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A Future at Stake

Recommendations to Include
Palestinian Women and Youth
in Political and Peace Processes



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INTRODUCTION



Photo: UN Women/Samar Abu Elouf

When on 15 January 2021 Palestinian legislative elections were announced, the new year started out on a note of tentative hope. Palestinian women and youth¹ who have had little to no opportunities in their lifetime to cast votes or run for office could not help but get energized. Just a few months later, by late May 2021, any optimism about the new year was gone. By this point, not only had elections been postponed indefinitely, but 256 people (23 girls, 43 boys, 40 women and 150 men) had been killed during the Israeli bombing of Gaza² and dozens of families in Sheik Jarrah, Silwan and elsewhere continued to be at risk of imminent eviction from their homes.³

At the same time, it was clear that the events of those weeks had not silenced Palestinian women and youth. Quite the opposite. Muna el-Kurd and her brother Mohammed remain visible: they are gathering online support, speaking to mainstream media and appearing in front of the UN Human

Rights Commission. Young activists mobilize tirelessly online for international awareness and solidarity. Less visible but impossible to ignore were also the women on the ground mobilizing, documenting, protesting and reporting on the frontlines – at great personal risk with some of them subjected to physical assault and arrest.

This mobilization happened despite the odds and perhaps *because* Palestinian women and youth have few places to go other than social media, international platforms and the streets. Panning back to the political landscape, the picture remains unchanged. Palestinian leadership and officials are overwhelmingly male and over 50 years of age. In the absence of democratic processes, none of the momentum gained by women and youth is set to translate into official roles or influence. With the indefinite postponement of the elections, many women and youth cannot help but feel that a crucial opportunity was lost.

1. This document refers to the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security which defines youth as persons between 18-29 years old, and further notes that there are variations of definition of the term that may exist on the national and international levels. For example, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) has used the same definition in its publications (see e.g. <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4046>). It is also recognized that explicit references to young women in policies and documents are important to fully acknowledge the contributions of young women to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. However, for the sake of brevity the term youth is used in this document to refer to both young women and young men.

PALESTINE AND THE WPS AGENDA



The context of Palestine is unique in many ways; over 50 years of military occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip which resulted in systematic human rights violations against Palestinians living there and over a decade long blockade on the Gaza Strip which the UN⁴ predicted would be uninhabitable by 2020. Attempting to apply global frameworks like the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda can be a difficult exercise. While in most conflict contexts women struggle for a seat at the peace negotiating table, women in Palestine have limited opportunity for a seat at a table since it is currently non-existent and, in any case, has not managed to deliver meaningful progress for decades. Therefore, opportunities for promoting women's participation in the formal peace processes in the context of Palestine, are limited. However, the impact of the occupation on Palestinian women's lives and on Palestinian political structures is so all-pervasive that focusing the WPS lens only on official peace processes would be to miss the point altogether. Even in the absence of such processes, **Palestinian women have an unrelenting ambition and fundamental right to play a role in shaping a future that is peaceful and secure, and where they and their communities can thrive.** This is especially true of young women. This paper outlines some of

the barriers within the current context, and ways women and youth can be better supported.

Palestinian women and youth are deeply invested in the future for their society. However, they often find themselves excluded from the spaces where decisions that profoundly affect their lives and futures are made. The number one cause they identify as the source of their disenfranchisement is the Israeli occupation. The ways in which occupation limits and diminishes them on an ongoing basis, and the negative impact it has on their mental and physical well-being has been well-documented.⁵ However, their disenfranchisement is compounded by exclusion from Palestinian decision-making. The percentage of women in leadership and decision-making positions hovers around 11.7 per cent.⁶ Out of 16 governors, only one is currently a woman.

BACKGROUND

There are only three women out of 24 ministerial posts in the current cabinet.⁷ Moreover, after Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, the first woman to hold a seat in the Executive Committee of the PLO, resigned last year, it does not look like there are other women successors at the time being. On the other hand, Hamas has very few women in leadership positions.



Women have also been largely excluded from official reconciliation talks and dialogues to end Palestinian political division. A look at recent history shows that this situation did not always seem inevitable.

This policy paper highlights barriers to women's and youth participation in Palestinian political structures, reconciliation, and other high-level processes. It also identifies some of the duty bearers, such as the Palestinian leadership and the international community who can play a stronger role in facilitating Palestinian women's inclusion, participation and influence in processes that impact them and their futures. A list of key informants who were interviewed for the sake of developing this policy brief and the timeframe of the interviews is included at the end.

