



CEPPS/IRI West Bank-Gaza Quarterly Report: January 1 – March 31, 2005
West Bank-Gaza: Women's Empowerment Project/ MIFTAH
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I. SUMMARY:

In cooperation with the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), IRI is imparting important leadership, political, and communications skills to Palestinian women. IRI and MIFTAH have initiated Phase II of the Women's Empowerment Project to address the gender deficit in local politics by developing a support network for Palestinian women interested in assuming a more prominent role in public life. Building upon the success of the first phase of the project, Phase II more intensively supports prospective women candidates who intend to run for local and/or national office in the coming year. The primary vehicle for this support is nine local Women's Electoral Support Points (WESPs), which provide ongoing support, training, and consultations for women candidates, as well as facilitate networking, media contacts, and community outreach.

In an effort to support Palestinian women leaders and help them develop core skills for successful electoral and advocacy campaigns, IRI and MIFTAH staffed the nine WESPs with qualified personnel to provide decentralized services to the population in their respective cities and towns, a crucial component given the difficulty of traveling between areas in the West Bank and Gaza. The WESPs (located in Jenin, Tulkarem, Nablus, Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem and North, Central, and South Gaza) offer ongoing access to resources desperately needed by women to effectively achieve some level of parity in the Palestinian political environment.

In the first quarter of the project, WESP coordinators initiated voter registration, awareness-raising, and initial candidate support for municipal elections. In the second quarter of the project, the coordinators at the WESPs worked intensively with candidates to prepare them for the first round of municipal council elections, held on December 23, 2004, in 26 municipalities throughout the West Bank, and on January 27, 2005, in 10 municipalities in Gaza. In early December, just weeks before the election, an amendment was passed to the local elections law which set aside two seats for women in every elected council (where women were running). WESP coordinators worked individually and collectively in eight locations with over 80 women candidates; 15 of these women won seats in local councils in the West Bank and five won seats in Gaza.

During the current quarter, IRI staff and volunteer trainer Brian Berry conducted intensive, two-day trainings in Ramallah, Nablus, and Gaza for nearly 60 prospective women candidates who intend to run in Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections tentatively scheduled for July 17, 2005. The trainings addressed topics including campaign planning and strategy, message development, and voter outreach. Attendees included women leaders who are heads of non-government organizations (NGOs), government employees, university professors, lawyers, and medical doctors. Despite the fact that the women have proven track records of service to the community, all will have to overcome persistent traditional attitudes about the role of women. They will also face stiff competition as power struggles between the old and young guards of Palestinian leadership come to the fore.

II. BACKGROUND:

The call to reform Palestinian governing institutions is not a new one, yet following the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in November 2004, and the Palestinian Presidential election in early January 2005, there is a sense of urgency and optimism among the Palestinian public. The political dynamics in the West Bank and Gaza have shifted and key issues of reform, transparency, elections, and citizen participation that have been debated for years – but sidelined by entrenched political interests – have now surfaced. This transition has given rise to new opportunities for political change that must be capitalized upon, and in this process women can and should play a greater role in shaping the direction of Palestinian political discourse.

The challenges that women face to become more fully integrated into the political process and to assume positions of real decision-making authority are still significant. In January 1996, 676 candidates stood for the Palestinian Legislative Council elections. Despite comprising 42% of the electorate and polling data that showed significant levels of support for women's participation in elected office, only 27 women ran for the Council with five eventually attaining office. According to the head of the Jerusalem Center for Women, speaking in February 1996, the poor showing by women in the elections was due as much to “financial restrictions” and “the constituency system” as it was to “the patriarchal nature of society which bars women from decision-making positions.” Before the current round of municipal elections began, Palestinian women faced similar constraints and held only 22 of 3,439 local council seats – barely more than half of a percentage point.

While the situation for Palestinian women has certainly improved since 1996, many of the obstacles cited still remain paramount. Palestinian women have made great strides in advancing their political agenda and achieving a quota for women in locally elected bodies, yet considerable barriers still exist to broader participation beyond the elite. Addressing this issue must equip women with the skills and the self-confidence to become elected representatives and also challenge traditional attitudes that still question women's political leadership. In this crucial period of transition, and with the promise of Palestinian legislative elections on the horizon, the integration of women in the political arena has never been more important.

