

**Forum:** Special Committee on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

**Issue:** Protecting and enhancing the rights of women in Palestine

**Student Officer:** Bin Choi

**Position:** Deputy President

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## Introduction

On January 1st 2016, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development officially came into force, gender equality being the fifth goal listed. Regarding gender equality, the UNDP specifically called for equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes. It has nearly been two years since the SDGs came into force, yet there still remains a nation in which women's rights show no substantial improvement: Palestine.

The women rights situation in Palestine exemplifies the exact opposite of what was desired by the UNDP when establishing the SDGs. Palestinian women do not have equal access to education, health care, decent work, nor representation in political and economic decision-making processes. According to a study, women only hold 12.9% of national parliament seats, only 8% of the Palestinian Liberation Organization seats (PLO), and only 4.3% of ambassador positions. The unfortunate women of Palestine experience various violations of their human rights at two levels: at the international and local levels. The international level refers to the increased level of violence in Palestinian societies due to the prolonged conflict between Palestine and Israel. This, of course, affects all social groups, including both men and women. However, for women, violence also prevails at the local level. This includes domestic violence, violence in the extended family, and violence in community institutions. A local study shows that approximately 40% of ever-married women in Palestine have been subjected to some form of violence within the household; the types of violence include psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. In addition, Palestinian women are constantly faced with unjust regulations regarding marriage/divorce, reproductive health, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and access to education and economic opportunities.

During the past several years, attempts have been made to resolve this devastating humanitarian crisis. Although some attempts have yielded beneficial outcomes, their impacts were largely limited and insufficient in eliminating the gender inequality and deep-rooted violence towards women and girls in Palestine.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Humanitarian Crisis

Refers to a singular event or a series of events that threaten the health, safety, or well-being of a community. Palestinians – especially Palestinian women – are faced with a detrimental humanitarian crisis at this moment. Their education, health, and well-being are constantly being threatened by the current situation.

### Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt)

Refers to West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which are under the control of – occupied by – Israel.

### Basic Law

Refers to the proposed constitution of a future Palestinian state. It was established in 2002 and is based loosely on Shari'a.

### West Bank

Refers to the chunk of land in eastern Israel. It is home to 2.6 million Palestinians and is considered illegally occupied Palestinian land by the Palestinians and most of the international community.

### Gaza Strip

Refers to a strip of land that is surrounded by Israel and densely populated almost exclusively by Palestinians. Israel had a military presence but withdrew in 2005. It is currently under the Israeli blockade.

## Background Information

### Factors behind the gender inequality and VAW in Palestine

Research and interviews of Palestinian women revealed several factors that may have contributed to the increased the rate of violence and violation of women's rights during recent years in Palestine. These factors derive from diverse and numerous origins, including socio-economic, cultural and political sources.

#### *Cultural tradition*

Palestine's deep-rooted culture, tradition, and norms are some of the largest contributors to the current, devastating women's rights situation in Palestine. The patriarchal organization of the

society – including the male-centric system, gender stereotypes, and gender-biased social attitudes – continue to falter progress towards gender parity in Palestine. The general public still adheres to women’s customary responsibilities, which are limited to children rearing and reproduction. Additionally, methods of child rearing in Palestinian society promotes gendered role divisions in favor of male power and dominance; children are taught that boys have a role in both the private and public sphere while girls only have a role in the former. A Palestinian woman who participated in the local research confessed that she raises her children in a way that promotes male/son dominance and marginalizes the daughter’s role; for example, she requires the daughter to serve the brother a glass of water or prepare his room for him. Also, the patriarchal culture gives preference to boys’ needs over girls’ in education, inheritance, and other rights. These behaviors stress male predominance and inhibit women from enhancing and protecting their human rights.

### ***The prolonged Israeli occupation***

Local studies also discovered that economic and political factors, such as the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and thus the denial of Palestinian citizens’ rights at economic, social, and economic levels, contributed to the increased women’s suppression of human rights. Women in the study indicated that due to the oppressive policies of the Israeli occupation, men who receive unjust treatment and are exposed to daily insults consequently turn to women to whom they are able to relieve their own frustration. Unfortunately, this is done through domestic violence, sexual violence, or other violations of women’s rights. The deterioration of the political, social, and economic situation in Palestine pose difficulties for protecting the rights of Palestinian women.

### ***Local legislation and laws***

The Palestinian legislative framework falls under four different systems (Jordanian, Egyptian, Palestinian, and Israeli) depending on the geographic location, and the Palestinian Legislative Council has been paralyzed since 2007. Due to this divided legal reality, Palestinians (women especially) have suffered greatly from the absence of the rule of law. For instance, no specific provisions exist in oPt that protect women against sexual violence and domestic violence. New laws or amendments that plan to do so have been largely disregarded as they are considered “contradictory to human rights” or “discriminatory towards women.” In fact, clauses in the Penal Code, which is in force in West Bank and Gaza strip, contain unfair provisions relating to adultery, sexual violence, and rape. For instance, if a woman is unable to provide proof of “force,” “threats,” or “deception” to support her claim, she risks being criminalized for “adultery.” These discriminatory laws promote male ascendancy and female subordination in Palestinian communities.

