

Israeli Organization Empowers Palestinian, Israeli Arab and Druze Women

Haifa's Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center promotes peace and the human rights of women in the Palestinian, Israeli Arab and Druze communities.

Under the auspices of MASHAV—Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation—Mazal Renford has worked to promote the cause of both Palestinian and Israeli Arab women. In her capacity as director of the training center, Renford has made great strides to this end.

Speaking to participants at the Stand With Us International Women's Conference, Renford discussed her work to "bring Israelis and Palestinians together," which involves frequent consultations with Palestinian women from Judea and Samaria.

"If we educate for peace, maybe one day we will enjoy it," Renford said.

As "a city of peaceful coexistence," where Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze and Baha'is live side by side, Renford believes Haifa is the ideal location for her work. Renford's organization was founded on former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir's belief that "women weren't taken into consideration in the process of development," despite their pivotal importance.

In this regard, Renford emphasizes that "Israel has been a pioneer in promoting" women's development, with the training center providing Palestinian women an opportunity to "come, learn how to set up a business, and stand up for their rights."

Vered Sawied, a former mayor of Netanya who is presently working for the prime minister's office as an adviser for social and welfare issues, notes that while Israeli Jewish women often struggle to find the right balance between work and family, "the situation in Arab society is more difficult." For this reason, explains Sawied, Israel set up an authority to provide jobs for Arabs as well as specific scholarships for Arab women seeking to enter the high-tech profession.

Hiba Zaidan, a young Druze Ph.D. student, credits Israeli professors and her family with helping her advance. She claims that in Druze society, it is considered taboo for a woman to drive, go to school or even leave the village without an escort. This has created major problems for Druze women who wish to work and study outside the village.

However, Zaidan also emphasizes that Druze society is changing due to courageous and bold strides made by Druze women, with many of them now driving and studying to be teachers. She notes, however, that psychological research at the Ph.D. level is still very rare for Druze women.

"Lots of people in my village were against me getting a Ph.D.," she says, adding that her Israeli professors were very understanding of her situation and always offer her assistance.

Dr. Janan Faraj-Falah was the first Druze woman in Israel to receive her Ph.D. and today works as a lecturer at the University of Haifa as well as the Arab Academic College for Education. Her book *The Druze Woman* is widely acclaimed both in Israel and around the world as the first book to discuss the status of women in the Druze community. Additionally, she is the founder of the Women's Vision of Akko Foundation, which brings Jewish and Arab women together to work toward peace.

"I established this association to improve women's status and support peace," Dr. Faraj-Falah says. "Women bring life into

this world, so women can also bring peace.”

Some of her organization’s projects include constructing peace gardens in which Jewish and Arab children play, teaching Arabic to Jewish women and Hebrew to Arab women, and bringing both Jewish and Palestinian writers together for joint meetings. She emphasizes, “We will continue our march for peace and never give up.”

Her work is supported by Renford.

“Bringing Arabs and Jews together can make a big difference,” Renford says.