It should be mentioned that from the perspective of most Palestinian women and youth, the first precondition for a peaceful and prosperous future is an end to the occupation, as well as accountability for violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This is within their right to advocate for and cannot be used to dismiss their voices or question their commitment to a peaceful and just solution. This paper affirms the primary importance of ending the occupation and protecting Palestinian people's rights, but rests on the assumption that we cannot wait for these things to occur before making efforts to include women and youth in peace and political processes. Similarly, women's demands

to play a stronger role in Palestinian leadership should not be used to question their commitment to the national cause. This paper too is meant to be constructive and based on the principle that with the strong inclusion of women, conflicts and their impacts have a better chance of being addressed and resolved effectively.

Scholars and historians have noted that women have long taken on leading roles in Palestinian society. They are known to have mobilized alongside men in 1917 against the Balfour Declaration, and the first exclusive female organization, the Palestinian Women's Union, was founded in 1921. Women have been frontline responders and organizers since the very start of the occupation, continually finding new ways to support and rebuild their communities. The First Intifada (starting 1987) is considered a turning point in the women's movement, where women from all strata of the Palestinian society participated and mobilized to protest the occupation. The signing of the Oslo Accords (1993) and the commencement of official state building changed and, in some ways, scattered the women's movement, but also brought the first opportunities for women to enter formal political bodies and roles.

Since then, Palestinian leadership has made some laudable efforts including in recent times. For example, Palestine acceded to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without reservations

(2014). The adoption of electoral quotas for women in local council elections (30 per cent) and legislative elections (currently at 26 per cent but not yet implemented) were a positive step. Additionally, last year, the Ministry of Women's Affairs took a leading role in developing and launching Palestine's second National Action Plan (NAP) for the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. If implemented, the action plan is perceived as a robust framework that could make a real difference for women's participation and leadership.

Despite progressive measures adopted by the State of Palestine to promote women's participation in decision-making processes, such as the development and endorsement of the first and second NAPs, official institutions continue to be male-dominated and centralized in their decision-making. The government continues to grapple with an inability to ensure broader participation, inclusivity and accountability to all of society. This situation has worsened due to the political division with Hamas in 2007 and the suspension of elections since then. Maintaining gains like the electoral gender quotas has been an ongoing fight for women's rights activists, not to mention that elections do need to take place for quotas to be meaningful. Reconciliation processes too have been overwhelmingly male dominated. For example, no women participated in the talks that led to the signing of the reconciliation agreements between Fatah and Hamas in 2017, and consequently no women were appointed to the technical committees established afterwards.⁸ Women civil society actively protested this, and consequently there was minimal engagement of women in the PLO delegation and on the side-lines, but as with all other official processes, talks continue to be overwhelmingly male dominated.

Some of the key socio-political dynamics and reasoning used to continue to put off real gains in women's participation in official processes in Palestine are outlined below. Most of the barriers for women apply equally to youth, and especially to young women.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

1. Ongoing occupation

While not discussed in detail here, the ongoing occupation needs to be mentioned first and foremost, since it affects every aspect of Palestinian governance, democratic structures, access to resources, social and economic dynamics and many aspects of women's everyday lives. Implementation of key UN Security Council Resolutions related to Palestine, an end to the occupation and an end to the associated censorship of Palestinian voices would be a major step towards restoring democracy and opening up spaces for Palestinian women to take on effective roles in defining Palestine's future. However, given the current political context, there is little to no prospect of this occurring.

2. Centralization of power and other democratic issues

Many of those consulted for this paper expressed serious concern at the absence of opportunities for democratic participation that has effectively made it impossible for women and young people to penetrate political structures and institutions. There is a sense that because of this, the current leadership lacks legitimacy, and that power has increasingly been consolidated into the hands of a few (older men). The barriers this has thrown up for women and youth participation are broken down below:

Disillusionment with politics

Disillusionment with any official politics or processes has turned many women and youth away from official participation, especially at the higher levels. The perception that there is pervasive "culture of exclusion" governing many aspects of politics has discouraged many women and young people. Additionally, young women who have joined political parties (known in any democracy as the gatekeepers of political power) often end up leaving them because they do not find a supportive environment, in some cases feeling forced to co-opt with party's vision and policy in order to survive.

Moreover, as one person consulted for this paper noted: “Political processes are so stagnant that being a young person in a political party does not amount to anything.” In this context, it is unsurprising that young people turn to activism and social media, increasingly remaining outside of political structures. However, in the long run this is not sustainable – Palestine and its people cannot be governed through activism alone. Local organizations continue making efforts to engage young men and women in politics and find that many are still ready and eager to take on political roles, but the only real way forward is restoring trust through effective democratic processes, notably elections.

