

Women, Leadership, State, and Society
An International Conference Sponsored by the Al-Quds/Brandeis Partnership
Sunday, 3 May 2009
At Al-Quds University, Abu-Dis Campus, East Jerusalem
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Almost a century ago, a Massachusetts poet wrote that “the rising of the women means the rising of the [human] race,” yet women have not yet achieved full equality either in the United States or in Palestine. Recognizing the critical role of universities in fostering gender justice in both the academy and the larger society, the Al-Quds/Brandeis partnership chose Women and Leadership as the subject for its international conference. Organized by a team of faculty from both institutions under the leadership of Dr. Fadwa Allabadi, Director of the Insan Center for Gender and Women’s Studies at Al-Quds and Prof. Sue Lanser, past chair of the Brandeis Women’s and Gender Studies Program, **“Women, Leadership, State, and Society”** offered an intense day-long exploration of the achievements, possibilities, challenges, and strategies for women’s leadership in Palestinian education, government, community-based organizations, and civil society.

Structured to combine national and global perspectives and to blend expertise with participation, the conference featured three plenary sessions, each pairing a Palestinian and non-Palestinian speaker; two sets of concurrent sessions allowing for smaller-group interaction, and a final discussion session capped by a poetry reading by Iman Hammad of An-Najah National University. The first plenary session, “Changing the Face of Government,” featured Drude Dahlerup of Stockholm University, an expert on gender in electoral systems worldwide, and a discussion of women’s leadership in the Palestinian Authority by Zahira Kamal, former Minister of Women’s Affairs and currently Director of UNESCO’s Palestinian Women’s Research and Documentation Center in Ramallah.

A second session focused on law, family, and rights brought together Anita Hill of Brandeis University, speaking about the legal and political implications of issues such as sexual harassment that cross public and private boundaries, and Khuloud Khayyat Dajani of Al-Quds University offering a model for conceptualizing women’s agency in the context of social change. In our final plenary session, “The Politics of the Possible,” Islah Jad of Birzeit University presented

the experience of the Birzeit Institute for Women's Studies as a mechanism for political action, while

Mari Fitzduff of Brandeis, an expert in co-existence, offered an experience of "parallel politics" by showing how women in Northern Ireland were able to cross political barriers and foster peace in ways that were not available to the men engaged in a polarized struggle.

Interspersed with these larger sessions were workshops exploring issues of law and legislation, university leadership, theories and practices of leadership, culture and religion, political factors in women's leadership, and the role of classrooms in fostering leadership. Together these sessions addressed social, cultural, and political factors that facilitate or impede women's leadership and considered the particular role that universities can play in advancing women's status. There was strong consensus among those present that the quality of presentations in all the sessions was uniformly high, that the young people in attendance were particularly engaged, and that excitement among those who attended was palpable.

No report, of course, can capture the spirit of a successful conference: the intensity of give-and-take, the mix of voices and viewpoints. We were fortunate that the more than 150 women and men present included a lively range of Al-Quds students, faculty from several universities in the region and in the United States., and members of non-governmental organizations within and outside Palestine. Every session stimulated conversation that ended only because of time constraints, as members of the audience debated issues of both substance and strategy: barriers to women's empowerment; workable means for making change; relationships between family and public life; ways to address divisions and divergences within communities; the role of Palestinian women in political struggles.

Those of us gathered at Abu-Dis on May 3 did not, of course, reach solutions or even consensus on these thorny topics. But we believe that the intense focus on women and leadership, the excellent presentations, and the opportunities for conversation across age, gender, occupation and nationality advanced the potential for Palestinian women in all walks of life to be full partners in progress. The presentations themselves will soon be available on our website, generating the possibility of a continuing, electronic conversation across time and place. We hope you will add your voice to this endeavor.