



The Gazan Women's Context: Challenges and Opportunities

Prepared by:

Mrs. Heba Zayyan

Researcher in development and women affairs

Presented to:

Conference "The Gaza Blockade: addressing consequences and recovery strategies"

22 October 2012

Gaza- Palestine

In cooperation with



The views in this paper represent solely the researcher's view and it does not necessarily reflect the view of PalThink for Strategic Studies or the Heinrich Boll Stiftung.

The situation in the Gaza Strip has been characterized by a volatile political and economic nature for more than a decade. The impact of the ongoing crisis has definitely touched the lives of all Gazans regardless of gender, status and age group. However, the crisis has a gendered impact to it; meaning the way that it affects men and women, boys and girls is different. The more we , look holistically to the situation of women, the more we realize that the persistent conflict combined with the domineering patriarchal system and the prevailing gender norms had affected the advancement of women's empowerment and gender equality and had made the work of developmental organizations that focus on women's empowerment challenging .

Since the early nineties, civil society institutions have contributed to the provision of education and health services, literacy services, vocational training and care centers for women and children¹.The women's organizations and women's machineries in the Gaza Strip have been very active since before the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. They have worked and addressed numerous issues such as domestic violence, personal status laws, honour killings, forced marriage etc. The role of women's organizations have been affected by the difficult political circumstances and what they include of the combined impact of occupation, siege, political division added to an overall deterioration in the Gazan economy. Their work had been perceived by many as less important compared to humanitarian priorities. As an overall developmental agenda for Gaza had been pushed aside in the last years (after 2007) and gave way to more humanitarian needs of the population, the work of women's organizations was challenged by limited resources, societal ideological changes, and the emphasized perception of women as "care takers" who should support their families manage the crisis. The situation of women had thus been impacted by the Gazan context in the last decade. Sometimes the changes were backwards and sometimes, positive changes emerged according to the emergence of new social dynamics and norms. In this light, this paper will shed light at aspects of the impact of the siege and political split combined with other factors on three important areas related to women's empowerment 1) women's political participation 2) violence against women, and 3) women's economic empowerment.

1) Women's political participation

There are many definitions for women's political participation. Political participation does not only encompass the extent to which women are represented in, participate in and influence national political decision-making, but also includes women's political mobilization and participation through civil society organizations². Social participation is key to political participation. Women who leave the domestic sphere to participate in CBOs activities i.e. attend a workshop, volunteer in a community service event, participate in collecting donations for the municipality councils- are all exercising a form of political participation. However and for purposes of precision, political participation in this paper will be used in the meaning of women's participation in politics, which is more related to women's visible role in political public life.

Why is Women's political participation important?

Women constitute slightly more than half of the world population. Their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal political structures and processes, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women

¹Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy: Promoting Gender Equality and Equity 2011-2013, UN Women

² Women's Political Participation and Influence in Post-Conflict Burundi and Nepal PRIO Paper, May 2010, Åshild Falch, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

are made, remains insignificant.³ Women's political participation is important because decision making is key to bringing change. And decision making is key to gender equality. Women cannot participate in democratic processes if they are not part of decision making. They cannot change laws that affect their lives the most if they are not part of decision making mechanisms at institutional and legislative levels. And they definitely cannot control resources if they do not exercise decision making at the household level first. And for so many other reasons, women need to be as active as men when it comes to political participation with its wide definition as well as its specific meaning in the mind of many; which is participation in political processes (working in political parties, running for elections , or representing the country etc) . The 1995 Beijing Platform stresses that equality in decision-making is integral to the advancement of women's rights and that women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a question of simple justice or democracy, but also a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account.⁴ In this sense, *"we know that countries with more women in parliament tend to have more equitable laws and social programmes and budgets that benefit women and children and families."*⁵

Article 7 of CEDAW states that "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country". Article 8 of the same convention provides that "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations" (CEDAW, 1979, 2). The Palestinian constitution, in Article 9, states: «All Palestinians are equal under the law and judiciary without discrimination because of race, sex, color, religion, political views, or disability" (Amended Constitution of Palestine, 12).⁶

Just to examine some figures⁷ on women's political participation:

Women's representation in the PLC: In the PLC, while a large gender gap still exists; there has been progress in the status of women following the 2006 elections. Compared with 1996 elections, the proportion of women increased from 5.6% to 12.9% (17 members out of 132 members in 2006, compared to 5 members out of 88 members in 1996). The number of women candidates in the second legislative elections demonstrated an increase from that in the first elections, where the number of women candidates was 70, with 17 of them, or 24.2%, winning in the election. Clearly, **the quota system (20% in the PLC elections) has played a role in favor of women**, in addition to other critical factors related to support of women candidates from political parties.