Difficulty accessing decision-makers

A first step towards direct participation is for civil society groups to have access to decision-makers. But women and youth generally do not have this kind of access to decision-making structures. Several people consulted for this paper have witnessed positive results and good responses once local decision-makers engage with women and youth. Over many years of work, it can result in women’s groups being regularly consulted on major decisions, gaining the respect and the ear of mayors and local council members, and in the long run it is even known to lead to some of these women taking official local council seats themselves. But organizations facilitating this kind of access say it takes long and persistent effort to get decision-makers to meet with women and youth. Beyond the local level, it becomes even more challenging to gain this kind of access. There is a strong consensus that opening up more avenues and facilitating access for local women’s groups and youth groups to have regular and direct interactions with politicians at the higher levels could start to shift the culture in the same way that this has happened in some local contexts.

Absence of elections, prohibitive election laws

When the Presidential decree for elections was issued in January 2021, women and youth leaders and activists organized and mobilized around electoral lists to advocate for gender quotas. However, a slate of modifications to the election law ahead of the elections were perceived to favour

established candidates and parties, while throwing up insurmountable barriers for most new voices - particularly women and youth. Requirements to run for election for example included a minimum age requirement of 28 (among the highest in the world, with most countries maintaining an 18 to 21 years minimum), a \$20,000 fee to register a political list and mandatory resignation from certain jobs including jobs in the public sector, civil society and international organizations.⁹ This fuelled existing distrust in the political system, but women and youth remained engaged and hopeful, and the disappointment following the indefinite postponement was still crushing for many. Free and fair elections are a minimum requirement for women and youth to be able to take up their places in a legitimate and representative Palestinian government. Therefore, a priority policy recommendation is for all stakeholders to strongly commit to the holding of Palestinian elections.

“Because of our lack of representation, we feel hopeless. We do not want just to vote, but also to be able to run for elections. We are competent enough to change our society for the better. The conditions on the ground keep deteriorating. Our hope has dwindled over the past 15 years. There is blockade and a health crisis. Medication is not available for patients. Unemployment is high, especially among young people. And those who do work, are not always getting paid”.

Tayyeb Awwad, 18-year-old male, Gaza

“Although I have mixed feelings and many of my friends have doubts about the elections happening, I still believe that it is our chance to show that we care and we want to vote. Every vote counts. If we, the young generation that makes up the majority of our society, did not vote, who would?”

Dara Rahal, 19-year-old female, Ramallah

Shrinking civic space

While their participation in official roles is already severely limited, women and youth feel additionally constrained by recent laws, like the Cyber Crime Law, that prevent civil society organizations and activists from criticizing Palestinian leadership on social media and gives the authorities leverage to close down their pages, place organizations

under presidential control or arrest activists in the name of maintaining civic peace. Activists report enforcement of these laws already resulting in many pages having been shut down and arrest and interrogation of a number of activists. This situation became further aggravated following the death of activist and outspoken Palestinian Authority (PA) critic Nizar Banat in June 2021 and consequent crackdown on protestors. As of mid-August 2021, the PA continued to hand down decisions further restricting freedoms and/or limiting protections, for example eliminating a law that protected public employees' right to express their personal opinion, which opened up the way to interrogate and dismiss officials who had publicly criticized the killing of Banat.¹⁰ Within the same context, women civil society organizations reported a rising number of physical attacks on women, particularly women protestors and female journalists, as well as alleged breaking in and hacking of women's social media accounts by security services.¹¹ Such events directly affect women and youth's trust in their leadership and sense of being pushed out of decision-making as opposed to their voices being valued and taken seriously. Short of their direct representation within government, a free and vibrant civil society environment is the bare minimum for ensuring Palestinian women and youth have a voice in the public sphere and avenues to express their concerns and priorities.

In summary

Strong democratic processes that promote rather than constrain the participation of women and youth are crucial for Palestinian society to find a way forward out of the current situation – a sustainable, peaceful future is unlikely to be reached while power remains consolidated in the hands of a small, homogeneous group of people.

3. The reconciliation process “does not consider gender issues”

Women and youth are impacted by the situation of internal division and want to have a say in the reconciliation process and its committees. In practice, this has turned out to be very challenging. A very small number of women participated in official meetings held in Cairo in 2011, and not a single woman participated in the talks that led to the

signing of the reconciliation agreements between Fatah and Hamas in 2017 (or the subsequently appointed technical committees meant to work out the details of the arrangements). Women leaders and WPS advocates have been systematically highlighting this absence and outlining what they would bring to the table including during national-level WPS dialogues, such as Open Days on WPS organized by UN Women.^{12&13} The overwhelming perception among women leaders is that men political leaders and decisionmakers consider reconciliation to be “a serious political issue” which does not have to consider “gender issues”. Women have been told that they are represented through their political parties and do not themselves need to be at the table.

