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Centro de Estudios de Oriente Medio
Fundación Promoción Social de la Cultura

CEMOFPSC SEMINAR

Women's participation in water access and management:

"The case of Palestine"



Water access and management in Palestine: examples of good practices

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RANDA SINIORA

General Director at Women Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC), Palestine

I come from the Human Rights community from working on gender and women's human rights and it is really very exciting to focus on water. Although it is not my area of specialization, it is relevant and we can very much connect. Therefore, I am glad to start my presentation focusing on water.

When looking at water access or management it is obvious that women's traditional roles in the Palestinian context are very much linked with the involvement of women in these issues. Taking into account that the Palestinian society is a patriarchal society where division of labor is on the basis of sex, women are responsible for the private sphere and they work in the household, in agriculture around the household and securing drinking water and the hygiene of their families, especially children. At the same time, women remain very much marginalized in decision making and involvement at the micro managerial level of water issues in the public sphere.

Also to be noticed that no water networks are in place, there are poor water resources and sanitation infrastructures and collector wells and tanks are main sources of water to many of the communities in Palestine. For example, there are around 200 communities that do not have running water in the household, mainly in the Jordan valley where the collection of water is very common among women and also in the West Bank where women, girls and boys spend a lot of time to collect and harvest water to provide for their families.



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The quality of the water collected is generally weak and contaminated in many cases and yet women are not aware of that, even though they are responsible for the welfare of their families, because there are no education programs in place. Women in small communities say they are constrained by culture and social constraints, and also by Israeli restrictions of movement. In the end, women are bearers of the negative implications of wrong management and poor water policies. Overburdened by large families, health problems, miscarriages caused by water contamination, etc. women face many problems.

At macro level, women are 19.9% of the workforce (Palestine Bureau of Statistics) rising to 24% in the informal sector. Many more women are working in agricultural work around the household, cheap or unpaid labor not accounted for time and efforts spent at all levels contributing to the economy.

There is weak representation in decision making positions in services provision. In the Palestinian Water Authority women are not present, yet they represent 8% in the related service sectors and 32% in the other official institutions. In those sectors women constitute 11% in high decision making positions but in the 2nd rank.

There are lots of obstacles, I want to speak about the theft of water in Palestine. As women we also should care about this political context in which Palestinian water is being stolen by the Israeli authorities. There is discrimination in terms of water quantity and quality. I remember in the early 90's we used to discuss the Oslo Agreement on the right of self determination in the two Covenants and now we see the result for not having obtained any right to self determination either political, social or cultural. We have no control over our resources, we have not benefitted and there is discrepancy in power relations between Israel and Palestine when it comes to the Oslo Agreement and its negative implications. Another obstacle is forced purchased of water to Israeli National Water Company Merkorot.

Women as care takers have found innovative mechanisms to cope with water shortage and its health and sanitation implications: storing water in containers and bottles, limiting the use to the most essential needs, washing by hand to save water from washing machines, reducing number of times the children bathe, etc. Women mainly pay the price again because of the wrong perceptions about female hygiene. However, I believe this comes rather from chronic shortage and lack of access to safe water and sanitation and as such it should be addressed.

We should underline the implications of water and sanitation inefficiencies in women and girls in Palestine: extensive time and effort consumed in securing WASH needs of the families, long and excruciating distances daily to bring water to



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the their homes, girls' drop out of school due to lack of adequate water and hygiene facilities.

As for small scale solutions to alleviate the problem of water scarcity and food insecurity, women have come up with innovative ways to provide water such as rainwater harvesting in rooftops and storage in cisterns next to their homes.

There are also good examples of women involved in treatment of gray waters. I found out that women's high involvement in these good practices is becoming more accepted for uses in agriculture and the household, and therefore there is an opening for future projects and initiatives for women cooperatives involvement in waste water to build up on inexpensive projects. A figure to bear in mind is that 24% of water treatment is done by women.

Other two good examples in the Palestinian context as to save water and involve women in using water for agricultural purposes are rooftop and hydroponic agriculture initiatives now very much developed in our society. Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have neither land nor water, so this idea of women creating gardens on the rooftop using hydroponic systems has been very successful. Over 100 food insecure female headed families responsible for households living in urban poor areas were provided with rooftop gardens to grow fresh vegetables and fruits in an organic way with less than half of water consumption. Later these initiatives may become income generating projects through selling of the remaining part of their produce in the markets.

Aquaponics is a combination of a soil-less vegetables growing (hidroponics) and fish farming (aquaculture). A recycling system that is very beneficial for both the environment and the households. These practices together with water treatment are good practices to look at when it comes to women's empowerment in the water sector.

In terms of women participation in decision making, the sector is primarily managed by the Palestinian Water Authority and municipalities at local level, committees and non-profit organizations. Thus, women's role is limited in WASH services management and their contribution still to be documented and their innovative ideas and practices still to be encouraged.

As for International Human Rights Law and Conventions, just to underline International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), art. 11-12 and conclusion 15. Also the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW) art. 14 addres issues of rural women, very much involved in agriculture sector in Palestine. Palestinian legislation has the standards but water issues are weakly regulated although we have acceded all



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the Treaties and Conventions. Again under the Humanitarian Law The Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention art. 49 states the responsibility of the Occupying authority and the third parties as member of the Conventions towards humanitarian principles.

While the international community is thinking of their responsibility towards technical support, financial aid and developmental aid, there should be political commitment of the international community. The voices of the Palestinian women who are involved now in the implementation of Resolution 1325 on issues of women's participation in conflict situations, in peace building and peacemaking, as well as in transitional justice and in preventing conflicts should be heard. Our contribution as women and mothers will make a difference once we are in decision making positions we can be more effective in what we do. First of all, we have a call as Palestinians for demanding the end of the occupation, the exploitation of water resources, the restrictions on access to water resources by Israelis and abiding by all especial procedures of Special Rapporteur on HR to safe drinking water and sanitation.

I would like to invite the Special Rapporteur to Palestine, I will follow up on it with the Palestinian Authority. If Israelis allow Mr. Heller to come to Palestine, I promise I will push and advocate for that.

Last, I would like to recommend to the Palestinian Authority as State party to several International Treaties (ICESCR, CEDAW, etc.) to stand up to their legal obligations under international law despite the fact we are under occupation, and therefore to adopt appropriate measures to fulfill their legal obligations in gender equality in decision making processes, particularly on water and sanitation sector; in setting priorities; influencing policies and legislations as the plans and programs at all levels and strategies; in mainstreaming in the work of the ministries in national plans, developments plans; in encouraging initiatives for income generating projects for women, especially for households headed by women in both urban and rural areas.

As for the donors they should abandon the practice of conditioning funding for water infrastructure in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, they should further support projects and initiatives at local communities level, they should adopt a rights based approach in the implementation of these projects, ensure participation and empowerment of women, ensure all donations are funded for projects carried out in compliance with third State party responsibility under International Humanitarian Law, hold Israel accountable for demolition of water infrastructure projects and demand appropriate compensations.