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Statement submitted by Kayan-Feminist Organization, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Kayan-Feminist Organization is a grassroots Palestinian feminist organization that works in the field of women's empowerment and promoting the rights of Palestinian women citizens of Israel. Established in 1998 by Palestinian feminists in Haifa, Kayan takes a bottom-up approach to social change. We invest in the field by empowering women and youth to become transformative leaders on local and national levels, protecting and promoting the human and civil rights of Palestinian women in Israel, and breaking down the social and institutional barriers to gender equality.

Context of Palestinian women in Israel

Palestinian women citizens of Israel are part of the national minority of Palestinians, who comprise approximately 20 per cent of Israel's population. This national minority has experienced discrimination and repression on a number of levels, including by law, governmental policy, state practices, and social dynamics.

Palestinian women citizens in Israel are facing both structural and institutional discrimination, as the government actively omits them from its agenda and chooses not to invest in their infrastructure, education, public transportation, and social programmes. This disinterest has direct impacts on the quality and quantity of services to which the Palestinians have access, contributing to the lower socioeconomic status of Palestinian families with 53 per cent living below the poverty line. Palestinian women also face oppression as women in a patriarchal society. They are disproportionately the victims of gender-based violence and femicide.

Violence against Palestinian women

Violence against Palestinian women in Israel creates a serious threat to their safety and security. Arab victims of femicide have numbered 12 in 2016, 10 in 2017, 14 in 2018, and 10 women already this year. In 2018, Palestinian women made up more than half of the murder victims even though they compose only 20 per cent of the population. One cause of this is how society approaches this issue in a patriarchal and discriminatory way. Unfortunately, too often, society gives legitimacy to the murderers and undermines the victims. The problem also comes from institutions and government. For all femicides in Israel, more than half of victims had reported domestic violence to the police before their murder and, yet, the police failed to prevent the killing. Despite the crisis of femicides, the State has failed to make an appropriate plan. A serious national plan to prevent and deal with the crisis of violence and femicide must address the protection of the women by various stakeholders (the police, the ministry of the interior, the Attorney General, social services, etc.). It must clearly set out short- and long-term strategies for each actor.

As a result, Palestinian women are increasingly losing trust in affecting change through the Israeli authorities and laws. Thus, more battered women are not filing complaints to the police.

Accordingly, the public have no access to basic information about the case. Furthermore, the police do not give information about cases of violence regarding violence against and killings of Arab women, including complaints, investigations, reasons for closing the files without trial, etc.

We demand the prioritization of femicide as a personal security issue that threatens Palestinian women's lives and the submission of a national plan for establishing training for police officers in gender sensitivity, building trust with the Palestinian society, implementing assertive punishments for murderers, establishing centres for handling domestic violence, etc.

Sexual harassment in the workplace

Palestinian women are often excluded from the labour force. According to a 2019 report published by the Ministry of Labour, the percentage reached 38.2 per cent, while the percentage of orthodox Jewish women is 76 per cent, and the percentage of other Jewish women (not orthodox) is 83 per cent. Analysts claim this number is inaccurate and that the percentage is much lower.

Palestinian women citizens of Israel are victims of multiple types of sexual violations. Police data from 2017, presented in a report by the Association for Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, found 6,587 cases of sexual complaints opened by the police in 2017, wherein 89 per cent of the victims were females. Twenty-three per cent were cases of sexual harassment. Thirty-five per cent of sexual violations cases occurred in the workplace or in the army. Only 3 per cent of the cases were discussed in court.

Men dominate most workplaces. Sexual harassment at work against women has serious and far-reaching consequences for their livelihoods, rights, personal safety, and health.

Due to the structural, social, and institutional difficulties of the integration of Palestinian women into workplaces, women often fear losing their livelihoods if they speak up, so they decide to tolerate the humiliation from the harasser. They also fear being the subject of ostracism in their workplace and family. Thus, Palestinian women rarely file complaints and expose cases of harassment and sexual harassment although there is a law in place to protect them.

The Sexual Harassment Prevention Law of 1998 and the regulations to prevent sexual harassment demand that the employer takes responsibility in enforcement of the law and requires the employer to designate a sexual harassment appointee (preferably a woman) in workplaces. However, the law is deficient, because there is no requirement or regulation about the ratio of appointee to the employees, no financial remuneration associated with the appointee position, no professional criteria required for appointment, no budget dedicated to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace, and no enforcement measures.

The Israeli police do not prioritize the issue of sexual harassment and do not address it appropriately. The police do not provide culturally- and gender-sensitive responses to sexual harassment.

It is the State's duty to establish a clear policy that addresses the issue of sexual harassment on various levels, such as:

- Establish public-awareness programmes about the status of women in general and the impact of sexual harassment
- Strengthen the complaints-receiving system in law enforcement systems, including consultation lines in Arabic
- Provide accessible emotional and mental health support in Arabic
- Work with the police to train special teams in handling complaints, while taking into consideration the sensitivity of the issue in the Palestinian patriarchal community, and take appropriate steps to overcome women's mistrust of the police
- Make employers aware of their duties under the law, which could increase the enforcement of the law and provide women with a safe work environment
- Legislate amendments to define more clearly the status, role, and qualifications of the appointee, the number of appointees; and remuneration for the committee

The data provided by the ministries and officials, like the police, the State Attorney's Office, and the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, does not reflect the reality of the Palestinian society because the data is collected for women in general without ethnic disaggregation. There is no specific data on the harassment experienced by Palestinian women in the workplace, which limits our work. Data on sexual harassment and other kinds of harassment is critical to demonstrating the severity and causes of the phenomenon.

Women in politics

Women are systematically excluded from politics. They are excluded from political discussions in the media and even in their own homes and social circles. They are too often excluded from decision-making positions, whether in workplaces, in their neighborhoods, or at the city or town level. Women are excluded from informal positions on council committees and positions as councillors in local authorities.

The lack of women councillors leaves Arab women vulnerable, as their needs are rarely addressed within political bodies. Issues like women's health, gender-based violence, women's employment, and women's economic security are easily ignored.

Palestinian women are discouraged from political leadership by a patriarchal and traditional social structure, in which women are relegated to the domestic sphere.

We found that of the nearly 800 council seats in Arab constituencies, women only won 12 in the 2013 elections. Less than 0.1 per cent of councillors are women and no women serve as mayors.

Suggested strategies to be developed

Society will work to:

- Advance Palestinian women's interests by empowering and mobilizing grassroots women for transformative change
- Build strong women leaders, empower them, educate them, and ensure they have strong support groups of other grassroots women

We also demand the state intervention in promoting Arab women election in the local authorities by developing a national plan that includes:

- Empowering women and providing support programmes for social change and gender equality that manage the Palestinian women challenges and obstacles in being represented in decision-making sphere, mainly in the local councils and in advocating for gender-sensitive budgets
- Creating and implementing an enforcement mechanism.