In reality, reconciliation is a struggle over what the future Palestinian society will look like and the ideological foundations it will be built on. These are potentially enormously impactful negotiations and decisions. Additionally, reconciliation is a key part of restoring democracy as well as allowing Palestine to present a united front to the outside world, including Israel. For women and youth, there could hardly be more at stake. Women leaders worry that during the negotiations, protections and laws that are particularly impactful for women will be the first to end up on the chopping block. All stakeholders involved need to advocate much more strongly for the meaningful inclusion of women in all reconciliation negotiations and processes.

4. Political division among women

At the same time, women leaders are as politically divided as men, particularly along the lines of women who promote “secular” values and those who seek to maintain traditional “religiously conservative” values. While these definitions are a simplification and do not necessarily describe accurately the complex political agenda of Palestinian women leaders, they are still useful to understand how these two groups see each other. Simply put, “secular” women leaders think that their “conservative” counterparts are being used by the men in their parties to promote the entrenchment of gender stereotypical roles, and policies and laws that limit and disenfranchise women. In turn, “religiously conservative” women think that

“secular women” are promoting frameworks and views that are foreign and against their religions. This fracture has become apparent on the topic of CEDAW – which has been passionately rejected, on religious grounds, by conservative groups in the West Bank especially in Hebron. An ongoing advocacy campaign denouncing it was launched and gained traction.

Attempts to find common cause and form women’s coalitions that cross party lines have so far come to nothing, and women on either side are unwilling to uplift the voices of the other. Women in the centre feel this has compromised women’s positions and has made it easier for powerful male politicians to take up the space and dismiss women’s contributions. They see that women across factional divides ultimately do have many common objectives. The policy implications for this are less clear but need to be further explored. Renewed dialogue efforts and attempts to find common ground may be called for.

5. “There are more urgent issues that take precedence”

The Palestinian context is forever volatile. There are almost always urgent issues at hand and all actors who have a role to play in promoting Palestinian

women’s participation will at one point or another blame lack of progress on the fact that there are too many other more urgent issues competing for their attention. The presence of the occupation, internal divisions, humanitarian emergencies and the absence of an official peace process are each in turn regularly used as justifications to delay women’s inclusion in decision-making and high-level processes. But none of these are valid excuses. If anything, the presence of these challenges makes women’s effective engagement even more urgent.

Similarly, the sensitivity of the political situation and strong presence of patriarchal norms are supposed to make women’s participation too delicate a topic to tackle. This too is a questionable line of reasoning that implies that women’s inclusion might be harmful to political and peace processes, when in fact all available evidence points in the opposite direction.¹⁴ As the UN Secretary-General has noted: “The participation of women is non-negotiable. More men must step up and do their part to break the cycle of exclusion.”¹⁵ History and global experience show that the ideal circumstances for women’s participation rarely occur and push back against it is inevitable. The only way it can be achieved is through persistent and committed efforts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The following recommendations are based on consultation with civil society members and other key informants. Key recommendations are also incorporated from [the Generation Equality WPS-HA Compact Framework](#) and the [UN Secretary-General's 2020 report on women, peace and security](#) (which in turn are based on decades of global experience and advocacy around the WPS agenda). Recommendations are specified for key policymakers and duty bearers.

Palestinian Leadership

While the limitations it faces and the extraordinary position the government is in are understood, women and youth as rights-holders need to be able to hold their leadership and those claiming to represent them accountable. The 2012 status change of Palestine to non-Member Observer State by the UN General Assembly allowed it to ratify international treaties, thereby officially taking on responsibility as a duty bearer.

Key recommendations

1. Move forward with **inclusive reconciliation processes**. This needs to happen in a way that

women and youth from different backgrounds feel heard and assured that their rights are being prioritized, not sacrificed in the process.

- Women and youth need to be given a much stronger presence at the negotiating table, their futures are at stake and their perspectives matter.

2. **Hold Elections.** Free and fair elections are the number one priority for women and youth to restore trust and confidence in their leadership and open up opportunities for their own leadership and participation.

- Leadership needs to be truly committed to holding elections. A flexible and resilient approach is required that includes mitigation strategies for the Jerusalem issue and other potential obstacles.

- Elections can constitute a start to ending the internal political division.

- Election laws should promote and facilitate women and youth participation, including their candidacy,

rather than obstruct or make it more difficult.