Women's representation in local councils: With regard to local councils, the proportion of women was 0.5% of the total members appointed in municipal and village councils and project committees in 1997. The proportion increased to 1.8% in 2000 and to 18% in 2004 and 2005, following four stages of local elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This significant increase in women's representation was largely due to a quota system that was promoted by Ministry of Women's Affairs and civil society organizations.

³United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) Expert Group Meeting: Enhancing Participation of Women in Development through an Enabling Environment for Achieving Gender Equality and the Advancement of Women Bangkok, Thailand, 8-11 November 2005-10-29

⁴Women's Participation in Politics and Decision-Making in Ukraine:: Strategy Paper

⁵UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet remarks on "Women Political Participation" at the Old Town Hall in Helsinki, Finland, 11 October 2011.

⁶ Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy: Promoting Gender Equality and Equity 2011-2013, UN Women

⁷ Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy: Promoting Gender Equality and Equity 2011-2013, UN Women

So how are women's various forms of political participation affected by the siege and the political division?

The political split and the Israeli detention of PLC members had resulted in the freeze of the legislative council, putting the quota victory of the women's movement into a halt. One of the most important fora for women's exercise of decision making had stopped working and thus women's political leaders hope for pushing a women's empowerment agenda forward had diminished. The 2006 elections had brought to office women from different parties representing Fatah, Hamas, popular front and others, where their discourse with relation to advancing women's rights was not necessarily the same. Time however was not enough to test the translation of women's leaders political view into actions when it came to the *How* to support gender equality. With the freeze of the PLC, important work of women's organizations such as reform of laws from a gender perspective and amending the electoral system had been affected. Though many women's organizations continued on their advocacy and lobbying programs, the freeze of the legislative council had not helped these efforts reach their targets.

When it came to the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah or the PA government in the West Bank and the de facto government in Gaza, and in spite of the evident national role of women's leaders, representation from women's political leaders was limited. Women who were elected as members of the PLC and women leaders in political parties were often absent from serious engagement in the reconciliation talks in Egypt. The lack of political representation of women in the reconciliation talks was not exclusive to one party that is adopting a particular rhetoric when it comes to women's empowerment. It was rather across the board! This signifies more that women have to struggle for an increased representation within the political parties themselves. The reconciliation had produced 4 committees, with only one woman represented in the elections committee, ignoring women's participation in important committees such as social reconciliation, liberties, and leadership committees. The challenge with political participation is not only the percentage (aspired to be 30% in Beijing conference in 1995); it is more the *quality and influence of such participation!* Women leaders face both issues in their parties , limited representation and limited ability to influence key decisions both caused by the parties' male dominated agenda which sometimes force women leaders to take decisions in support of their male colleagues' interests over those of women they represent .

A number of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR)⁸ call for equal and active representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts. They also call for the protection of the rights of women and children during armed conflict and attention to their special needs. In the oPt, UNSCRs on women's peace and security are not being respected and specific systems to regularly monitor and report women's rights violations of the Palestinian women are not available. In light of 1325 resolution, Palestinian women should have a much of a bigger role in peace talks and negotiation processes. They should be able to address their concerns through decision making processes.

What to do?

Just to list few measures:

Supporting women's political participation requires national reconciliation first! The factional spilt is highly affecting women's engagement in political processes in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

⁸ UNSCR 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 and 1889 (2009)

The women's movement should adopt a unified rhetoric when it comes to women's political participation and the way this participation should support and be supported by unified national efforts. Women's organizations should work hard on the creation of new female political leaders (**second line of leadership**) who are able to build on the achievements of the women's movement, transforming the rhetoric of gender equality and women's empowerment into real action.

Efforts to conduct awareness campaigns with the population on the importance of women's participation in the electoral process as candidates and voters should also continue highlighting the importance of supporting women leaders; targeting marginalized areas as well as major cities and villages.

