

Running Head: WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

The Rights and Treatment of Palestinian Women in Palestinian, Israeli, and Non-Palestinian Arab Cultures will be Compared and Contrasted

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Abstract

This paper is about the struggle that Palestinian women and most women in the Arab and Middle Eastern countries have faced in gaining equality. I will focus on a few key women who have improved the situations of women including Hanan Ashrawi, who became the Palestinian Minister of Higher Education and Research, and the head of the Political Committee. In 1993 she was one of the founders of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizen's Rights. She is also a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council for Jerusalem. Hoda Shaarawi is another instrumental woman who was instrumental in 1944 in convening the first Arab Feminist Conference and in 1945 in forming the Arab Feminist Union, which called for solidarity with the Arabs of Palestine.

Since September 29, 2000, Palestinian women have been facing continuous violations of basic rights. Prominent but unrecognized among these rights are women's health rights. Women are at risk; their Reproductive Health Rights are violated subjecting them and their newborn infants to morbidity and mortality. Recently, women's reproductive rights have been blatantly violated in front of the closed eyes of the world. The Israeli army is denying women safe passage to hospitals and health centers, forbidding ambulances to transport them and shooting at them. In desperation women use alternative routes and means to reach health services. Women in Palestine have been moving to Israel for better health care and more opportunities for advancement. The rights and treatment of Palestinian women, in Palestinian, Israeli, and non-Palestinian Arab cultures will be compared and contrasted.

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Around the globe women have made tremendous strides in attaining equality and a voice for themselves. However, women in Arab countries are not gaining the power and equalities that women in most nations have been able to achieve. The Middle East is notorious for its troubles, not the least of which is the state of affairs that their women have to endure. Every day thousands of women are kept in poverty and ignorance.

The United Nations Development Program's publication, *Arab Human Development Report 2002* states, "The utilization of Arab women's capabilities through political and economic participation remains the lowest in the world in quantitative terms, as evidenced by the very low share of women in parliaments, cabinets, and the work force, and in the trend toward the feminization of unemployment. Society as a whole suffers when a huge proportion of its productive potential is stifled..." (Cited in Ottoway, 2004) President George W Bush reiterated these opinions in 2003, saying, "No society can succeed and prosper while denying basic rights to the women of their country." (Whitehouse.gov, 2004)

Generally perceptions of women in Arab nations can be incorrect. Some see Arab women as covered, uneducated, ignorant, and somewhat responsible for their own state. In reality women in many Arab nations are smart, educated, and fighting for their rights. Many of them come up against harsh religious cultures that suppress women and fight to maintain the dominance men have over women. In the Quran 2.228 it states, "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them," and in 4.034 it says, "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means." (USC.edu) Needless to say, Arab women of the Islamic faith or who reside in strong Islamic cultures have difficulties gaining equality, although some nations are more tolerant than others. It is important to mention that in Christian religions you can find statements of the same sentiment, Ephesians 5:22 in the Bible states, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord." Some people would maintain that all major religions are oppressive to women.

Religious beliefs are not the only thing women in the Middle East have to contend with, many women have to deal with war and its impoverishing effects. Palestinian and Israeli women have suffered much because of the continuing war between these two peoples. In March of 2005 BBC reported, "Amnesty say that violence against women, sex crimes and honour killings have increased in the last four and a half years whilst few of those responsible have been brought to justice. 'Palestinian women's suffering has been two-fold. They have borne the brunt of conflict and decades of Israeli occupation and in Palestinian society they are also denied full rights and protection,' said Kate Allen of Amnesty International UK in a statement." (BBC.com, 2005) Honour killings are when women are killed to protect the honour of the family because of suspected sexual contact with another man. These killings are considered grave injustices and discrimination against women. An organization called *Women for Palestine* reports, "Since the

beginning of the Intifada on the 29th September 2000, Palestinian women, along with the whole Palestinian population have been facing extensive and continuous violations of basic rights. Prominent but unrecognized among these rights are women health rights. Women are at risk; their Reproductive Health Rights are violated subjecting them and their newborn infants to morbidity and mortality. In the most recent months, women's reproductive rights have been blatantly violated in front of the closed eyes of the whole world. The Israeli army is denying women safe passage to hospitals and health centres, forbidding ambulances to transport them and shooting at them if in desperation they use alternative routes and means to reach health services.” (Womenforpalestine.com 2002)

In Israel women have higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and health problems. According to statistics one in three Israeli women will be sexually assaulted. Only 17 percent of the members of Knesset are women. The orthodox religious control of Israeli culture makes divorce for women when the man disagrees extremely difficult. Although life for Israeli and Palestinian women is difficult, Israeli women have slightly more freedoms than Palestinian women.

In the US today a woman can do almost anything a man can do. There are still gaps and some would say the gaps in equality are too wide, but compared with women in the Middle East, women in America are incredibly free. I might cheat on my husband but I will not be killed for it. My nation is at war technically but I am not directly affected by it or in much danger. I have the choice to wear almost anything I want. If I chose to I can obtain a divorce whenever I want.

Women in the Middle East are oppressed to some extents beyond imaginable. The tragedies that some of them face are excruciating and would surprise almost anyone. The question is how do we help them? How can their situations be improved? Various governments make claims all the time that certain programs will be implemented and that women will earn the equality they deserve, but it is not always the case. A nation might promote one or two token women to powerful positions, or implement a small program but in the end words are cheap and actual progress doesn't happen. The US and the UN do make efforts to help women in the Middle East, but advancement is slow and tedious. Funds that are given to help women and children often fall into the wrong hands and never reach their intended destination.

Over the years a few women have stood out in their relentless pursuit of helping Middle Eastern women gain the rights they deserve. Huda Shaarawi was born in 1879 and was a central figure in women's rights in the early nineteenth century. She founded the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women and in 1923 the Egyptian Feminist Union. The EFU, while accomplishing few of its goals such as increased education for women, is credited with setting the stage for future feminist victories. Another prominent player in women's rights is Dr. Hanan Ashrawi. She has been a prominent figure in Palestine and at one point was appointed by Arafat as the Official Spokesperson of the Palestinian Delegation to the Middle East Peace Process. Later she became the Palestinian Minister of Higher Education and Research, also the Head of the Political Committee. Ashrawi ended up resigning from her government positions in protest against political corruption. She has been fighting for women's rights for decades.

How can women overcome the religious persecution they endure? When men oppress women and do it in the name of God or Allah how can women argue with that? If you are taught that the ruler of the universe, the light and creator of all mankind wants you to be subservient and trampled on, how can you fight against oppression and maintain the faith of your religion? Are religion and feminism opposites? Can a woman stand up for what she believes and rights she feels are hers if she belongs to a religion that is oppressive towards women? The truth is if mankind followed their various religions with faith and love for others (as is preached in all major religions), they wouldn't oppress women. The problem is that some cultures translate sacred writ too strictly and sometimes misinterpret what the real intent of the vocabulary is. Maybe in order to be part of a religion women must make the choice to bend to the law and obey subserviently.

There might be obstacles of religion and governments but never should the fight for women cease. Every woman deserves the right to education and equal rights. We cannot stop until this issue is resolved.

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