Palestinian - Israeli Women’s Peace Initiatives and Power Relations

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FEMMES PALESTINIENNES ET ISRAÉLIENNES: INITIATIVES DE PAIX ET RELATIONS DE POUVOIR

Les initiatives de paix des Palestiniennes et des Israéliennes ont commencé il y a plus de dix ans. Le dialogue des femmes a conduit au premier article politique écrit conjointement. Le dialogue entre les activistes politiques connues des deux côtés a également ouvert la voie au premier travail institutionnalisé basé sur des principes politiques en développement continu et a donné naissance à un organisme de liaison et de coopération entre deux associations féminines (l’une à Jérusalem Est et l’autre à Jérusalem Ouest): «The Jerusalem Link».

Dire cela ne signifie pas oublier le fait que les relations de pouvoir entre les deux côtés et dans chaque communauté ont toujours régi, à un degré important, le processus de formation des rôles dans la quête des femmes pour une transformation du conflit. En tant que telle, la politique des femmes a été très liée à la politique de leurs partis.

Dans ce texte, basé sur les expériences de «The Jerusalem Link», nous traitons ces thèmes, d’une manière plus ciblée sur le côté palestinien.

Women on both sides of the conflict live in different cultural, economic, social and political conditions. Yet the conflict affects the daily reality of these women in both similar and different ways.
Decades ago, as Palestinian women activists were strongly involved with the Palestinian people's national political struggle for liberation, Israeli women activists were also very much involved in the quest to achieve equality in a society divided between secularism and religion.

As feminist thought developed across that divide, the roles women saw for themselves expanded. More than ten years ago, prominent political activists broke the taboo of recognizing and meeting those on the other side. Dialogue between political activists and scholars, who met during the first Intifada or uprising, produced the first published joint position paper. Its main article was the recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. This was a substantial step forward and a substantial step for the bi-national movement for peace making. Dialogue continued, mirroring the power relationships existing between the two sides and within each community.

The Palestinian - Israeli dispute is based on the fact that there is an occupier and an occupied. This fact is reflected at the dialogue table. For example, while Palestinians have tried to re-shift the balance towards one between equals, the Israelis have aimed at finding a compromise with a "flexible" partner. But Palestinians, now without their basic rights and needs, can hardly give up more of these in a compromise.

The Palestinians, who are the weaker party according to the conventional definition of power, demanded concessions from the stronger side on many occasions, saying that it had room to give. The Israeli's readiness to make a change in positions and get closer to the Palestinians' has very much been affected by changes in the political situation whether locally or internationally. For example, the Israelis would be ready to compromise if there was a Palestinian Intifada (uprising) because the price they would pay would increase. But as long as the price for peace is limited, they are more reluctant to compromise as if nothing was pressing. As such, throughout the process of dialogue, both sides had phases of strength and weaknesses.
The progressive thought of feminists on both sides geared the process of political dialogue towards trust building and creative thinking. Both aimed at moving towards a joint vision for peace making. Agreed-upon political principles constituted the basis for institutionalized cooperation (such as the Jerusalem Link) and joint initiatives. Specific strategies were aimed at the public opinion and personal attitudes of both sides.

Still, not much was achieved. Each side worked within the framework and structures of its own political parties and affiliations. The Palestinians had different and changing strategies for struggle that reflected individuals' political party line. The Israelis made many moves forward and backward, reflecting the ongoing change in political realities and coinciding with their surroundings.

To talk about women's substantive yet limited effect on national politics in the peace building process on both sides, one must speak of each community's internal politics. On the Palestinian side, patriarchal relations dominate. The cultural heritage does not provide fertile ground for women's participation in community and political life. According to traditional values, males are the independent breadwinners, while females are the subordinate caretakers. Of course the Palestinian feminist movement consisting of many factions has challenged this norm. The movement is still developing and has many challenges to overcome.

The Palestinian feminist movement, that represents a plurality of thought from conservative to liberal, has been developing for decades. Still, it has not been able to overcome the traditional nature of the main political establishment, the Palestine Liberation Organization. The PLO praised women's participation in the political struggle, but it did not include or empower women to take part in the decision-making process.

The first Intifada, which erupted in 1987, introduced a progressive political discourse calling for the liberation of the land and people.
The United Leadership of the Intifada encouraged women to participate in all aspects of the uprising, including demonstrations, local committees, and cooperatives. Women's grassroots organizations and activists were strongly involved.

But despite recognition of their central role, women's contribution to decision making was highly limited. Political parties from left to right had this same position, not least because of their internal lack of real democracy.

The establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994 gave women more of a role - albeit cosmetic - in political decision making. There is one female minister in the cabinet of thirty members appointed by President Yasser Arafat. The minister of Social Affairs, an elected member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, is the wife of assassinated PLO leader, Abu Jihad. Only five of the 88 elected members of the Palestinian Legislative Council are women. One of them is active in the bi-national venture for peace building, the Jerusalem Link.

Lately, the leftist political parties have been enhancing their internal democracy. Women are encouraged to apply for top positions and many have succeeded. Still, conservative and religious parties lag behind.

On the Israeli side, the women's movement is also facing tremendous difficulties in overcoming existing rivalries between secular and religious groups. After years of activism to achieve equality, patriarchy continues to negatively affect women's quest for equality and social justice. No wonder then that the democracy practiced in Israeli parties only produces limited women's representation. Fifteen of the 120 Israeli Knesset members are women. One of them is a Palestinian Israeli, another is Mizrahi (from Arab roots) and 13 Ashkenazi (from European background). Few of these women are active in the Jerusalem Link. Experience has shown that each Bat Shalom board of trustee member represents the position of her party.
in discussion. Decisions made in Bat Shalom are the result of consensus accepted by all.

This process is very similar to what occurs at the Jerusalem Center for Women, the Palestinian partner. This means that both sides are very connected to existing political structures with limited space to maneuver. It also indicates how much internal power relations can affect one side's position in an external power relationship.

No wonder then that the Jerusalem Link is currently in crisis. The Israeli public is moving to the political right. The same can be said of Israeli leftist parties. It took the Israeli “peace camp” over a month before it reacted positively towards the Palestinian Intifada for independence, rejecting the Israeli government’s practices. Members of Bat Shalom have made a shift in their positions, from a discourse close to the Zionist mainstream to that of the Zionist left. For example, at the request of the Palestinian members of the Jerusalem Center for Women, the Israeli members managed to present a position on the Palestinian refugees’ issue that left the door open for continuing dialogue between the two sides’ board members.

The Palestinian side was astonished by the limited involvement of Israel’s peace camp during the recent Palestinian Intifada. It took Bat Shalom weeks to react at a time when their counterparts’ lives were in danger. Emotion is now very high on the Palestinian side due to the rapid increase in the number of killed and injured. As a result, the Palestinian side gave a clear message to its Israeli counterpart that a measure of trust building must come from their side. All joint projects and activities have been stopped. Boards members and staff of both sides can meet whenever it is necessary. Jerusalem Center for Women now tries to reach an agreement over political principles that leaves no room for misinterpretations. Only then can joint activities be resumed and new strategies be defined by both parties.