More networks and coalitions should be created in the fashion of 1325 coalition, which is managed by the General Union of Palestinian Women to address women's priorities and needs through politics and through engagement in political parties.

More work should be done to reform the political parties in favor of gender equality, including utilizing the quota principle, advocacy and lobbying, and capacity building of women leaders in the parties.

The nationalization and operationalization of UNSCR 1325 resolution should be considered as a priority. A clear strategy to implement the resolution should be developed outlining commitments and measures to put the resolution in effect by a national government and other actors.

2) Violence against Women in the Gaza Strip: A major protection concern

The Universal Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, endorsed by the United Nations in 1993, defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing reaffirmed this definition 1995.⁹

Violence against women and girls in the Gaza Strip is on the rise! The domestic violence survey conducted by PCBS in 2005 indicated that 49.7% of ever married women in the Gaza Strip have been exposed to psychological violence, 22.6% to physical violence and 9.7 % to sexual violence at least once. According to PCBS in (2011), there is a high incidence of domestic violence within Gazan households with more than 51.1% of women who were ever married in the Gaza Strip subject to violence by husband; 76.4% of whom were subject to psychological violence, 34.8% of whom were subject to physical violence, 88.3 % to economic violence, and 14.6% had experienced sexual violence. The overall percentage of 51.1% subject to violence in the Gaza Strip is compared to 29.9% in the West bank , which signifies a clear gap and a real concern when it comes to women's protection in Gaza. The So-called "honor killing" of women occurred on many occasions throughout the Gaza strip. According to a press release published in 2011 by the Palestinian center for human right (PCHR), three (3) women were killed under the pretext of the so called "Honor Killing" According to the UNIFEM guidebook¹⁰ as opposed to men, "*women are primarily vulnerable to violence in the domestic sphere rather than the public sphere with young wives in extended family households more likely to suffer abuse*".

What does this tell us?

There is limited comprehensive and precise data on the causes of violence against women and girls in the oPt. However, research suggests that the prolonged political violence, siege and illegal blockade of Gaza

⁹Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy: Promoting Gender Equality and Equity 2011-2013, UN Women

¹⁰Towards gender equality in humanitarian response: Addressing the needs of women & men in Gaza, UNIFEM 2009

have directly and indirectly affected the escalation of violence against women and within the family¹¹. The increase must be related to the troubled political and economic situation of the Gazan families. The siege had pushed the Gazan families to become “extra resilient” trying to find or rather invent alternatives to survive the ever continuing electricity and fuel shortages, food insecurity, water scarcity and pollution which in turn had put huge pressures on family dynamics. If we take the case of The 23-day Israeli military operations “Cast Lead” alone in 2009, we notice that it resulted in the creation of 800 new widows who along with their children, face a range of new protection issues and challenges. In the extremely resource poor environment of Gaza, they are vulnerable to many challenges in terms of access to family property and child custody¹².

If we go back to the PCBS survey in (2011), we find that when subject to violence, women in the Gaza Strip are less likely to go to a police station to file a complaint (only 0.4%), and also less likely to go to a women’s organization or a protection center (only 0.8%), with the majority of them going to a family member (37.7%) or remaining silent (66%). This reluctance to seek proper support is in itself one of the main reasons of the continuation of VAW as one major threat to women’s protection and well-being.

How are the siege and political split limiting the possibilities of providing solutions?

The West Bank and Gaza have different judicial systems, which hinders the pursuit of justice. At the same time, local customary laws are most commonly used to settle disputes and crimes in the oPt, as is the nature in most patriarchal societies. These local customary laws are based on reconciliation and exclude women from decision making. They deal with women as victims who have no say. In addition, previous studies on VAW in the oPt have found some provisions in existing (inherited) penal codes applicable in the West Bank and Gaza that also discriminate against women. The complete absence of specific laws that would criminalize domestic or sexual violence is problematic. Too often in the oPt, domestic and sexual violence are treated as private affairs and not as matters of public concern¹³.

Since the early nineties, women’s organizations had paid a great attention to the issues of VAW and GBV and had invested largely in designing and implementing awareness raising programmes for women mostly and started to do the same for men lately, which was and still is within the area of expertise and capacity of many civil society organizations. The problem resides however in the linkages between violence against women and the deteriorated socioeconomic and political conditions (explained above), where issues like improving the economic status of Gazan families or improving the stability of the political situation are not within the capacity of civil society at large or other actors in general!

