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Gender Roles in Occupied Palestinian Territory: Time to Listen to What Young Women and Men Think

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INTRODUCTION:

The roles of men and women have been changing since the twentieth century, yet a gap remains in this area[1]. The fifth sustainable development goal focuses on gender equality as many women still face discrimination in different aspects of their lives[2]. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), just like other societies, women face gender inequality and marginalization. Many changes need to be made in education, labor force, wage, and decision-making to increase the inclusion of women. Palestinian women have double the disadvantage, as they have to deal with both the gender inequality within their society and the occupation that targets their physical and mental well-being[3, 4].

Although there is an increase in attention on youth as a sector in research in the OPT, data provided about Palestinian

youth remains limited. There is a dearth of research about gender equality and equity issues from the perspectives of youth. Despite improvements in Palestinian women's education, more progress is necessary to increase women's participation in leadership roles and the labor force. Only 19.6% are in labor force in contrast to 100% participation in domestic labor and activities[5]. Furthermore, gender dynamics are important to understanding how young women and men experience equality and equity, which is influenced by a complex web of cultural and social factors.

Therefore, this brief investigates young Palestinian women and men's understandings, perceptions, experiences of gender, gender relations, equality, and equity. Youth (aged 15-29) today comprise about 30% of the Palestinian Population[6] and represent the current view of the society and their input is valuable to inform and influence local stakeholders, local/international NGOs and the nature of

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the future Palestinian society. The findings presented in this policy brief are based on the statistical analysis of data derived from a survey of Palestinian youth and focus group discussions with young people conducted throughout the OPT.

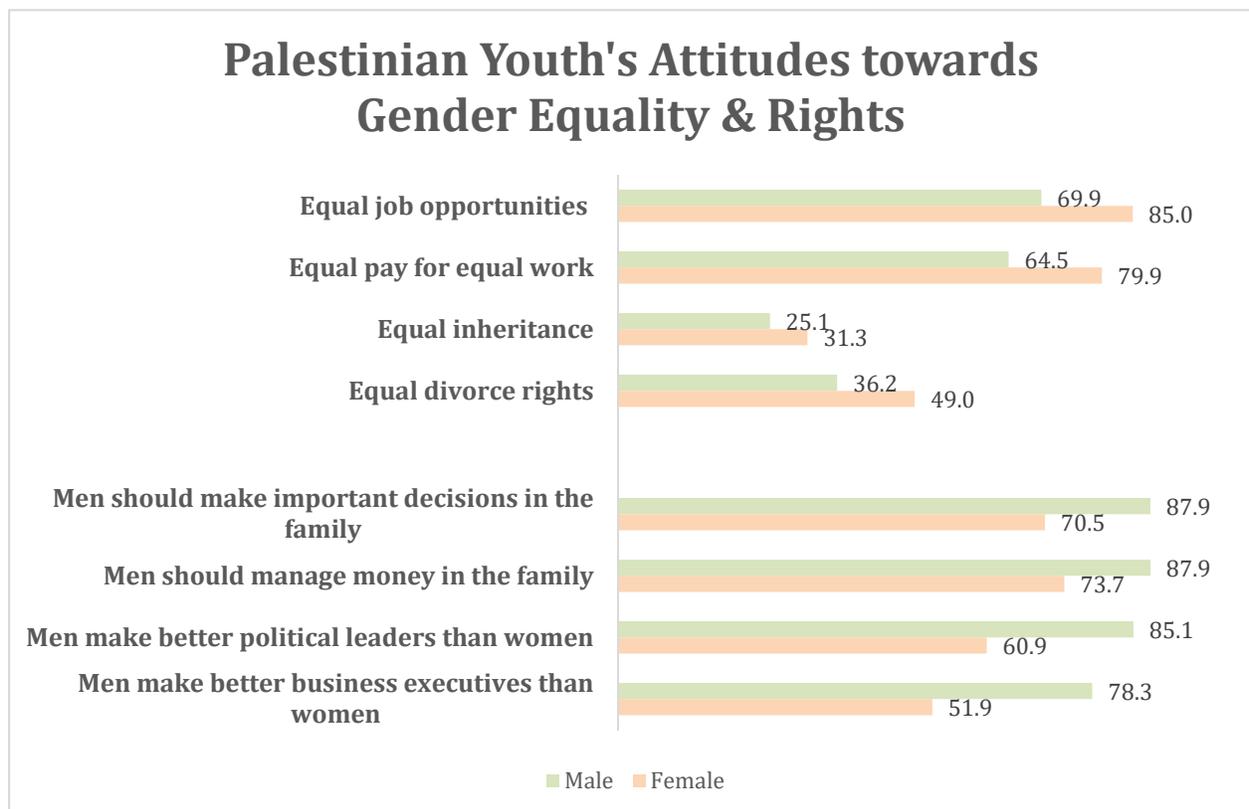
Attitudes Towards Gender Equity and Equality

From the survey, we developed a scale (out of 15) to indicate how supportive youth were of gender equality and equity. We found that the scores, on average, were low, with an average of 7.5 out of 15. There was a marked difference between men and women, where women scored 8.4 compared to 6.1 for men. This discrepancy in attitudes between males and females are shown in the figure below.

