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Women and Human Rights in the Middle East: A region of conflicts

It is my honor to take part in this conference on the very important subject of “Women and Human Rights in the Middle East”, and I am also honored to be part of this panel of distinguished women.

I consider this conference to be of special importance because it places the spotlight on the general issue of women and human rights in the Middle East. We are addressing the issue of the status of women in civil society as well as in the political sphere. We are speaking about equal opportunities.

In this presentation, I will present my personal views and beliefs regarding the status of women and rights in general. I am also presenting to you my perspective, as a citizen of Israel, as to where these issues stand in the State of Israel. I would also like to frame my viewpoint in accordance with the understanding that Israel is an important player in the Middle East. I would like to note that the words that I will share with you are a consequence of both my personal experience as well as my engagement in civil and political life.

I was elected to the 17th Knesset on the national Labor Party list and did not contend for the slot that the party had reserved for an Arab. I filled my duty as member of Knesset for 3 years. I was the only Arab woman representative out of 120 parliament members, and 17 Jewish women, that compose only 14% of the parliament.

It was very important for me to run and be elected on the national list as an equal to all contenders on an equal playing field with all other candidates. In my eyes, this is a basic important element of equality. Of course, I also wanted my election process to express my belief and commitment to the subject of equality for women and civil rights.

I believed that if I were to be elected by all, Arabs and Jews, men and women, I would have the strong based legitimacy to advocate my position on the issues that I feel passionate about. I perceived my election process as an expression of what I believe in, as well as a potential model for others.

I believe that when we speak about women's rights and empowerment, we are first of all talking about civil rights. There are those that look at issues of women's quality as a problem for women only. Women's equality isn't an issue or problem reserved only for women. It is a social phenomenon that should require the joint partnership and involvement of both women and men. The first step for the empowerment of women requires a social and holistic observation. Women are part of society. Discrimination towards women is first of all damaging to the entire society. The integration of women in the political and civic life should be beneficial to the whole society and boost progress. There should be an emphasis on moral education and values, education for gender equality, education for tolerance and accepting the other as an equal.

Now I would like to use this opportunity to bring up a few points concerning the Middle East. It is no secret that the Middle East is in a serious state of conflict, which seems farther away from being resolved than it was in the early 1990's. Within most of the countries of the Middle East, democracy is more of a dream than a reality. This of course brings about much social dissatisfaction.

I sincerely believe that if more women in the Middle East were in positions of power in their respective countries, greater progress would be made in the peace process and on internal political and social issues. The problem, as I just stressed, is that very few women in the Middle East are in positions of power and unfortunately women are still subject to discrimination in many parts of the world.

Although there has been significant progress on the status of women on many levels, in most countries women representatives in politics in general and even more so in parliament is significantly lower than their proportional rate of the population. This applies also to Israel. Women have limited ability to influence the public agenda as well as small representation in politics in general and in the government in particular.

When talking about women in Israel, it is very important for me to also pay attention specifically to Arab women in Israel. These women bear their own specific characteristics. Their discrimination is twofold, also of being part of the Arab minority as well as being part of the general women's circle.

In the 18th current Knesset, there is a certain increase in the number of female representatives. 17.5% of all Members of Knesset are now women. This rate is lower than that of women in parliaments of Scandinavian countries, and western and northern European countries.

Unlike several other countries, there is no legislation in Israel that allots quotas for female representation in the political system. In the past there have been a few legislative proposals on this issue, but none of them passed. While I was a Knesset member I proposed a bill concerning equality in the local municipal councils, wherein there would be at least a 1/3 of female representation. Unfortunately this bill didn't pass, however a few parties decided upon a quota for women in their own party organs. For example, in the labor party the quota decided upon is 30% of female representation.

When comparing the figures of women in the Israeli parliament to the figures of women in other parliaments in the world, from March 2009, we find that Israel is ranked 69th in the world, out of 150 countries.

Now I would like to present to you a few examples of female representations in other parliaments:

- Spain is ranked 10th in the world. As of the elections of March 2009, in the lower house of Spain, out of 350 seats, there are 127 women that make up 36%. In the upper house, out of 263 seats, there are 79 women that make up 30%.
- In Jordan, as of the elections of November 2007, out of 110 seats, there were elected 7 women that make up 6.4%. Jordan is ranked 118th in the world.
- Egypt is ranked 131st in the world. As of the elections of November 2005, out of 442 seats, 8 women were elected, making up 1.8%. In the lower house, as of the elections of June 2007, out of 264 seats, 18 women were elected that make up 6.8%.

Low representation of women in the political system can be linked to a few causes. One of them is the system of elections implemented in a particular country. Another factor that affects the election of women is the political culture of a respective society, as well as the degree of conservatism or openness of a society towards the integration of women in politics and their place in positions of power.

During the past 20 years many countries and parties have come to the conclusion that they should take different measures in order to ensure a higher rate of representation of women in political institutions. One of the ways to do this is to set minimal quotas. Quotas can be used as an allotted number of seats reserved for women in parliament in order to ensure proper representation.



This method became very popular especially in the 1990's. Up to today, more than 30 countries have set female representation quotas for their national elections by legislation.

Using the quota method, the responsibility passes, to an extent, from women over to the bodies that decide upon the election process. With all of this, it should be mentioned that this form of a solution for the problem of low female representation is controversial. It has been argued that the minimal quota method contradicts the right of equal opportunity for all, since then women are prioritized as opposed to men. This argument leads to an even deeper conclusion that maintains that this method encourages the election of candidates according to gender as opposed to their qualifications, merits and abilities.