The political split specifically had prevented the existence of one national agenda in combating VAW, though the problem exists in the West bank and Gaza. There is a general lack of political will in the oPt to make the necessary policy changes for combating VAW, as it is not considered a priority issue or a real risk to Palestinian social cohesion¹⁴.

The Ministry for Women’s Affairs in the West Bank had worked with UN Women, for instance, on the development of the first National Strategy to Combat VAW (2011- 2019), which was endorsed by the

¹¹Policy Brief: Mainstreaming Gender Concerns in Palestinian TVET System. . International Labour Office, 2011

¹²Towards gender equality in humanitarian response: Addressing the needs of women & men in Gaza”, UNIFEM 2009

¹³Gender -Based Violence in the oPt, Bisan Center, 2012

¹⁴Gender -Based Violence in the oPt, Bisan Center, 2012

Palestinian Cabinet. This strategy is not adopted by the ministry of women's affairs in Gaza and is not thus acknowledged in any governmental interventions in Gaza.

Due to the increased frequency of the so called honor crimes, the Palestinian Cabinet issued a decision in its 15 February 2010 session to request that the President suspend work on the articles (of the Palestinian Punitive code having to do with lesser sentencing or pardons on crimes of "family honor" and to refer this back to the general law, which considers such killings as ordinary homicide. A presidential decree was issued to criminalize "honor killing". Due to the long term effects of the political division in the Palestinian territory, this presidential decree was not fully put in effect, especially in the Gaza Strip.

What to do?

Just to list few measures:

Again political and economic stability is important to combating VAW and GBV. The reconciliation and the building of the Palestinian state can help improve the efforts of combating violence. Since the reconciliation is somehow linked with a promise of improvement over the socioeconomic and political conditions in the Gaza Strip, then its actualization can help in the structuring and nationalization of formal efforts exerted in this field.

The reconciliation can help unify governmental efforts in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank when it comes to the implementation of the National Strategy to Combat VAW (2011-2019), which was endorsed by the Palestinian cabinet in the West Bank but is not put in effect in Gaza.

The laws reform from a gender perspective can highly reduce violence, through criminalizing violence against women as such and cancelling any excuses the law avail for perpetrators. Amending the family law according to recommendations of the women's organizations can also highly support women's access to justice and build their trust in the legal system, and thus encourage them to seek proper protection mechanisms.

The work of networks and coalitions that combat VAW and GBV should continue and should be well supported by different actors and supporters, such as Al Muntada Forum to combat VAW in the West Bank and The Amal Coalition to combat VAW in the Gaza Strip¹⁵. Their work should go hand in hand with national efforts of governmental institutions according to a national strategy in place.

The establishment and creation of protection centers (safe houses) in the Gaza Strip is very much needed. Despite the fact that *the HAYAT multipurpose Center for the Protection and Empowerment of Women and Families in the Gaza Strip (a shelter for women victims of violence)* ¹⁶ was established in Gaza in January 2011 to address the phenomenon of gender based violence within an integrated, human rights-based approach, the center sheltering section was closed by a decision of the Ministry of social Affairs in Gaza.

Civil society organizations should also continue implementing programmes and projects to raise the awareness of the general public (men and women) of the problem of violence and how it is more of a public issue that affects society at large than a private issue the resides at the household. Efforts should be also targeted at the educational institutions, particularly schools encouraging a culture of zero violence and dialogue. Tailored trainings and awareness raising activities should be targeted at the police in Gaza,

¹⁵ A strategic coalition of 12 active women's and human rights' organizations operating in the Gaza Strip.

¹⁶ Supported by UNDP and UN Women, the centre is managed by the Center for Women's legal Research and Consulting (CWLRC) in partnership with the Amal coalition to combat VAW

focusing in particular on women's rights as human rights. Such efforts should be linked with a clear referral system among actors that can help victims and survivors find the best intervention mechanisms available.

3) Women's Economic Empowerment

The World Bank defines economic empowerment as "...making markets work for women and empowering women to compete in markets"¹⁷. Sida defines women's economic empowerment as "the process which increases women's real power over economic decisions that influence their lives and priorities in society. Women's Economic Empowerment can be achieved through equal access to and control over critical economic resources and opportunities, and the elimination of structural gender inequalities in the labour market including a better sharing of unpaid care work"¹⁸.