As we can see in the figure below, respondents in general have favorable opinions toward women’s rights in employment and education, where women’s views are more favorable in this regard.

However, there is little support among both young men and women for equality in personal status rights.

Furthermore, the majority of men and more than half of women believe that men are better suited for leadership positions, as we can see in the figure. There appears to be an issue related to men’s perceptions about women’s capacities as leaders and decision makers in the family and public spheres. This might be due to the absence of female role models at the political and business levels as well as the lack of confidence in women’s ability to manage the family financial aspects. In contrast to education and employment, youth were not as supportive towards equality in relation to personal status rights, like divorce and inheritance.



Gender Equity and Equality: tensions, differences in understandings and experiences, and resistance to the terms

"I notice that all gender studies or gender in general, not just here in Palestine but everywhere else, tends to portray the woman as a victim. This is not how I see it. I see that there are differences and higher pressure on women. Even men do not have the freedom that we think they do. They see freedom as going out...having relationships and drinking, this is not what freedom is. Freedom means that you have choices whether a man or a woman. For example, they always direct us as if we are victims and what not...that a girl has to rebel and what not...instead of seeing that I have been through problems and I have persevered...I think we should stay away from the idea that a woman is always the victim. It puts us in a corner...even a man can be a victim, you think a 20 year old man can have his own house, save to buy his bride gold and think about a wedding; all to show off to the society. This is pressure on the man; the man will in turn put pressure on the woman; and the woman will take it out on the children, it is a circle."

The quote above from a young woman from a village near Bethlehem highlights key issues that came out in our qualitative investigation. As this woman notes, many young women and men saw that there are key issues pertaining to gender inequity and inequality. However, there was a lack of clarity in terms of how gender equity and equality are defined, and for some a resistance to the terms, given how they have been deployed in the Palestinian context. For example, this young woman noted that there are problems that need to be addressed, but she had a critique of the depiction of women "as victims" rather than

as agents, and noted that many of the programs and workshops use discourse that in essence deprive women of their agency and treat them as passive victims.

Throughout the course of our research, the discrepancy between women and men in terms of their perception of gender issues was also evident. Importantly, there also appeared to be a gap between young men's perceptions of young women's lives and young women's actual experiences. Additionally, there was a lack of clarity on what "gender equality" meant to youth. Even though all youth agreed that equality means having the same rights, responsibilities, abilities, opportunities, sharing roles, this agreement was not absolute and was conditioned by social norms and the religious context.

Findings from the qualitative component supported findings from the quantitative analysis in terms of youths' agreement on women rights in education and employment as long as it does not interfere with religious and cultural beliefs. As one young woman from the rural Nablus focus group discussion said *"we remain in an Arab society. We have the customs and traditions of the East that don't allow me to come home late regardless of how open it is"*.

Many of the participants showed some resistance to the term gender equality. For some, this resistance had to do with the idea that full equality would take away from their manhood.

"... Look, if they (referring to men) see their male neighbor handwashing clothes, doing laundry with his wife or wiping the floor then he is considered submissive and controlled...And then his wife, herself, despite the fact that he is helpful and they understand each other, she goes and says around to other women..."he never says no to me". She takes pride knowing she is in control. Why can't she

take pride of the fact that they are on good terms while keeping that to herself?"

However, for many youth, the resistance to the term had to do with their experiences with NGO programming that they felt was condescending and approached their cultural and social norms as if they are backwards. One other participant noted: *"they also have problems in their countries, but they come here (to fix us)."*

Some men felt that the emphasis on women's rights and gender equality put them in a position where they were viewed as culprits or an enemy of sorts, even though they felt like they were trying to be respectful towards women, and even when they believed in equity or equality.

Others insisted that any discussion of gender equality should take into account religious and cultural values and that part of the problem is what they considered to be an incorrect interpretation of religion and an emphasis on outdated 'traditions'.

Societal norms and expectations were more restrictive of young women's mobility and personal freedom, and placed a lot of pressure on men to fulfill their roles as providers. There was also noticeable social pressure on men caused by social expectations in regards to work, education, marriage, and other life aspects. A woman from Hebron argued *"The guy is also repressed and has to marry his cousin. If he doesn't marry according to his mother, she becomes angry with him... This also happens but no one talks about it when gender is brought up. ..."*. What this and other similar comments show is that oftentimes gender roles are reinforced by women within the family because they have internalized patriarchal values.

