The Plight of Palestinian Women

April 10, 2015

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National Post

http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/robert-fulford-the-plight-of-palestinian-women

Their many admirers in the West like to depict Palestinians as innocent victims of imperialism, anxious to live free under their own state but tragically locked within boundaries imposed by Israel. The myth of the virtuous Palestinian flourishes especially on North American campuses where naive students vigorously press the case again Israel. But that sentimental notion collapses under scrutiny.

Students in the West would be appalled if they learned a little about the rights of women under the Palestinian Authority (PA). Some of the truth is available even in the official daily paper of the PA, Al-Hayat al-Jadida, published in Ramallah. The position of women today in the West Bank and Gaza provides chilling insight into what life in a Palestinian state will be like if that state ever becomes a reality.

About half of Palestinian women have been exposed to domestic violence, according to Al-Hayat al-Jadida. In 2014 a senior official in the PA Ministry of Women’s Affairs reported a 100 per cent recent increase in “family honour” killings. No one was particularly surprised. Zainab Al-Ghneimi, who runs the Women’s Legal Counselling Centre, says that this is a product of the entire society’s culture.

Al-Ghneimi believes that a Palestinian husband assumes the right of ownership. A man is his wife’s guardian, free to command and forbid. She points out that violent husbands are not following Islamic doctrine; no religious text encourages violence against women. But the idea has become so entrenched that it’s now assumed to be correct doctrine.

Typically, Al-Ghneimi says, a man believes he has bought the woman and paid for her. She has become his property and must obey his orders. But it becomes more complicated when women are surveyed. The PA newspaper claims that many women accept violence as their due. About four out of 10 agree that violence is justified if a woman leaves home without notifying her husband. About three-quarters believe it’s justified if she neglects her children.

Palestinian Media Watch, an independent online service, says Palestinian laws have been interpreted as allowing violence against women. Mahmoud Abbas, the PA chairman, has been criticized by women’s rights groups for failing to revise the legislation.

A headline, “Violence against women in Gaza: The undermining of family life,” ran in Al-Hayat al-Jadida.

The article said that in Gaza violence against women increased after the 50-day rockets-and-bombs struggle with Israel in 2014. A statement from the Palestinian Centre for Democracy and Conflict Resolution in Gaza said poverty explains the increase. Men become more stressed and angry when they can’t support their families and live in crowded conditions with no privacy. “There has also been a reversal in gender roles where women accept low-paying jobs which men consider below their status as the head of families. This has all fed into men’s feelings of inadequacy and to them taking their frustrations out on their female relatives.”

Khaled Abu Toameh, an Israeli Arab reporter with the Jerusalem Post, has recently written an account of how women are treated in Gaza. Hamas imposed strict rules on women after taking control in 2007. Women are required to wear veils, especially in offices and on college campuses. They can’t walk in public except with a male relative. They can’t smoke in a café. They are not allowed to use hairdressing salons owned by men. If mannequins displayed by retailers are shaped like women, they must be dressed modestly.

On the other hand, Gaza women can go to war. Abu Toameh reports that women are being recruited to take military training with the Nasser Eddin Brigades, a famous terrorist militia, known for helping capture the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and for blowing up an Israeli tank. So far, 40 Palestinian women have graduated from military training camps and another 40 are being taught. These women have the special privilege of being in the company of men who are not their close relatives.

If many Palestinian women believe they are unfairly treated, where can they turn for support? They might consider the UN Commission on the Status of Women, whose stated goal is to “promote gender equality and the empowerment of women.” Last month the commission passed just one political resolution, sponsored by Palestine and South Africa. It declared, to no one’s surprise, that Israel is responsible for unequal treatment of women. That was a logical position. Israel must be guilty in that case, since the UN has already declared Israel guilty in all other violations of human rights.