

**Building Bridges over Troubled Waters:
Critical Reflections on a recent conference about Palestinian Women and Politics**

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On the surface, the conference held at the Van-Leer Institute in June 1999 under the title "Arab Women as Trailblazers in Politics in Israel and in the Areas of the Palestinian Authority," seemed depressingly familiar. Co-sponsored by the Israel's Women's Network, the Institute for Israeli-Arab Studies and the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, the conference was staged by liberal Jewish feminists who probably expected to be congratulated for taking an interest in the situation of Palestinian women. As is customary on such occasions, there were numerous appeals of conference organizers and sponsors for closer collaboration between Palestinian and Jewish women. Not less familiar were the unavoidable references of the organizers to the difficulties they faced in working with Palestinian women on the conference. The passing references Jewish organizers and participants made to these difficulties and the innocence, if not hurt, in their voice underscored both their political naivete and lack of familiarity with the history of alliances between Palestinian and Jewish women. These alliances, which date back to the early days of the first *intifada*, were characterized by fundamental differences between Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women in both expectations and political agendas. These alliances also often reflected a tendency on the part of Israeli-Jewish participants to downplay or overlook altogether their power and privilege vis-à-vis Palestinian women and to dictate the terms of collaboration and frame the boundaries of the discourse (e.g. excluding the subjects of Zionism, the Nakba etc.)

The participation of many Israeli-Jewish women in such encounters has been encouraged primarily by liberal positions on both the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and feminism. They believe that through dialogue they could find ways to transcend cultural, historical, and political differences and to unite under the banner of global sisterhood and peace, which could then have a spillover effect onto the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian women, on the other hand, had very different expectations from such encounters. Their participation in them was inspired by feminist convictions shaped in the context of a national liberation struggle and intense grassroots activism. Because their ultimate goal was to bring about an end to the Israeli occupation, Palestinian women viewed their meetings with Jewish women as an important vehicle for influencing public opinion in Israel in that direction. In other words, Palestinian women did not perceive such encounters as means for overcoming differences and establishing personal relationships or professional collaborations with their Jewish counterparts, but rather as a tool of social transformation and political change.

Since the Gulf War in 1990 encounters between Palestinian and Jewish women have been few and far between. But even before that, at the height of the *intifada*, such encounters were always fraught with trouble and contradictions. This fact, however, escaped many in the international women's movement who were lured by uncritical accounts of alliances

between Palestinian and Jewish women produced by feminist tourists and impressed with abundant funding available for conference bringing together women from both sides of the political divide. Most such encounters ended in disappointment, originating primarily in the different expectations of the Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish participants, which were rarely articulated explicitly.

The Van-Leer conference serves as a reminder that very little changed in the dynamics of encounters between Palestinian and Jewish women. Particularly striking in this regard is the fact that very few Jewish women in Israel are aware of the unequal basis upon which such encounters are predicated and the political conditions that contribute to the uneasiness of Palestinian women to participate in such venues. In fact, with the uncritical embrace of the Oslo Accords by Israel's elites and by large segments of the Israeli peace and women's movements, these encounters acquired more legitimacy in Israel. Towards this end, the conference skillfully masked the inequalities in power and privilege between Palestinian and Jewish women as well as the different political realities and challenges facing them. Against this background, it was surprising that Palestinian women did not boycott the conference altogether. Their decision to participate and their interventions throughout the day illuminate both the potential (albeit limited) and pitfalls of such endeavours.

The conference was set to compare and contrast the experiences of Palestinian women in the Israeli political arena with those of their counterparts in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But Palestinian women called into question the organizers' preference of the term "Arab women" over "Palestinian women" with Palestinian women from the West Bank resenting their introduction in the program as "women from the areas of the Palestinian Authority." In fact, as some of them stressed, many of them came from areas not controlled by the Palestinian authority such as East Jerusalem or villages in area C that are still under Israeli occupation.