Why is Women's Economic Empowerment important?

Women's economic empowerment is crucial to the advancement of society. Women's economic empowerment is the single most important factor contributing to equality between women and men¹⁹. A host of studies suggest that putting earnings in women's hands is the intelligent thing to do to speed up development and the process of overcoming poverty. Women usually reinvest a much higher portion in their families and communities than men, spreading wealth beyond themselves²⁰. When women generate an income, they highly contribute to the welfare of the household. Their productive role has been identified as one main generator of development in many countries. It supports reducing poverty and generating human development.

How is women's economic empowerment impacted by the siege?

The Gaza Strip prolonged crisis had its grave consequences over its economy. In 2011, unemployment in Gaza stood at 29% and has increased since.²¹ Women and youth are particularly affected: The unemployment rate for women was 47% during the first quarter of 2012,²² and it was 58% for people between 20 and 24 years of age.²³

From the time they were first measured in the early 1990s, women's labour force participation (LFP) rates in the oPt have never exceeded 15% (among the lowest LFP rates for women globally). Moreover, Gaza women's LFP has always been much lower than their West Bank counterparts, registering as low as 3% in 1995. The reasons for this are rooted, on the one hand, in the oPt's labour market structures and the repeated shocks they have faced, and on the other hand, in the limitations of standard surveys in capturing the types of informal and own-account activities into which women have often been marginalized²⁴. The low LFP can be also attributed to the fact that standard measurements traditionally used in official surveys do not account for most work done by women, as the official definition of labor used to measure participation rates neglects the types of economic activities in which women are most often engaged. For instance, female labor and economic activity concentrated in the agricultural sector often goes uncounted,

¹⁷World Bank, (2007). "Gender: working towards greater equality", Gender equality as smart economics: A World Bank group action plan, Washington, DC .

¹⁸Women's Economic Empowerment: Scope for Sida's Engagement, Sida (2009)

¹⁹ Women's Economic Empowerment: Scope for Sida's Engagement, Sida (2009)

²⁰http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/womens_economic_empowerment.pdf

²¹Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 22 February 2012 and 16 May 2012, page 38.

²²Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 16 May 2012, page 15.

²³Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 16 May 2012, page 18.

²⁴ Who answers to Gazan Women : an Economic Security and Rights Research, UN Women (2011)

while women's representation in other areas, such as the manufacturing sector, while counted, is often quite low²⁵.

A study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) on unprotected employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip found that "Gender-based variation exists in relation to the labor force, with higher proportions of men than women among both formal and informal workers. According to the relaxed definition, 60% of working women are defined as informal workers, compared to only 16% of total male workers. This is evident in the fact that women carry out most of the unpaid work and work that is not included in official statistics. In addition, the proportion of informal labor declines with the increase in men's ages, but it increases as women's ages increase, which is often a result of women's reproductive and caretaking roles"²⁶.

In a recent research conducted by UN Women on women's economic security and rights in the Gaza Strip²⁷, the major finding was that **women across the Gaza Strip have indeed played critical roles in securing their households' livelihoods under ever-deteriorating circumstances over a decade of crisis**. The research also highlighted the following findings:

I. *There is a growing gap emerging between women's sense of themselves as economic actors and the limited amount of rights and recognition they receive from their spouses, extended family members and the larger cultural framework of gendered rights prevailing in Gaza today. In all cases, however, it has become apparent that dominant gender norms built on a division of roles in which men are breadwinners and women dependent (and obedient) housewives, has ceased to reflect the realities and necessities of household survival in Gaza.* This finding shows clearly that despite women's serious engagement in economic activities in Gaza, the shift in gender roles is still slow and their ability to control resources is still restricted by the domineering culture.