### ***Absence of programs, entertainment venues, and cultural activities for youth***

The absence of effective programs, entertainment venues, and cultural activities is a concern for future women's rights advocates. Due to the deficiency of these activities, the younger generation growing up in Palestine (especially in villages and remote areas) has increased free time. As a result, boys are spending more time in the streets or browsing the internet, causing them to be exposed to many negative information and influences which is thought to exacerbate the violations of women's rights. Additionally, the study claimed that girls are usually expected to spend their free time at home which increases "depression"; this causes them to consider early marriage as a "more attractive option."

### ***Unemployment of Palestinian men***

Local interviews of Palestinian women has shown that the unemployment of men may be another potential cause of increasing women's rights violations. According to the interview, unemployed men usually spend more time in cafes or other locations that are far from their homes. Palestinian women claim that this detaches men from their families and weakens their relationship with their children – hence increasing the difficulty for women as they now have to raise their children virtually on their own.

## **Gender inequality in Palestine**

### ***Leadership and political participation of women***

As mentioned previously, women suffer greatly from the lack of provisions that protect their rights and that is to some extent due to the lack of representation in the Government and political participation. Here are some facts and statistics about women's lack of participation in leadership and political occupations:

- "Only 12.9% of national parliamentarians are women (12.3% in the West Bank; 15.9% in the Gaza Strip) as of January 2006."
- "During the Palestinian Legislative Council elections, women accounted for 11.2% of the candidates"
- "65 women hold a seat in the Palestinian National Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), accounting for 8% of the total number of members of the council."
- "Women hold 3 out of 24 ministerial level posts in the current Palestinian cabinet."
- 4.3% of Palestinian Ambassadors of the PLO are women
- "Women account for 15% of judges, 19.5% of prosecutors and 32.5% of lawyers."

### ***Restricted Movement***

Palestinian women who live in Gaza are strictly prohibited of crossing borders to enter and exit the territory. This is detrimental to women as they are denied exit to follow university education, find work, and receive specific medical services which are not available to them in Gaza.

### ***Violence against women and girls***

The increasing rate of violence against women and girls in Palestine is a very urgent issue. According to UN Women, nearly 30% of ever-married women in the West Bank and 51% in the Gaza Strip have been subjected to a form of violence within the household. 48.8% of women in the West Bank and 76.4% in the Gaza Strip stated that they were psychologically abused. 17.4% in the West Bank and 34.8% in the Gaza Strip physically abused. 10.2% in the West Bank and 14.9% in the Gaza Strip sexually abused. In most cases, the perpetrator is the husband, but it may also be strangers or other family members. Due to the general public's acceptance of male dominance, women rarely chose to speak up about their experience with sexual violence; UN Women claims that 65.3% of women who were exposed to violence by their husbands declared preferring to remaining silent. Violence towards women and girls seem to have become more and more common and decisive solutions are required.

### ***Education opportunities***

Although education has improved for Palestinian women recently as seen by the increasing literacy rates, there is still a significant gap between men's educational opportunities and that of women's. Due to the general public's patriarchal beliefs and acceptance of strict gender roles, the education of a son is much more valued than that of a daughter. This is of paramount significance as education is the key to ending inequalities like that Palestinian women are faced with today.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **Palestine**

The State of Palestine lies on the western edge of Asia and towards the east of the Mediterranean Sea. It borders Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Gulf of Aqaba and the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. The geographical region of Palestine is also known as the Holy Land and is held sacred among, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Ever since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region witnessed much Jewish and Arab national movements and their conflicts which led to prolonged violence and, sometimes, open warfare. Palestinians are Arab people. Their total population ranges between 7.5 and 8.5 million according to official statistics. For a long time, Palestinian women have been subject to violence inflicted

by men – mostly husbands, but also strangers and other family members. The devastating situational factors that Palestine is affected by has profound implications for women’s rights in the region.

## Israel

The State of Israel, a country in the Middle East, is located at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. It borders Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and the Mediterranean Sea. Israel proclaims Jerusalem as its seat of government and capital, although the latter status is not widely accepted by the international society. It is an unquestioned fact that Israel has a significant influence on the women’s rights situation in Palestine. In fact, their contribution to increasing the marginalization of Palestinian women can be classified into two categories: direct and indirect. The direct effect is shown through all the violence perpetrated by the Israeli’s occupation, including beating, cursing, and forcing women to deliver babies at checkpoints. Also, Israeli forces often inflict sexual or verbal assault at checkpoints. Indirect effects are factors such as the obstruction of the Palestinian legal system, which consequently inhibits the provision of legal protection for women in Palestine or the blockade imposed on Gaza, which prohibits women from leaving the region thereby preventing them from receiving higher education or specific medical treatments.

