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ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

The role of youth and women in the peaceful resolution of the question of Palestine

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

PLENARY I

The situation of youth and women in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem

Paper presented by

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Distinguished Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established in 1949. Nearly five million Palestine refugees, descendants of those who fled Palestine in 1948 subsequent to the Arab-Israeli conflict, live now in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. For over six decades, UNRWA has played an essential role in providing vital services for the well-being, human development and protection of Palestine refugees, pending the just political resolution of the refugee question.

Among UN agencies, UNRWA is unique in delivering services directly to beneficiaries through its 30,000 local staff, half of which are female. UNRWA provides education, health, relief and social services, microfinance, emergency assistance as well as infrastructure and camp improvement in all fields of operation. Over the past 60 years, UNRWA’s assistance to Palestine refugees has undergone considerable transformation in response to changing needs and political contexts.

Before presenting some of the current challenges and programmatic responses in more detail, let me point out one key achievement of UNRWA that is linked to both, women and youth: As you might know, UNRWA is running one of the largest school systems in the Middle East, teaching half a million children in 700 schools, and employing currently 19,000 teachers. Already in the 1960s, UNRWA schools became the first in the region to achieve full gender equality. In UNRWA’s schools today, fifty per cent of the students are female. Our vision is to provide quality education for Palestine refugees, girls and boys alike, so that they can achieve their full potential, individually, as a member of a local and global community, and become active and productive residents in social, economic and cultural life.

Let me point out that UNRWA does not only strive to further equity and quality in our schools. UNRWA adopted a Gender Policy in 2007, which emphasises UNRWA’s commitment to gender equality as a strategy to advance development, peace and security for the Palestine refugees through a twin track strategy associating gender mainstreaming with interventions that address the gender gaps in participation and access to the services provided by the Agency.

Furthermore UNRWA’s Medium Term Strategy 2010 – 2015 promotes gender equality as a key area; and UNRWA’s Gender Mainstreaming Strategy defines the levers that will ensure the gender-sensitive provision of all UNRWA services to beneficiaries. These levers are building a structure for change, capacity building, outreach and gender sensitive programming.

All our programmes undertook gender analysis and defined gender mainstreaming strategies with operational gender action plans.
What does gender mainstreaming in our programmes mean, concretely? It means that we are assessing and addressing the specific needs of women and men, boys and girls in our programmes, in all areas and at all levels, including gender sensitive human resource management.

Let me give you three examples:

1. In our health programme, we pay particular attention to reproductive health. UNRWA runs preconception care and family planning programmes and we are working on including men in all of this. To this aim the Health Department put in place, technical guidance and management protocols on including men in pre-conception care and family planning.

2. In our microfinance programme, UNRWA strives for equal access to loans. The Microfinance Department offers Women’s Household Credits, a loan aimed specifically to be practical and appealing to women. In 2011, UNRWA’s Microfinance Department has made almost forty per cent of loans to women in Gaza, Jordan, Syria and West Bank. This represents a significant increase by 27 per cent on 2010.

3. UNRWA’s Cash for Work Programme in the West Bank targets the most vulnerable of Palestine refugees and provides short-term job opportunities. Female participation in the programme has exceeded expectations, with an impressive over 40 per cent of beneficiaries being women. Furthermore, in West Bank we are introducing new professions and training opportunities for women. Examples include photography, accounting, banking and financial management courses as well as courses in food processing as a response to identified market needs, especially in the Jordan valley area.

In addition to mainstreaming gender across all our programmes, UNRWA also embarked on interventions specifically targeting women. Please allow me to underline the complexity of socio-economic factors and gender issues in the example of Gaza, with a refugee population of 1.2 million, representing over 80 per cent of the population.

As you are aware, the Israeli blockade on Gaza has halted exports and cut jobs, destabilising the local economy and increasing poverty. The effects of the blockade on families include soaring numbers of domestic violence. A recent PCBS\(^1\) study (March 2012) points out that in 2011 domestic violence amounted to an alarming 51% in Gazan families (nearly 30% in West Bank). Almost 15 per cent of Gazan women are exposed to sexual abuse, and a staggering three-quarters experience psychological abuse. With the majority of Gazan women being Palestine refugees, UNRWA has taken action to address

\(^1\) PCBS violence survey: http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/el3onfNewenglish.pdf
their safety through education and support for women, men and the entire family. In 2011, functional referral systems were not only set up in Gaza, where the situation is particular worrying, but in all of UNRWA fields of operations to detect violence against women and refer victims to appropriate support services. Since the establishment of these referrals 1044 survivors of gender based violence were detected and accessed services.

Let me point out another project in Gaza which we consider of high importance: With unemployment rates being particularly high among young women, UNRWA in Gaza launched the Young Women Leaders Programme in 2011. This programme provides young female graduates with the skills needed by the labour market in Gaza, and links them up with potential employers, such as businesses or NGOs. So far, almost 200 young talented female graduates received training complementing their university education, such as advanced IT training, project planning, management, and English. The programme fosters a sense of leadership, giving participants the confidence and means to be active residents and actors of change.