But rather than using the time to criticize the conference's organizers and its rather patronizing framework, Palestinian women from Israel and from the '67 Occupied Territories opted to take advantage of the unique opportunity and engage one another in a sophisticated critical discussion about the interplay between gender and politics in their communities. The conference's advertisement promised simultaneous translation from Hebrew to Arabic and visa-a-versa and Palestinian women took advantage of this unique opportunity and opted to speak in Arabic. As a result, with the exception of the opening remarks, Hanna Herzog's paper and Sylvia Bizaoui's closing remarks, which were delivered in Hebrew and Rema Hamami's paper, which was given in English, the presentations and the subsequent discussions were carried out in Arabic. While Palestinian women engaged in a passionate dialogue about their political struggles, most Jewish participants had to rely on their headphones for translation, an unfamiliar experience, which seemed quite unsettling to many. This, in my view, was one of the most interesting (and subversive) aspects of the conference – a clear indication of the political experience and sophistication of Palestinian women from both sides of the Green Line.

Without prior planning but with passion and determination, they reclaimed the space of a prestigious research institute in West Jerusalem dominated by liberal Zionists. Rather than trying to reach out or appease the audience which consisted primarily of upper-middle class Ashkenzi Jewish women, they took advantage of both the space and venue to share experiences, analyses and insights in their own language. These two constituencies of Palestinian women [the inhabitants of Israel and those of the '67 Occupied Territories] who rarely meet, used the conference to network and forge new collaborative projects. It was quite clear that at this particular juncture they saw more of a priority and were more interested in talking to one another than to explore avenues of collaboration with Jewish women.

Several themes emerged during the discussions which ranged from inroads Palestinian women have made into politics to the obstacles facing them within the different parties and political frameworks. While the clear distinction in the program of the conference between scholarly presentations and personal accounts of women activists can be somewhat problematic, the lively and rich discussions that ensued, underscore the importance of constant cross-fertilization between these two Palestinian constituencies from both sides of the Green Line

As the conference took place less than a month after the Israeli election amidst Barak's efforts to form a coalition government, many references were made to the elections and their implications for women. Against this background, the personal account of Hussnia Jabara, a newly elected Knesset Member for Meretz and the first Palestinian woman in the Israeli parliament, triggered a heated discussion among conference participants. The main point of contention involved Jabara's decision to run as part of a Zionist party. Indeed, Jabara acknowledged that she was most likely voted in by Jewish women and men, not by fellow Palestinians. She argued, however, that how she got in does not matter as she is committed to advancing the lot of women in general and Palestinian women in particular. Still, many Palestinian women from both sides of the Green Line found it quite difficult to reconcile Jabara's passionate commitment to women's equality and participation in politics and her compromise with Zionism and its exclusive tenants and practices.

This discussion illuminates some of the different approaches concerning women in politics discussed in the course of the conference. It was clear that Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women's views of the relationship between women's issues and politics were fundamentally different. Palestinian women stressed time and again, like they have done so many times in the past decade, that all issues are women's issues and thus they cannot be treated in a vacuum but rather must be integrated into political platforms and campaigns as well as into every sphere of life. However conference organizers and many of those in attendance seemed to believe that sisterhood can transcend major political differences and therefore women working together on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide will constitute a major political force. A clear illustration of this point came in the form of a question raised by a Jewish woman in the audience. The woman, who introduced herself as one of the supporters of the defunct Women's Party (which withdrew from the recent Israeli elections), was troubled by the fact that no Palestinian

speakers referred to the potential of a Women's Party. The expression on the faces of many of the Palestinian speakers when the question was asked pointed, once again to the differences between Palestinian and Jewish women on this question. Still, it seemed that there was a lingering hope among conference organizers and most those who chose to attend, that differences would be set aside for the sake of unity.

The tension between coalescing around similarities and discussion differences was one of the main themes in Sylvia Bizaoui's closing remarks. She warned against the dangers of identity politics and an overemphasis on difference and on the history of the political struggle between Palestinians and Jews. Instead, Bizaoui insisted we must leave the past behind and explore ways to live and work together in a global village. This conclusion underscores that if there was any dialogue during the day, it was a dialogue of the deaf. If this were the first conference of its kind I attended, I would think that this conclusion is a result of a misunderstanding, perhaps resulting from the fact that most of the intense discussions throughout the day were in Arabic. But since I have been to this movie before I walked away once again with a great sense of frustration. My own conclusion is that after Oslo it is far more difficult to confront Israeli-Jews in general and Jewish feminists in Israel in particular with their power and privilege vis-à-vis Palestinians. This task is almost as difficult as explaining to liberals worldwide the unjust and limited premises of what passes these days as "peace" in Israel/Palestine.