The stress of living in patriarchal society affected both men and women differently, with a bigger disadvantage on women. Many young men noted that they face great pressures to perform their traditional gender roles: *"If she (referring to a married*

working woman) wants to stay home, no one will force her to provide for her family. But if she goes to court, I am forced to provide for her. If she is divorced and has the kids, I am forced to support her".

Children of Educated, Working Mothers are More Supportive of Gender Equality

When investigating factors predicting attitudes towards gender equality, we found that mother's education as well as employment, and the perceived influence of women in society were important predictors of positive attitudes towards gender equality². The perceived role of women within the household and community confirms the statistical findings. One man from a village Northwest of Jerusalem highlighted the role of mothers' education in positively influencing attitudes toward gender equality:

"Of course if the mother is educated, the first thing she will do is transfer her education and intellect to her children. She will transfer her own experience and will improve it. If, for example, the mother used to suffer from her brothers making trouble to her when she goes to school, she will give more freedom to her daughters to go in and out of the house and she will be able to teach them to value trust, so she'll know they are going to school and coming back".

Another woman from Halhul said:

"I will raise my son with this mentality that a woman is free to wear what she wants. I will raise my son and raise my daughter with the same mentality. I will tell my son not to learn from his friends and that they are wrong, as they learn from one another."

² Other factors included age, gender, place of residence and education

Experiences of gender inequality- constricting the lives of young women

Throughout the focus group discussions, youth participants, and especially young women, pointed out the presence of gender inequality in education, workplace, marriage, divorce, inheritance, rights, and social restrictions. Women discussed about the lack of freedom to live their lives as they wanted: to go out at night, travel, and study in the field or university of their choice. Those restrictions were enforced by the fear of being watched and “what people would say”, thus affecting their reputation and family’s reputation. Additionally, women complained about unequal pay and discrimination against women’s marital status in the workplace. There were also complaints about not applying religion the way it is supposed to be. Ultimately, these restrictions constricted women’s lives in very palpable ways. One young woman in the South of the West Bank noted: *“now it has become a dream for me to ride a bicycle!”* She explained that while riding a bicycle is so simple, because of social norms that considered it inappropriate for women to ride bicycles in her village, this simple thing has become a life dream for her. It is important to take into consideration that while some of these restrictions seem benign what they ultimately do is limit the space for women’s participation and can have effects on the self-esteem and wellbeing of girls and women. Furthermore, while patriarchy places greater restrictions on women’s lives, especially in terms of mobility and appearance, it also places pressure on young men to conform to expected societal norms and limits their freedoms in other ways. Many participants noted that the current sociocultural configuration had negative impacts on all youth, male and female. However, they also noted that addressing the inequalities would only take plan by working within society and increasing awareness while being culturally sensitive at the same time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Results from the quantitative analysis and discussions from the qualitative part of this study suggest the following recommendations:

At the governmental level

- Integrating gender equality concepts in education curriculums and activities especially at early schooling stages (specifically to change the typical image of women as being mothers and housewives only), workplaces through labor laws, and social spaces while promoting it as part of the local culture in addition to highlighting past and current Palestinian women role models;
- Encourage religious sermons on Fridays and Sundays prayers to stress the importance of women’s rights in the sacred texts. For example, speaking about women’s issues during the Friday prayer in mosques and Sundays mass in churches.
- Enforcing gender budgeting in the public sector and assuring that the women’s quota is appropriately implemented and practiced through various mechanisms including training and internship programs to encourage women to take more active roles in public policy;
- Improve Palestinian labor law in terms of minimum wages and protection from harassment and discrimination against women;
- Enshrine equal employment opportunities in law and assure enforcement;

Non-Governmental Organizations level

- Target both young men and women in awareness activities in order to reduce

the gender gap by presenting young men as partners;

- Provide legal protection and help to marginalized women groups to defend their inheritance, divorce, education and choosing their partner rights;
- Focus on long term projects that seek to increase awareness on gender equity and involve both genders and take into account the specificities of each community, and target various segments of the population like disadvantaged women, parents, educational institutions, and school children;
- Support advertisements and theatrical plays that stress on women roles in society and gender equality;
- Work on developing women skills and talents at all levels and conduct motivational and inspiring workshops to show examples of success stories

Community-based Organizations levels

- Create legal programs stressing the importance of gender equality in terms of legal protection and education, and amplify the voices of women who the legal systems have failed using social media platforms;
- Break the stereotypical representation of gender roles that the Palestinian media sends and replace it with healthier values that promote the division of labor between couples;
- Support leadership programs focusing on women's leadership and participation to alter the power dynamics of male-dominant public and political spheres;
- Showcase role models and inspiring success stories to construct images for young women to look up to and to help young men encourage young women in their vicinities to follow;

- Create forums for the exchange of experiences to increase awareness of what Palestinian women, specifically young women, face in their societies;
- Target women through associations, such as rural development associations, to help uneducated women to learn skills and gain firsthand experience.

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