It was also a young woman from Gaza, the 22 years old Yasmeen Rabah, who opened UNRWA’s Engaging Youth Conference that was held in March in Brussels. For the first time, UNRWA had gathered stakeholders – world leaders such as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Lady Ashton, and 24 young refugee representatives from Gaza, West Bank, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan – to discuss the needs, hopes and aspirations of Palestine refugee youth in a changing Middle East. The 24 young refugee representatives’ enthusiasm, intelligence and eagerness for change impressed us all. There was a widespread consensus among host and donor countries, private partners, NGOs and UN agencies on the need to work with and for Palestine refugee youth.

UNRWA listened to what the youth representatives had to say. The youth representatives were so convincing that we did not only decide that youth will be the special focus for this year, but also committed ourselves in the so-called “10 Youth Commitments” to do more with and for Palestine refugee youth.

As you know, young people have been at the forefront of change in the Middle East, and their voices must be listened to. The current generation of Palestine refugee youth – we adopted the age range of 15-29 – is the largest in history. Youth account for 30 per cent of the registered Palestine refugee population, and is growing at an unprecedented rate. There is no doubt that UNRWA must engage with youth as they are the future human capital and source of productivity and a potential positive force for change in their respective societies.

UNRWA’s youth initiative is not about starting specific new youth programmes. Our main programmes already reach out to Palestine refugee youth. Just to give you a few examples:
As stated before, UNRWA is a significant force in the education of young Palestine refugee girls and boys, as education is widely recognized as the most fundamental form of empowerment. Young Palestine refugees are also included in our health programme, which provides for free primary health care; and they are also benefitting from our Cash for Work Programme or food aid, should they be in need for it. At the March conference, the 24 Palestine refugee youth representatives did not ask for the expansion of UNRWA services, such as more food aid or more health services. What the Palestine refugee youth asked for is that UNRWA adopts a more meaningful and effective approach to addressing youth concerns in our programmes, particularly in view of employment, capacity building and – importantly – youth participation. In other words: The Palestine refugee youth asked for opportunities so that they can achieve their full potential.

Allow me to briefly look at the 10 UNRWA Youth Commitments which were endorsed by the UNRWA Commissioner General in March:

1. The first 4 youth commitments build on what UNRWA is already doing in the fields of 1. education, 2. health, 3. vocational training and 4. microfinance. In the microfinance programme, for example, we aim at increasing lending to young refugee entrepreneurs to give them what is often beyond their reach: Their first loan to start a business. For the 3. commitment, vocational training, we aim at introducing more short-term courses, driven by labour market demands.

2. Our 5th commitment is about scholarships. We will better connect students to scholarship opportunities, as poverty is hindering Palestine refugees’ access to higher education. UNRWA wishes that more youth have access to higher education, which is necessary in today’s job market.

3. The 6th commitment focuses on skills. An EU funded project on “Engaging Youth” in Syria has been uniquely successful in building the skills of young refugees and thus improved their employability and entrepreneurship opportunities. At the inception phase of the project in Syria in 2009, 56% of Palestinians between 15 and 24 were either unemployed or underemployed. To date, 14,000 youth have directly benefited from the programme’s activities in terms of academic and personal development, marketable vocational skills training and small business development. We are now looking into the possibility of expanding this project to other fields, such as Jordan, Gaza, West Bank and Lebanon.

4. The 7th and the 9th commitment focus on rights and participation. It will not surprise you when I say that both rights and participation – meaning giving youth a say in operational or strategic matters – are fundamental but very complex issues. Together with the American University of Beirut, we are currently exploring first steps in view of a pilot participatory approach with Palestine refugee youth. When it comes to rights, we mean that we will be advocating more
clearly and specifically for the rights important to young refugees, such as the right to education, the right to work and the right to freedom of movement. We want youth to have the opportunities they deserve and to be able to seize them. The first and most concrete action will be taken in Gaza where UNRWA will strengthen its youth protection and advocacy.

5. Our 8th and 10th commitment is about partnerships and communication. UNRWA will build new alliances and strengthen our network with NGOs, the private sector the UN system and others involved in youth. As a first step, a workshop took place already in May with private and non for profit partners working with youth. We will also enhance direct communication between us and our young stakeholders including through new media and social networking, and are working on a campaign which includes partnerships with youth media outlets.

I hope I could give you a very brief overview on current challenges and initiatives taken by UNRWA in the field of gender and youth. Let me conclude to reiterate that Palestine refugees cannot depend on UNRWA efforts alone.

Whilst the search for a political solution of the refugee question is what is needed most - as there is no humanitarian or developmental solution to a political problem - UNRWA relies on our partners so that we can continue to engage in ways that promote initiative, change, ownership and participation so that Palestine refugees can achieve their full potential.

Thank you.