The women's rights community has been actively working to expand the space for women's leadership, and the first round of municipal council elections held in December/January in 36 municipalities offered women candidates their first opportunity to test the new political waters. In a remarkable victory for women activists and the National Committee for the Promotion of Women in Elections a long-fought battle resulted in a quota that allocates two

seats for women (where women are running) on every council, resulting in 72 elected women in the councils (52 in the West Bank and 20 in Gaza). While imperfect, the quota will help overcome traditional barriers to women's political participation, and those elected will prove critics that women can, and should, contribute equally. Local elections demonstrated Palestinians' commitment to the democratic process with over 81% of the 144,000 eligible voting in this election; of whom 49% of the voters were women.

The remaining rounds of municipal council elections are due to be completed by December 2005. While the political and security environment pose significant challenges for the potential impact of such elections, local elections offer a tangible goal and may help build momentum for broader reform efforts. Since traditional norms – particularly in small towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza – still threaten women's ability to become public leaders, local elections offer a unique opportunity for women to challenge these notions, present themselves as viable candidates, and enter the political playing field.

At the same time, preparations are underway for the Palestinian Legislative Council elections, scheduled for July 17, 2005. Civil society groups, political parties, academics, and key decision-makers have been working together and with PLC members to make substantive changes to the 1995 Elections Law that will govern the conduct of PLC elections. There are several significant issues that remain unresolved, such as the mixed proportional representation system, the minimum age for candidates, and the inclusion of a quota for women for the legislative council. Nonetheless, national elections will offer the first opportunity for competition on a large scale between mainstream political parties, the Islamic opposition, and independent candidates.

While the timing, administration, and legal framework governing legislative elections are still being negotiated, prospective women candidates are positioning themselves to launch campaigns. The National Committee for the Promotion of Women in Elections continues to actively lobby for the inclusion of a 20% quota for seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Whether such a quota is adopted before elections or not, it is clear that dozens, if not hundreds, of women will present themselves as candidates for PLC electoral races – whether on party lists, as independents, or as district candidates –and will achieve a greater level of representation for women in Palestine's most important institution.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES:

In anticipation of PLC elections – due to the announcement of local council elections in December and the postponement of legislative elections—efforts this quarter were dually aimed at identifying and training candidates running in the next round of local elections scheduled for May 8, as well as women intending to run in PLC elections scheduled for July 17. In anticipation of legislative council elections, IRI staff and volunteer trainer Brian Berry in late February and early March conducted campaign-planning training in Ramallah, Nablus, and Gaza for nearly 60 women candidates who intend to run for PLC seats.

In addition to candidate support through workshops and trainings, the WESP coordinators also provided detailed and accurate information to all candidates and women's groups in the different localities related to local, presidential, and national elections (processes for candidacy, voting validity, registration process, etcetera). MIFTAH produced and distributed leaflets written in simple, gender-sensitive language to all coordinators and candidates to help educate the community about new procedures and requirements.

Candidate Identification and Training:

Municipal Council Elections

The first part of this quarter witnessed the first round of local elections held in the Gaza Strip in 10 municipalities. Based on women candidates' success in the first round of municipal council elections in the West Bank and the introduction of the women's quota, at the last minute an additional number of women announced their candidacies for municipal elections in Gaza held on January 27, 2005. In response, MIFTAH identified a local trainer to conduct intensive, two-day training sessions focusing on campaign planning. The trainings, held January 10-12, included 19 candidates from Central and Northern Gaza and 10 candidates from Southern Gaza. IRI provided training materials, group exercises, sample agendas, and other support for these local trainings.

In order to provide the candidates with media skills training, MIFTAH also partnered with the Heinrich Boel Foundation and a German media specialist, Ina Fuchs, to train candidates on media communication and public speaking. One round of this training took place on January 11 in Central Gaza with 21 candidates in attendance; a second training with 12 attendees was held the following day in Southern Gaza.

Despite the last-minute entrance of new candidates and Hamas' decision to utilize the women's quota to gain greater weight on the councils, MIFTAH was able to work with a number of candidates over a very short period of time to help strengthen their campaigns. Of the women candidates that ran in the Gaza municipal elections, 34 had participated in MIFTAH activities – whether workshops, training, or individual consultations – and five of these won seats on councils. After the election, MIFTAH organized a gathering for the women candidates to offer congratulations on their campaigns, identify ongoing challenges, and strategize for future efforts.

