



THE WOMEN'S MODEL PARLIAMENT

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PROJECT'S ORIGIN/BACKGROUND

The project is executed through the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (a member in the Arab Women's Forum – Aisha) which has conducted a comprehensive survey of the discriminatory laws against Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza. After laws were surveyed and examined, proposals for amending them were made by the Center to be later published in a book entitled "Law and the Palestinian Woman's Future." Director of the Center, Ms. Maha Abu Diyeh explained that in light of major developments, namely, the foundation of the National Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Legislative Council, the center started to think of ways through which it could influence the legislator. Consequently, the idea of the Women's Model Parliament emerged. Similar experiences such as children's parliaments and shadow parliaments helped trigger the idea. Ms. Abu Diyeh holds, however, that their own Women's Model Parliament is a pioneer Arab and international experience in the domain of women's legal struggle.

OBJECTIVES

The Women's Model Parliament primarily aims at promulgating Palestinian laws that ensure justice, equality, and respect of human rights. Within this context, it strives at stimulating public dialogue, promoting legal awareness among all groups, and soliciting public and official support for the Parliament's demands and proposals.

STAGES AND COMPONENTS

Work on the Women's Model Parliament project started one and a half years ago. The first stage was a comprehensive survey of laws. The second stage was a national campaign led by the Parliament under the motto, "for the sake of laws that ensure equality and enjoyment of human rights by Palestinian women." A preparatory committee in the West Bank and the Gaza strip

was formed in order to monitor the work and to coordinate with committees and institutes concerned with human rights, legal and/or women's issues such as Al-Haq institute, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in the Gaza strip, and the Women's Studies Unit at Birzeit University. Later, preparatory committees were formed in all work areas in order to discuss the proposals for legal amendments with a larger group.

Explaining the rationale for the preparatory committees, the center's director said that they, at the Center, realized from the beginning that the legislating process should be socially based and that a large number of participants would empower the campaign. Consequently, they formed a preparatory committee that included different institutes for human and women's rights. People affiliated with these institutes contributed valuable ideas and suggestions regarding the Parliament's role and mandate. Unfortunately, however, they failed to resume their activities with the Center. Seeking a larger social participation, the center decided to extend its scope and form committees in different areas.

According to Ms. Yaseer, working on the project ran in two directions:

1. Training: Members of the area committees were trained on the use of "mobilization" and "influencing" skills. Within this context, the first Palestinian training manual was formed. The manual is to be used by women as a reference to persuade legislators and decision-makers of their entitlement to certain rights. Workshops were held to discuss proposals for law amendments, the training process, and the formulation of a plan to influence important social centers.
2. The Information Campaign: The intense information campaign organized depended on the use of leaflets, posters, caricatures, a special song for the Parliament, radio flashes, T.V. and radio programs on women and the law, a legal slot in the newspapers, and big bulletin boards in the Palestinian cities.

PREPARATORY AREA PARLIAMENTS

Three preparatory parliaments were held in the

main cities of the West Bank in addition to 23 workshops in the Gaza Strip. Each preparatory parliament consisted of eighty-eight members after the pattern of the Palestinian parliament and was equally represented by men and women. In the North parliament, proposals related to the personal status code were discussed. In the South parliament, proposals related to political and civil rights were discussed. In the parliament for the Central area, the focus was on amendments concerning economic, social and cultural rights. Finally, in the session that was held in the Gaza Strip, special emphasis was given to proposals related to the personal status code.

A CENTRAL PARLIAMENT IN THE END OF MARCH

This parliament which was held towards the end of the campaign for two consecutive days provided a free platform. Laws related to women, the family and society were mainly discussed. Recommendations made by the parliamentarians were to be forwarded to the Palestinian Parliament.

THE ARABIAN DIMENSION

There is continuous communication among the Women's Model Parliament and the Arab women's centers. After the Fourth World Conference for Women – Beijing, it was decided that the Palestinian experience be placed within an Arab context. A conference was held in one of the Arab countries in order to formulate mechanisms for improving women's legal status, and the possibility of publishing a legal book that could be of use to women in the third world was discussed.

Moreover, a delegation of five Arab countries including Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were invited to attend the Women's Model Parliament in their capacity as observers.

In order to improve communication and to bridge the gaps that led the Palestinian society to lag behind political, social and cultural developments in the Arab world, an open seminar following the conclusion of the Parliament's work was organized. Arab women's experiences with the law and the Arab feminist movements' accomplishments were discussed in the seminar. Women activists and intellectuals from Morocco, Tunisia, and India participated.

OBSTACLES THAT FACED THE PROJECT

After the preparatory parliaments were held, particularly the North parliament which focused on the personal status code, a campaign led by a group of extremists was held against the parliament. These extremists succeeded in turning a large segment of the civil society and religious men against those working on the project. They claimed that the Parliament had raised issues contradictory to social and religious principles and were thus destructive of the Palestinian family. Statements signed by certain unidentified groups who refused to reveal themselves such as (the Muslim Woman, the Virtuous Woman, and Mosque Men) were distributed to condemn the Parliament and those in charge. However, none of that prevented the Parliament from moving on. The solidarity among all women's organizations and some social organizations in addition to the support of members of the legislative council and the Palestinian authority (the conclusive parliament was held under the patronage of President Yasser Arafat) and women's masses, helped the Parliament to remain in operation. Ms. Seniora, a researcher and a trainer said that all what they were accused of was false. She added that those who were opposed to the project, accused the Parliament of calling for the control of polygamy though according to her, this did not contradict with the *Shari'a*. "There were rumors that we not only called for controlling polygamy but also for polyandry. There were other rumors that we were devil worshipers.

Other obstacles related to the political situation faced the project. The explosive political situation in Palestine and the Middle East which led to the deterioration of living standards of Palestinians in addition to other social problems - all led to a conviction among some people that the timing of the project was inappropriate.

The project also faced difficulties resulting from the continuous military shut downs imposed by the Israeli occupation and the military belt imposed on Jerusalem city which led to the isolation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank, thus hindering the execution of a unified plan in both areas.

Moreover, the different laws implemented in each of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and the ambiguity of legislative privileges of the elected parliament/legislative council had a negative effect on the project.