

The Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel
مجموعة العمل حول وضع النساء الفلسطينة المواتنات في اسرائيل
קבוצת העבודה בעניין מעמד האישה הפלסטינית בישראל

Statement by
The Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel
To the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
On the Third Periodic Report from the Government of Israel
July 5, 2005

Madam Chair, thank you for giving us the opportunity to address the Committee. My name is Abeer Baker, and I speak on behalf of the Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel, a coalition of six Palestinian women's and human rights NGOs inside Israel.

We would like to draw your attention to six main areas of concern that contribute to the perpetuation of systematic discrimination against Palestinian women citizens of Israel on the grounds of sex and ethnicity, namely: legislation, violence against women, participation in public life, education, employment and poverty.

1. Legislation

With regard to Israel's obligations under Article 2 of the Convention, we would like to note that, despite a previous Concluding Observation by the Committee, the right to equality is still not reflected in the Basic Laws of the country. The State's reference to the legal system's multilayered nature is no excuse for this omission. Neither has Israel made efforts to withdraw its reservations to CEDAW Articles 7(b) and 16, nor has it indicated its willingness to ratify the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. Furthermore, in line with concerns raised by other UN human rights treaty bodies, we call upon the Committee to strongly recommend the immediate revocation of the racist Nationality and Entry into Israel Law (Temporary Order), which denies spouses of Israeli citizens who are residents of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, residency in Israel. This law has devastating effects on all persons concerned, and particularly on Palestinian women on both sides of the Green Line, who are faced with the social and economic difficulties arising from the separation from their husbands, who are usually the primary or only breadwinners. In relation to Article 16 of the Convention and General Recommendation No. 21, the Age of Marriage Law, which sets the age of marriage at 17, needs to be amended by raising the minimum age to 18, and it needs to be better enforced. The article of the Penal Code prohibiting polygamy is not enforced, either.

2. Violence against Women

The State of Israel provides insufficient support to Palestinian teenage women in distress. In 2003, the Ministry of Social Affairs closed the only state-funded secured shelter serving Palestinian teenage girls in danger of physical abuse, while it operates shelters for Jewish girls and boys and for Palestinian boys. After a petition by Palestinian NGOs, the Ministry assured the Court that a shelter would be opened. This has not yet happened. Therefore, we see the need to remind Israel of its obligation to offer such an important service.

3. Participation in Public Life

In violation of Article 7 of the Convention, Arab women remain heavily under-represented in the public sphere and decision-making. Out of the 254 female judges in Israel only five are Palestinian, and while Jewish women make up for 64% of civil service employees, less than 2% of civil servants are Palestinian women. No Palestinian woman sits in the Knesset. With regard to these harsh discrepancies, temporary special measures need to be taken in accordance with Article 4 of the Convention, and the Committee's General Recommendation No. 25. In response to the Committee's List of Issues, Israel did not provide

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information on the existing laws on fair representation of the Arab population in the civil service and on the boards of directors of government companies. The Working Group found that these laws are not being implemented.

4. Education

With respect to equal rights in education, Israel continues to disregard its obligations under Article 10 of the Convention. In 2000, the state spent over than three times more money on each Jewish pupil than on each Palestinian pupil. This discrimination in resource allocation results in second-rate education for Palestinian children, high drop-out rates, especially among girls, out-dated schoolbooks containing gender stereotypes, a lack of counseling services, and failure to meet university entrance requirements. We would like to emphasize the necessity of recommending that needs-based budgets be allocated to the Arab education sector, and, in addition, that temporary special measures and programs be implemented to close the huge gap in educational attainment levels of Palestinian girls and women compared with their Jewish counterparts. Moreover, affirmative action is needed to raise the percentage of Palestinian women in the academic staff, which currently stands at less than 1%.

5. Employment

In the field of employment, covered by Article 11 of the Convention, Arab women face serious obstacles as well. Only 17% of Palestinian women participate in the labor force, as compared to 54% of Jewish women. It is Israel's responsibility to counteract the following aggravating factors: apart from the lower level of education, Palestinian communities lack access to public transport, infrastructure, daycare facilities, and the long school day service. We request that the Government of Israel engages in a number of temporary special measures and programs to make the labor market accessible to Palestinian women by providing the lacking services.

6. Poverty

Israel did not respond to the Committee's inquiry about poverty among non-Jewish women. Here, I would like to note that no gender-disaggregated statistics are available on poverty indicators concerning women, which is a shortcoming with respect to General Recommendation No. 9 of the Committee.

Finally, we would like to express our solidarity with all women citizens and residents of Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and beyond, for universality is the very essence of CEDAW.

For details and further issues of concern, please refer to our Alternative Report on the Committee's List of Issues, which you received again this morning. This statement does not refer to Israel's 4th Periodic Report; the Working Group was not made aware of its publication. Now Hanan al-Sanah will speak on the particular problems faced by Palestinian Bedouin women in the Naqab. Thank you.