In February, MIFTAH staff and WESP coordinators began working to prepare women candidates for the second round of local council elections scheduled for May. Once the municipalities for the second round of local elections were announced, WESP coordinators contacted local women leaders, representatives of the Local Elections High Committee, and political party representatives in order to begin identifying qualified women who would be interested and willing to run in each of the 55 localities. The coordinators initiated a thorough process of identifying and selecting qualified women candidates that would receive support from this project.

Since this year's municipal elections represented the first time local councils would be elected in Palestinian areas since 1972, there was a great deal of misinformation about the requirements to be elected to a local council and the mandate of the council itself. In order to equip women with the knowledge and confidence to seek representation on their local council, the WESP coordinators helped educate potential candidates and other women leaders about the mandate, roles, and responsibilities of the local councils. To that end, the WESP coordinators organized a series of workshops held throughout March entitled, "Women, Municipalities and Development". These workshops invited the current appointed members of the local councils to share their experiences and discuss the following topics:

- Role of the municipalities in development and the type of services to be provided;
- The decision-making process in municipalities and the problems that appointed women faced; and

- Women’s contribution and expected role in municipal councils.

Due to ongoing confusion regarding the quota amendment to the electoral law governing local elections, an additional educational workshop dealing with the specific topic was held in Hebron in late March. MIFTAH organized another two-day training session on electoral campaign planning that was held in Bethlehem on March 29-30. Fifteen women attended the training, 12 of whom will run in upcoming local elections. At present, WESP coordinators are utilizing local trainers to organize campaign planning trainings and communication skills training before the campaign period begins.

PLC Elections

In late January, IRI and MIFTAH began working to identify the group of women candidates for PLC elections that would receive support through this project. Through pre-existing contacts, new outreach, and women's networks, WESP coordinators identified a core group of approximately 60 women leaders who intend to run for parliamentary elections that would work consistently with MIFTAH in the pre-election period. These potential candidates were selected on the basis of several criteria: their commitment to women's rights and service to the community, their commitment to the democratic process, and their likelihood of winning the election. Once these prospective candidates were identified, the WESP coordinators used questionnaires to conduct an initial needs assessment and evaluation to identify strengths and weakness. Based on this information, IRI and MIFTAH staff developed a strategy and timeline for assistance and skills training.

It is important to mention that since the electoral law has yet to be approved, and therefore political parties have not finalized their candidate lists, many women are unwilling to formally announce their intention to run or firmly commit to their candidacy. The women with whom MIFTAH and IRI are working have all indicated their desire to enter PLC elections, but some may not be included on their party's list and may choose not to run as an independent. In an effort to ease women’s and party concerns, MIFTAH has conducted its meetings under the framework of supporting women “activists,” rather than women “candidates.”

In order to build the capacity of potential PLC-election candidates, in late February and early March, IRI Staff and volunteer trainer Brian Berry conducted three two-day training sessions on electoral campaign planning. The first session took place in Ramallah on February 24-25, and targeted 20 potential candidates and leaders from Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron. The second session, with 14 attendees, was held in Nablus on February 27-28, and targeted women from the Northern West Bank. The third and final training was held in Gaza City on March 2-3 and drew 21 participants. Topics addressed in the training included:

- Identifying community issues
- Message development and sub-message development
- Crafting a campaign strategy and tactics
- Identifying communication strategies

The trainings elicited positive feedback, with several women expressing greater confidence that they could run and win in the July elections. In addition, the trainings offered an important opportunity for women activists from different fields and political orientation to come together during these trainings. Many of women, while familiar with each other by

name and reputation do not often have venues to discuss and strategize about the best way to overcome common obstacles. The coordinators and participants noted that this was an integral part of the training experience. Participants also requested future training on the following topics: intensive media skills training, coalition-building and networking, time management, and fundraising strategies.

In direct response to feedback that lack of financial resources presents one of the most serious challenges to their campaigns, in late March MIFTAH organized four group meetings in Ramallah, Nablus, Gaza, and Jerusalem to brainstorm on creative strategies that candidates could employ before and during their official campaigns to raise funds. Drawing upon the wealth of experience among the potential candidates themselves working in government institutions and civil society organizations, the participants developed a list of fundraising ideas, including organizing charitable dinners and concerts as well as seeking assistance from businessmen, firms, and various interest groups. Because many women fail to see the efficacy of fundraising in the Palestinian context, the candidates also requested additional assistance on the part of MIFTAH:

- To help facilitate meetings with businessmen, firms, and chambers of commerce to discuss financial support of potential women candidates.
- To conduct a feasibility study to assess necessary resources (money, materials, people) for a typical campaign.