## UN Women

UN Women is the UN organization devoted to gender equality and women empowerment. UN Women promotes the setting of global standards for achieving gender equality and works with civil society and governments to craft necessary laws, policies, and programs that will benefit women and girls worldwide. They also focus on the Sustainable Development Goals and attempt to make it a reality for females worldwide. UN Women has promoted and continues to support the Palestinian Government in the development and implementation of the National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women 2011-2019. The organization has taken a holistic approach in countering gender inequality in Palestine; it works in partnership with civil society organizations to develop, strengthen, and implement systems, policies, and procedures to make justice system accessible and fair for all women and girls in Palestine. UN Women also amplify the voices of Palestinian women, which were mostly passed unheard previous to UN’s intervention. Lastly, UN Women also supports innovative actions – such as the creation of the first specialized anti-violence center “Mehwar” and the first National Observatory on Violence against Women – to promote gender equality in Palestine.

## Timeline of Events

| <b>Date</b>                      | <b>Description of event</b>  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| May 14 <sup>th</sup> , 1948      | Creation of the state of Israel  |
| September 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 1981 | The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against |

|                                   |                                       |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|                                   | Women instituted                      |
| November 15 <sup>th</sup> , 1988  | State of Palestine Founded            |
| September 13 <sup>th</sup> , 1993 | Oslo Accord signed at the White House |
| September 22 <sup>nd</sup> , 2005 | Israel's Disengagement from Gaza      |
| January 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2016    | SDGs officially in force              |

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Resolution 1325, 31 October 2000 (S/RES/1325)
- Sustainable Development Goals (2016)
- The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1981)

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

UN Women is an organization that attempts to protect and enhance women's rights in Palestine. In hopes of achieving gender equality around the globe, UN Women sets global frameworks and works with civil society and governments to develop policies, programs, and laws. UN Women has promoted and continues to support the Palestinian Government in the development and implementation of the National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women 2011-2019. The organization has taken a holistic approach in countering gender inequality in Palestine, which is further elaborated upon in the previous section (Major Countries and Organizations Involved). Moreover, UN Women also advocates for innovative approaches – such as the creation of the first specialized anti-violence center “Mehwar” and the first National Observatory on Violence against Women – to promote gender equality in Palestine. To learn more about UN Women's contribution, please read the previous section (UN Women).

Additionally, one of the approaches attempted to resolve this issue is through the assistance of NGO's such as Women's Affairs Center (WAC). These NGO's generally attempt to empower women and enhance their rights through promoting education locally, which is viewed as “an innovative and catalytic role in empowering women, and advocating women's rights and gender equality.” These NGOs certainly do assist women empowerment; however, due to the lack of public support, their impacts are hardly noticeable at a national level.

The legislature and other national institutions, on the other hand, have not done much to protect the women's rights in Palestine. This is most likely because of the divided legal reality and the paralysis of the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2007, which continuously hamper the progression towards gender equality and women empowerment. Due to this detrimental situation of the Palestinian Legislature, there are clear shortcomings in laws and regulations that protect and enhance rights of women. As mentioned previously, if a woman is unable to provide proof of “force,” “threats,” or

“deception” to support her claim, she risks being criminalized for “adultery.” Such unjust laws are major factors that harm and violate women’s rights in Palestine.

## Possible Solutions

First and foremost, education must be easily accessible for women and girls in Palestine; this is the most fundamental and essential key to ensuring long-term, healthy progress towards gender equality. With the assistance of various NGO’s, such as Global Partnership for Education, and/or various UN organizations, higher education needs to be made attainable by all girls and women regardless of their geographic location, socio-economic class, or any other factors. Subsequently, it is significant to convey the importance of female education to all peoples in the society. Both genders need to be educated about the social and economic consequences of gender inequality and learn that gender equality will certainly benefit both genders. To further convince them, NGO’s could initiate innovative education support programs. For example, the NGO could offer that if a girl goes to school at least 20 times a month, a bottle of vegetable oil – or any other incentive – is sent to her family. This will completely reverse the situation. Soon enough, families will urge all of their daughters to attend school. Supporting women’s education will play a major role in protecting the rights of women in Palestine.

Another potential approach to protecting and enhancing women’s rights is through providing job opportunities or teaching uneducated women advantageous skills through training sessions/workshops run by UN organizations or NGOs. Although direct economic benefits from this may be minuscule, the exposure to the public sphere will instill just the right amount of confidence and hope in Palestinian women so that they will persevere in their battle for equality. Also, this will make men more familiarized with viewing women in the public sphere, which in the long-term will alter gender roles and stereotypes.

For the sake of enhancing the safety of women from sexual violence or domestic violence, more Family Protection Units (FPU) – which are Palestinian Police units mandated to protect family and specifically children and women – need to be established in various locations in Palestine. Currently, there are only 10 units in 10 districts of the West Bank. Also, more anti-violence centers/shelters could be constructed in Palestine – there are four currently – in order to provide a safe refuge for abused women and children.

The issue of enhancing and protecting the rights of women in Palestine is a complex conflict; therefore, countless approaches exist apart from those mentioned above. The protection and enhancement of women’s rights in Palestine is a very urgent issue that requires immediate action and innovative approaches.

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