The members of the Working Group are:

Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel – www.adalah.org

Al-Tufula: Pedagogical and Multipurpose Women's Center – www.tufula.org

Arab Association for Human Rights (HRA) – www.arabhra.org

Kayan: A Feminist Organization – www.kayan.org

Maan: The Union of Bedouin Women's Organizations in the Negev

Women against Violence (WAV) – www.wavo.org

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To the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
On the Third Periodic Report from the Government of Israel,
With regard to Bedouin Women in the Negev/Naqab
July 5, 2005

Thank you, Madam Chair, for giving me the opportunity to speak to the Committee. My name is Hanan al-Sanah, and I work for the Sidreh Association, a member organization of Ma'an, the Union of Bedouin Women's organizations in the Naqab, which is part of the Working Group.

With specific reference to Article 14 of the Convention, I would like to elaborate on the multiple forms of discrimination Palestinian Bedouin women are faced with in the Naqab. In my statement, I will only introduce the major areas of concern, namely the unrecognized villages, employment, education, and health.

1. Unrecognized Villages

About 140,000 Bedouin live in the Naqab, a desert area in southern Israel. Approximately half of this population lives in unrecognized villages – what the state refers to as “illegal villages.” Accordingly, all construction in these villages is treated as subject to demolition. Moreover, the unrecognized villages are denied all public services, including water and electricity. The State pressures the inhabitants to move to the townships set up for the Bedouin population. This transfer plan is a gross violation of the Bedouin's rights as an indigenous population to pursue and foster their traditional lifestyle. Since 2001, at least 120 houses have been demolished, and many crops destroyed by aerial spraying and bulldozers. With respect to the Palestinian Bedouin women citizens of Israel, the State grossly violates Article 14 of the Convention, in addition to its disregard of most other Articles of CEDAW. Traditionally, Bedouin women played a central economic role within the family in agriculture, herding, and handicrafts. Nowadays, Bedouin women are deprived of their status within the family because of the lack of land and cattle. It should further be noted that, due to the State's denial to take responsibility for its citizens in the unrecognized villages, no official statistics are available on socio-economic indicators in these villages.

2. Employment

The unemployment rate among working-age Bedouin women reaches 85% in some localities – both recognized and unrecognized. Factors that inhibit economic activity include the lack of land, limited budgets, low levels of education, and the lack of public transport. Seven out of the ten poorest localities in Israel are recognized Bedouin communities. We strongly recommend that immediate action is taken with regard to Article 4.1 of the Convention and General Recommendation No. 25 to provide remedies for the extreme disparities in access to employment for Bedouin women in the Naqab, including investment in traditional craftwork and small enterprises in the Bedouin villages. There are local women's organizations that currently employ 400 women artisans. With financial support, at least 1,000 women could find employment there.

3. Education

One of the main factors leading to the devastating economic situation among Bedouin women is the extremely low level of education. The estimated illiteracy rate among Bedouin women in some unrecognized villages is 85%. Moreover, drop-out rates among Bedouin girls are high: up to 77% among

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Bedouin girls. The first reason given by girls for dropping out of school is the long distance between their homes and schools. In the recognized localities, where secondary education is available, Bedouin girls in high school even outnumber boys. At the university level, the Ministry of Education has offered 18 scholarships to Bedouin girls. However, one of Ma'an's partner NGOs alone has offered 150 scholarships in the past three years. We strongly recommend that immediate action is taken with regard to Article 4 of the Convention and General Recommendation No. 25, to provide remedies for the extreme barriers to accessing education for Bedouin women in the Naqab, such as opening secondary schools in the unrecognized villages and offering more literacy projects in the Bedouin communities, according to the high demand among women.

4. Health

Discrimination with regard to access to health care is another major factor which impacts on the lives of Bedouin women in the Naqab. Again, it needs to be noted that there are no statistics available which combine an ethnic with a gender breakdown. In 2000, the infant mortality rate among the Palestinian Bedouin population in the Naqab was almost four times higher than that of the Jewish population. The State quotes marriages within the family as a main factor. However, we would like to maintain that 38% of Bedouin infant mortalities are due to malnutrition and environmental causes. Moreover, Bedouin women have limited access to health care during pregnancy. Therefore, we suggest that recommendations are made with regard to the provision of health care facilities and health education in the villages; services in Beer Sheva, the major town in the Naqab, are not accessible to rural women due to lack of public transport and publicity. In order to monitor developments, accurate data disaggregated according to gender and ethnicity has to be provided by the government.

I would like to conclude with our Working Group's position on Israel's presentation of its comprehensive plan for the Bedouin sector – also referred to as the Sharon Plan – as being designed for the common good of the Bedouin population. Firstly, we strongly disagree with Israel's denial of basic public services to its citizens simply by claiming that the Palestinian Bedouin choose to live in illegal villages – villages which in many cases predate the establishment of the State. Moreover, we find that resources earmarked for house demolitions and crop destruction do not qualify for the definition of being “for the common good” of that population. Finally, I would like to kindly ask the Committee to enquire about the “extensive resources allocated by the Government for providing the Bedouin living in the illegal villages with basic infrastructures and municipal services,” as stated in its response to Issue No. 13.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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