Individual Candidate Support

In addition to workshops and formal training session, WESP coordinators devote considerable time and energy to provide candidates with guidance and consultation on an ongoing basis to encourage, sustain, and strengthen their campaigns. WESP coordinators conducted meetings with individual candidates to review campaign strategies and messages and draft a timeline and outreach plan. Through contact by phone and in person, the coordinators provided the following support for both municipal council and PLC candidates:

- Updating candidates continuously on changes to the electoral law, new procedures, and developments from the Ministry of Local Government, the Local Elections Commission, and the Central Elections Commission.
- Connecting candidates with legal aid organizations and the Local Elections High Committee in order to answer questions related to registration procedures and regulations as well as assist with any difficulties encountered during the campaign.
- Lobbying of political parties to nominate qualified women candidates with the potential of winning (in some locations political parties contacted MIFTAH coordinators seeking recommendations for women whom they could support).
- Facilitating and ensuring candidates' participation in election-related activities (public meetings, debates, and workshops) organized by other organizations (such as the Women's Affairs Technical Committee and Civic Forum).
- Providing a space for candidates to introduce themselves in the local media through TV programming (especially at Al-Fajer and Al-Farah TV stations), in addition to arranging interviews for a number of candidates to be broadcast on some satellite channels.
- Helping to identify and secure sources of financial assistance to cover the fee required to register as a candidate.

Advocacy

In addition to the work of the WESPs, MIFTAH staff and leadership also continued to actively participate in two important civil society coalitions: the National Committee for the Promotion of Women in Elections and the Civil Society Committee for The Follow-Up of the Elections Law, which channels the concern of civil society organizations on issues related to local and national-level elections. During the quarter, MIFTAH was actively involved with advocacy efforts aimed at passage of the quota amendment to the electoral law governing local elections. As a member of the Civil Society Committee for the Follow-Up of the Elections Law, MIFTAH:

- Joined in the publication of a statement in support of a mixed proportional system and the introduction of a women's quota for local and national bodies. The statement was printed in newspapers for three days in early January.
- Developed a statement and collected signatures from organizations and political parties and figures in support of a mixed proportional system to be published in the daily newspapers on the day of the second reading of the proposed electoral law.

Over the next few weeks, the PLC will consider and debate the proposed changes to the electoral law, and MIFTAH will continue to be involved with the Committee as it plays a key role in advocating procedures that strengthen democratic practices and even the playing field for women and independent candidates.

V. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Result #1 The establishment of a network of women's leadership centers in major Palestinian population centers to encourage the increased participation of women in politics and decision-making positions;

Indicator #1: Women's Electoral Support Points (WESPs) are operational in the following areas: Ramallah, Jerusalem/Jericho, Jenin, Hebron, Nablus, Bethlehem, Tulkaram/Qalqilia, North/Central Gaza, and South Gaza.

Indicator #2: Decentralized WESP offices established in the primary population centers address the reality of travel restrictions between and within the West Bank and Gaza by allowing for direct support of women leaders by the local coordinators.

Result #2 The institutional capacity of civil society organizations is strengthened to provide continued support for women's leadership and political activism;

Indicator #1: MIFTAH has assumed a coordination role among the WESPs to ensure consistent communication, reporting, and assistance mechanisms, which strengthens MIFTAH's internal organizational capacity.

Indicator #2: The presence of MIFTAH coordinators at the WESPs helps extend the grassroots reach of MIFTAH into more rural, marginalized communities of women.

Result #3 Technical assistance and training is extended to Palestinian women seeking to enhance leadership skills, develop political expertise, and prepare for local and national electoral campaigns;

Indicator #1: WESP coordinators worked intensively with 34 women candidates to help them prepare for the complementary first round of municipal elections held in 10 municipalities in Gaza. Of these, five women won seats in their local councils.

Indicator #2: WESP coordinators have identified a core group of women candidates to support for the next round of municipal council elections and upcoming Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections and are providing individualized and group support through consultations, skills training, workshops and discussion groups.

Indicator #3: In order to build the capacity of potential PLC-election candidates, IRI staff and volunteer trainer Brian Berry conducted three two-day training sessions on campaign planning, message development, and media communication for more than 50 women leaders in the West Bank and Gaza.