

Women's Struggle in Occupied Palestine

Women's liberation is a matter of increasing importance in our time, for we live in the era of the victory of socialism, the era of the steady advance of national democratic liberation movements and the building of communist societies. Women's liberation is directly linked to this struggle; we cannot struggle for the people's liberation unless priority is given to women's liberation. On the other hand, women cannot achieve liberation through a simple campaign for change in old ideas and customs. It is not enough to demand freedom in choosing a husband, jobs and clothes, or to work in this or that association, committee or syndicate. The women's struggle must have a political, national and progressive orientation aimed at changing the economic conditions which subjugate both men and women.

Women in general suffer class oppression as well as oppression by the men. In addition, the Palestinian woman suffers national oppression due to the imperialist-supported Zionist invasion and occupation of Palestine, which inflicted grave political, economic, social and cultural destruction on Palestinian society. From the beginning, Palestinian women realized that this national and class oppression fell equally on Palestinian men. Thus, Palestinian women worked side-by-side with men against the common enemy, postponing the conflicts that might arise between them for the sake of the main aim: liberating Palestine and establishing a democratic society as a major step towards women's full liberation.

The Palestinian people have firmly faced many challenges and conspiracies aimed at eliminating their identity and just rights. The Zionist invaders, upon occupying major parts of Palestine in 1948, worked in accordance with a planned policy to take possession of the land by expelling the original inhabitants and enacting Judaization. A major component of this policy was destroying the Palestinian economic infrastructure by imposing restrictions on agriculture, industry, marketing and education. Moreover, laws were made to prevent the founding of national associations and syndicates, and to disband the existing ones. The same policy was later applied in the remaining parts of Palestine which were occupied in 1967.

Confronting these challenges and conspiracies requires the recruitment and mobilization of all the potentials of the Palestinian people, of whom women compose roughly the half. The Palestinian woman's contribution has been significant; she spared no effort to serve her people, country and cause. This was based on her strong belief in the people's ability to face these challenges, despite Zionism's massive aggression and imperialist support. The Palestinian woman's struggle has progressed from being partial and instinctive, to being overall and organized. Women's participation has taken a variety of forms, including armed struggle.

The Palestinian woman's struggle, as part of her people's struggle, has passed through three main stages corresponding to the following periods: (1) The beginning of the Zionist invasion of Palestine until the formation of the Zionist entity in 1948, (2) 1948 until June 1967, (3) the contemporary Palestinian national liberation revolution.

Stage one: Prior to the formation of the Zionist entity

In 1884, Palestinian women were among the peasants who acted to uproot the first agricultural settlement which the Zionists tried to build near Affouleh. This was an early indication of women's social and national-political awareness. After World War I and the results represented by the Sykes-Picot agreement and then the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, the Palestinian woman's awareness increased. In 1920, women actively participated in demonstrations and strikes protesting the colonial plans against the Palestinian Arab people and demanding cancellation of the Balfour Declaration. In 1921, women made a qualitative advance by establishing the first women's union, headed by vanguard women like Melia Sakakin and Zalikha Shehabi. This union played a major role in organizing women's efforts and in demonstrations demanding a halt to Zionist colonization in Palestine. During the 1929 revolt, Palestinian women participated in the demonstrations where many were martyred, such as Jamile Azaar, Aisha Abu Hasan and Azba Salame.

In 1928, the Arab Women's Association was founded as a Palestinian association to work side by side with the men in the common struggle. The founders were Khadije Hussein, Tarab Abdul Hadi, Zakia Budeiri, Wadiha Khalidi, who chaired the association. In October 1929, a women's conference was held in Jerusalem. Hundreds of women participated and condemned the repressive British measures. The conference sent cables to the King of Britain and the United Nations. A delegation of fourteen women was formed and met the British High Commissioner, requesting cancellation of the Balfour Declaration, a halt to Zionist immigration to Palestine, the discharge of the Zionist British Deputy, the release of prisoners, and a halt to torture and aggression against the Palestinian people.

In 1936, the women's struggle took new forms in the context of the famous general strike, which lasted six months. Women started collecting and distributing material and financial aid to the rebels and to the families of martyrs and prisoners; they sewed clothes, bought and transported weapons, carried food and water to the rebels fighting in the mountains and administered first aid. On June 25, 1936, Fatima Gazal became the first Palestinian woman to be martyred in combat; ►