II. *Women's increasing economic activity is inseparable from various dimensions and phases of the Gaza crisis and its impacts on their households. The expansion of women's economic roles was propelled by a decline in male breadwinner income under various impacts of the crisis. In most cases, men did not simply retreat from the market, but instead, the alternative strategies they developed were constantly eroded in the face of protracted destructive effects of the crisis environment. In parallel, the patterning of women's response was to undertake ever-evolving and multipleranges of strategies and activities.* This finding clearly reflects the active role women assumed to support the household income and compensate for the male breadwinners' loss of livelihood sources. However, their role is not being seen as structured support to the family, but rather as different activities that constitute an extension to their domestic role. And a question here poses itself with regards to women's engagement in economic activities, which is "if the crisis situation improved, will women's engagement in economic activities stay the same?" meaning will the women's assuming of their new role as supporters of their families, which is induced by the crisis, continue if male breadwinners regained their lost income? Is the crisis changing mindsets as it is changing some of the gender roles?

III. *Greater respect and appreciation from husbands, children, or even parents and in-laws, and having their opinion listened to were main positive outcomes that many women mentioned. Clearly, through bringing in*

²⁵Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy: Promoting Gender Equality and Equity 2011-2013, UN Women

²⁶Unprotected Employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Gender Equality and Workers' Rights Perspective, Jamil Hilal, Saleh Al Kafri, and Eileen Kuttub, ILO (2008)

²⁷Who answers to Gazan Women : an Economic Security and Rights Research, UN Women (2011)

income, many women earned the right to increased decision-making within their families. In other cases, economic activity has not necessarily translated in positive ways. In particular, women working as unpaid family labour (in the study primarily represented by women in agricultural households) tend to express the opposite experience. Contributions such as performing heavy workloads on the family's agricultural holdings and liquidating personal assets, such as gold or inherited land, in order to sustain the family's livelihood have not been experiences of empowerment, but rather of exploitation. This finding shows that women's control over resources is still an issue especially in agriculture. Women in agriculture cannot control the main asset (the land –even if owned by them). So despite women's contribution to the family acquisition of assets, they are generally denied rights to decisions making.

IV. Women's own experiences in job creation programmes differed significantly from men's. Often women called these "voluntary work" experiences in contrast to calling men's experiences "unemployment projects". This points to the fact that while many job creation schemes for men have been run as public works projects, among women they are mainly run through local NGOs and charities where women are taken on in a half-paid, semi-volunteer capacity. This finding also reflects that situation of female job seekers, whose efforts in finding stable job opportunities are generally faced by various limitations including bias and exploitation.

V. Women undertaking income generation projects can overcome the disadvantages of skills and find starting capital through borrowing from friends and relatives, but then the gender disparity in asset ownership, such as not owning business premises, often becomes a critical obstacle in the development or sustainability of their activity. This finding explains the difficulty of sustaining small enterprises owned by women who generally face issues of resources, skills, price inflation in addition to the lack of enabling environment when managing their businesses.

What to do?

Just to list few measures:

Again and again, the siege should be lifted. Political reconciliation and the building of the Palestinian state should actualize, so the wheel of development starts spinning. The Palestinian economy needs political stability which starts with ending occupation and building the state. The dilemma that continues to present itself is how and when these changes will and can take place.

The development of a national plan to support women's economic security and rights, putting clear measures to guarantee involvement of women in various aspects of economic activities including formal and informal employment is a must. This plan should focus on changing the gender segregated labor market to support women's participation in the labor force, looking with consideration at the high number of female graduates that is almost equal to that of males. It should also focus on the inclusion of women in non-traditional fields, particularly in the private sector, where they have been historically underrepresented to change the gender stereotypes about women's capacities and potential.

Economic programmes that support women's economic empowerment should continue but be enhanced and developed to take into consideration the prevailing gender norms and roles, putting as an objective the change of these roles in favor of gender equality. Such programmes should not deal with women as "mothers" and "wives" whose sole duty is to support the household's income, regardless how this is supporting them individually build their confidence and have an improved access and control over resources. Instead, they should push for women's empowerment in general through economic integration that is based on equality and rights.

Specific programmes should be implemented to improve women's access and control over resources, particularly credit and land. These programmes should take into account the cultural barriers and take an extra mile to support women overcome them.

Lobbying and advocacy efforts should continue to guarantee that national laws support women's economic security and rights and protect them from exploitation and exclusion , particularly in fields such as agriculture and small microenterprises.

Overall, there is much to be done to support women's empowerment and gender equality in the Gaza Strip. With all the capacities, lessons learnt, and experience at hand, moving forward should not be challenging. A stable political and economic enabling environment is needed; however, to support all actors in this field create the positive change that is aspired by all.

October, 2012