Another argument maintains that this method very often brings women to fight between themselves over the promised seats, instead of cooperating. Election due to affirmative action deducts from the value of the elected female, and this requires precaution for she may be seen as confirming her place by grace and not by merit.

Personally, and in the face of all the arguments, I support and believe in this method, especially for the Middle Eastern countries. I also believe in using this method in Israel since we haven't yet achieved full equality in representation in all arenas.

The process of education for gender equality is a long one and requires drastic changes in attitudes and outlooks of a society. This is why I believe in the quota method.

There is a real need for legislation and intervention in policy of affirmative action. Affirmative action is meant to compensate for the obstacles that prevent women from getting to the centers of decision making and influencing civic and political life.

I believe that women possess political skills and qualifications that are no less than that of men. Even more so, their experiences as women are needed in the political arena. However, over and over again, reality teaches us that these experiences and skills are pushed to the side and don't get full realization in the usually male dominated political system. Another issue is that women in political parties face a dilemma as to their political identity on the one hand, and their commitment to feminist positions and activities on the other. Choosing to be party members representing the overall party line, they often find themselves classified as "women" relegated to traditional feminine roles.

From my political experience, I can say with certainty that when a woman does finally get elected, no matter under which method, her work is done on a very high level. During my Knesset term, and I can say this without any doubt, the elected women Knesset members knew how to cooperate on all issues concerning women's rights and equality, regardless of party membership. For the most part, the quality of their work was more successful than their male counterparts because of their outstanding skills, merit and hard work in order to achieve their goals.

I don't have exact information about other female elected parliament members in other Middle Eastern countries. I can only speculate and assume that also in other places, this observation may be very similar.

As I have already mentioned, party representation quotas in Israel have not yet been passed as legislation. There have been several attempts at legislative action, but until now, these have been unsuccessful.

An interesting bill is currently on the table that proposes financial incentives to any party that consists of at least 30% women members. As far as I know, the only party in Spain that has set representation quotas is the socialist party, the PSOE. The quota set is a minimal representation rate of 40% for both men and women.

A very special law concerning women's leadership in Israel is the "Women must be included in peace talks" law. It was passed in July 2007, and is very relevant specifically to Israel as well as to the Middle East that is in a permanent state of conflict. The law demands a suitable representation of women in negotiating groups. Various steps will have to be taken to translate the law into action including the involvement of the courts.

When discussing the issue of women's rights and equality, we must mention the education sphere. Here, Israel has been more successful in ensuring that women are as well educated, and perhaps even better educated than men. One of the impressive statistics is that over half of all university graduates in Israel are women. Efforts are also being made to introduce changes in the education system on the issue of gender equality, but here the success has been less impressive.

In Israel we have a good deal of legislation regarding women's rights and equal opportunities in the civil society in general and in the work place in particular. As I mentioned, in the 16th Knesset an attempt was made to pass legislation regarding appropriate representation for women in peace negotiations. Another initiative concerns encouragement of political parties to

increase the number of women in their Knesset lists, and to reserve places for women in local authorities. In the future I believe that we must place greater emphasis on defining what we mean by “appropriate representation”, not just in numerical terms, but also in terms of the make-up of this representation.

Personally I would be much happier if there was no need for the legislature to intervene, and for affirmative action in this sphere. However, as long as the starting line for men and women is not the same, the legislature must act. The main problem is that there is a gap between what the legislation says, and the actual implementation of the letter of the law.

As an Arab citizen of Israel I am also sensitive to the fact that Arab women in Israel are in a much weaker position than their Jewish sisters. This means that for us it is much more difficult to influence developments in our country and in our region. We are even at a disadvantage when it comes to influencing our own community.

Arab society in Israel is much more Western than Arab societies in the rest of the Middle East. However, it is still largely a traditional and patriarchal society.

I could bring many examples to demonstrate what this means, but the most “impressive”, in the negative sense, is the fact that out of about 770 members of Arab local and municipal councils in Israel, only a few are women. This is in contrast with over 200 Jewish women serving as members of municipal councils. I for example, am the second Arab woman in history to have been elected to the Knesset, and both I and Hussniah Jabarra, who served in the 15th Knesset, were elected on behalf of predominantly Jewish parties.

Although there has been progress on this issue, women in Israel are still a long way away from full equality and from being a critical mass in the decision making forums.

The desired change is not something that can happen overnight. It requires a long and deep process of change in personal and social values, as well as in cultural approaches.

There must be an emphasis on education from a very young age, on the one hand, and on legislation on the other. They both have a very important role to play. In the Knesset I have initiated legislation in the sphere of making the work environment more suitable for women, especially for women with families.

The level of implementation concerning the status of women in Israel continues to improve. The Knesset continues to advance legislation regarding women's rights, and I believe that such advancement represents the progress of a whole society. There are many legislative developments and court decisions that have been influencing the arena of human rights and the empowerment of women.

(אם יש צורך וזמן- 2 דוגמאות של חוקים שהעברתי בנושא)

For example, the equal rights for women law.

The equal retirement age law.

The prevention of sexual harassment law.

Laws concerning equal representation for women in public positions.

Although we have many encouraging positive statistics that point towards progress, it is clear to me that we must act forcefully, from a position of strength fired by our belief that we deserve the best in every aspect and in every place. Only strong women in as many key positions as possible will lead and spread the change.

I would like to believe that women will be full participants in the international sphere. I hope that this participation will break boundaries and obstacles. This action can be a leading force in the Middle East and I believe it will have a positive impact on social and political change.

I wish you all an enjoyable, fruitful and successful conference.