- See also the UN Experts [statement](#) “Palestinian Elections: Free, Fair, Democratic and Credible Vote Must Include East Jerusalem.”¹⁶

3. Facilitate communication channels and **access for women and youth** to better reach decision-makers at the local but especially at the higher levels.

4. **Protect and increase civic space**, repeal laws that have the effect of constricting civic space and/or freedom of expression, ensure physical safety of peaceful protestors and journalists including women, protect online security and freedom of expression, end all forms of harassment of activists – physical, online and otherwise.

International Community

Women consulted for this paper exhibit both unrelenting faith and occasional deep disappointment in the international community. They continue to count on the international community to be champions for universal human rights, democracy, accountability and multilateralism – in Palestine as much as anywhere else. Through the UN Security Council, the international community also has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and implementation of relevant resolutions. Additionally, both Member States and the UN System are responsible for ensuring that mediators/envoys and other officials are gender champions who effectively advocate for women’s participation (from the outset) and the inclusion of gender-related provisions in peace and political processes.

Key recommendations (multi-lateral agencies)

1. Show **strong and persistent commitment to the**

continuous advocacy with all parties to include women in official delegations, including in any rounds of reconciliation talks. While the sensitivity of the context is well-noted, **advocating for women’s inclusion is not optional for UN officials.**

2. **Top leadership within agencies need to be strong champions for women and youth participation**, responsibility cannot be left with gender focal points.

3. In line with the UN Secretary-General’s recommendations: “Mediators are expected to promote the direct participation of women, **clearly articulate it as a priority**, rather than as something that can be addressed only after peace between warring parties has been achieved, and explore all possible strategies, including providing incentives and implementing temporary special measures.”¹⁷

4. Beyond reporting on women as victims and/or human-interest stories, **women’s leadership and participation should be raised consistently as a priority in briefings and reports.** Officials can speak out more consistently in support of women’s participation, gender quotas, the need for financial support to women-led organizations and other priorities raised by women.

5. Continue **consulting with and raising the voices of women civil society**, including grassroots leaders and young activists. Apart from the immediate benefits of getting their perspectives, this sends a signal to all stakeholders involved that women and youth perspectives matter.

6. Facilitate communication channels and **access for women and youth** to better reach decision-makers at the local but especially at the higher levels.

7. Agencies working at the political level are recommended to move beyond ad-hoc consultation

with women and **institutionalize the inclusion of women's perspectives** in any type of diplomatic efforts through a formalized, inclusive consultative body that includes young women and women working at the grassroots level.

Key recommendations (Member States)

1. Show a firmer stance in support of the basic human rights of the Palestinian people, which is also the number one priority for many women and youth as well as for women- and youth-led organizations.

2. Provide incentives and continue to **apply pressure** on all political and peace process actors to ensure women's meaningful participation.

- Also taking note of the [Statement by the Group of Friends of Women, Peace and Security in October 2020](#).

3. Showcase commitment in support of **holding Palestinian elections**, regardless of the expected outcome.

- Keep raising the importance of holding free and fair elections in every meeting held with all relevant counterparts.

4. Capacity-building support for women leaders and youth is welcome, but the focus should be on **facilitating their access** to decision-makers, platforms and other concrete opportunities where

they can actually be heard and put their skills to use.

5. **Facilitate communication channels** and access for women and youth to better reach decision-makers at the local but especially at the higher levels.

6. Continue **consulting with and raising the voices of women civil society organizations**, including grassroots leaders and young activists. Apart from the immediate benefits of getting their perspectives, this sends a signal to all stakeholders involved.

7. Continue to **listen to, support and amplify voices of young women and men** who are using platforms outside of official politics or political affiliations, including social media.

Israel as the occupying power

While Israel rejects any obligations to the Palestinian people, it needs to be acknowledged as a key actor with great influence over Palestinian women's lives. Its obligations to Palestinians under international human rights conventions and humanitarian law have been recognized by the UN General Assembly, CEDAW Committee, the UN Committee against Torture and International Court of Justice. UN Women's publication [International Legal Accountability Mechanisms: Palestinian Women Living Under Occupation](#) discusses this topic in more detail.

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In random order, the author would like to sincerely thank the following individuals for their valuable insights: Dr. Sahar Alkawasmeh, General Director, Roles for Social Change Association (ADWAR); Hala Morrar, Media and Advocacy Coordinator, The Palestinian Association for Empowerment and Local Development—REFORM; Amal Abusrour, Director of Programmes, Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC); Amal Tarazi, General Secretary, Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) Palestine; Rima Nazzal, Writer and Member of the General Secretariat, General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW); Batoul Mufreh, Project Coordinator, General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) and Anjad Hithnawi, Development Coordination Officer, Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO).

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