's reports were weak on information that categorized and described the beneficiaries of financial support and relief programs. This reflects the limited influence gender units have in the practices and operations within ministries.
- In view of the positive practices, the Palestinian government has granted flexible working hours for female employees, noting that the government is the largest employer of women in Palestine. On the other hand, this could be a reflection of the stereotypical roles within the family and society, as there were no efforts to give the male employees the same right to share family responsibilities with their wives.

Recommendations

- Ensure integration of women, women's organizations, and institutions serving people with disabilities in the emergency committees and decision-making processes relevant to the pandemic and its aftermath, so that these committees become more gender-sensitive to women's issues, in addition to supporting women members of the Local Councils to participate in these committees in order to provide support to women, especially in marginalized communities.
- Ensure the government's support for equal participation in bearing the burden of care and domestic work between women and men, away from the traditional social stereotypes of gender roles prevalent in the Palestinian society. In addition to supporting the women's organizations' efforts to stimulate debate about care work and its impact on the continuation of unbalanced relationships in the family, that are based on the traditional division of work, which in turn limits women's active participation in public and political life.
- Integrate the decisions of the Central and National Committees to allocate a quota of 30% of the seats in the structures of the Palestinian State, and to ensure that women are positioned in the electoral lists.

This factsheet was prepared as part of the action plan of the General Union of Palestinian Women and the Palestinian National Women's Coalition for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in Palestine and with the support of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

The opinions expressed in this factsheet do not necessarily reflect the official opinions and policies of UN Women.