

# Women in the Palestinian Revolution

*In anticipation of International Women's Day, we interviewed Samira Salah, Central Committee member of the PFLP and head of its women's organization. A mother of three children, she participates actively in women's activities on the Arab and international level. We asked Samira about the situation of Palestinian women in general, the General Union of Palestinian Women and the Palestinian Womens Organization of the PFLP. The following is based on our interview with her.*



Samira Salah at WIDF conference

## **The reality of the women's situation in the Palestinian liberation struggle**

The struggle of the Palestinian women, especially in the occupied territories, cannot be separated from the political struggle and the struggle in unions. Palestinian women suffer a compound form of oppression: economic and social as well as national. This is especially so in the occupied territories. Meanwhile, they participate in institutions whose role is to liberate them economically, socially and politically.

When discussing Palestinian women as distinct from Arab women, we should also keep in mind the following: Ever since 1948, Palestinian women have suffered the consequences of war, massacres, migration and occupation. This forced many to shoulder total responsibility for preserving the family. Circumstances demanded that the woman become the provider, a role historically assumed by the male, in addition to the burdens of domestic duties and motherhood. This added responsibility had the positive aspect of developing the character of the Palestinian woman as contrasted with Arab women as a whole. Secondly, participation in daily struggle through the Palestinian revolution gave her a distinct militant character. Thirdly, the ideologies that were introduced via the Palestinian revolution made her more aware of her rights as a woman and hastened the process of her becoming politically conscious.

If we look at women's participation in the struggle as such, it is relatively small. Yet compared to women in other Arab countries, we find it is very advanced. Palestinian women have participated in all fields of struggle, even the highest form, armed struggle. They have carried arms, planted mines, gotten arrested, etc. They have reached the same level as men, though on a smaller scale, because of the circumstances women live under.

Naturally we are constantly striving to upgrade women's struggle, because in the end it all goes towards advancement of the Palestinian revolution. The more women are liberated socially and economically, the more they are able to adhere to our people's cause and play an active role. Women's con-

sciousness and economic independence are a help to the revolution's advance. The slogan «Man and woman, side by side in the battle of liberation» has been applied in practice, but it has its ups and downs. The more the revolution advances, the more women's participation is boosted. The reverse is also true. Women being the weakest link, are the most affected by any slowdown in the revolution. In a phase of retreat, the progress of women is most affected. In phases of advance, their progress is not as quick as that of men, because of the backward social situation.

## **Obstacles to women's liberation**

The family is the main obstacle. Backward social customs hinder women from expressing themselves freely. Anyone who oversteps the social boundaries is considered to be deviating from tradition and norms which we inherited from our grandfathers. The woman's movement is restricted, because she always remains under the guardianship of her father, brother and husband. Her liberation is therefore necessarily linked with theirs.

A second factor is the woman herself. She is not convinced of her importance and ability to play an active role. She has been brought up to view herself as the society does, as the weaker sex. She is used to remaining at home. Her thoughts are limited to bringing up children, cooking, etc. She has been brought up to believe that men are responsible for making decisions, even over her own life. She lacks confidence in her ability to contribute, despite the fact that she is always giving. She bears the children that become heroes and martyrs for Palestine. That is basically her role in the society - to give. When women become conscious of the importance of their status as the giver, they will become aware that they are important. There are many subjective factors which affect women and limit their self-confidence.

In this context we can appreciate the role of the woman vanguard whose task is to mobilize the potentials of women by bolstering their confidence. Looking farther ahead, to after liberation, we will be faced with the task of building a new society. This will not be just the men's task. Women must be up to this task, and preparation must start now.

Another factor affecting women is the infiltration of western culture into the Arab world. This affects the process of women's liberation negatively, because it emphasizes things like fashion and make-up, projecting the woman as a commodity. We reject the television commercials projecting women as commodities or promoting other commodities. It is not only backwardness which is an obstacle to women's liberation. The invasion of western culture diverts from women's basic national and social cause. The reaction to imperialist ideas is either to be completely carried away and blinded by western