

I take this opportunity to express my thanks to the Swedish Christian Study Center and Hania for organizing this gathering on the occasion of The International Women's Day.

History is a witness to women's participation and struggle for rights to vote, and economic and social justice since time immemorial. In 1893, New Zealand became the first country to allow women to vote and in 1911, Clara Zetkin, a German woman pushed for the First conference on women's rights. Sadly enough, the UN recognized International Women's Day, only in 1975. In 1977, the General Assembly adopted a resolution inviting member states to proclaim a UN Day for women's rights and International Peace "in recognition of the fact that securing peace and social progress, and the fulfilling of human rights and fundamental freedoms require the active participation, equality and development of women. It also acknowledged the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security."

I have no doubt that there are many women in the audience who can speak more extensively on women's rights, democracy, the Beijing Women's Platform of 1995 or UN resolution 1325 that deals with the protection of women in areas of war or conflict, and about women's role in peace-building. There are among us pioneers who have relentlessly worked for the welfare of all in Jerusalem and the whole of Palestine, and there will always be with us special women who will keep working behind the scenes, sacrificing themselves, and who will silently eclipse from the limelight. My respect and admiration go out to each one of you, as directly or indirectly, you are contributing to preserving humanity by building a better world where justice and parity reign.

There is ample information on the beginnings and development of IWD on internet, and there are many events happening all over the world to-day. However, this gathering is a special occasion for us to unite and share our personal experiences, learn from each other and commit ourselves to meaningful change for ourselves, not only as women, but for the sake of the whole society and future generations.

It is not easy to speak after Um Johnny, the remarkable Georgette Rizek who has dedicated her life to the service of the residents of this city. I have humbly accepted to share some examples because of my obligation and love for Jerusalem, and its people. Today, I not only feel the threat, but also experience the concrete facts on the ground of an oppressive occupation that is trying to erase our culture and heritage by shaking the very foundations of our rootedness as a people. We, women, even if we remain unrecognized or sometimes marginalized, we remain essential and instrumental actors in the society. I will only speak of my experience as a woman of faith, a Palestinian, Armenian Christian who was given the opportunity to serve God and community as best as I could.

Though The Palestinian National Authority declared March 8, a paid official holiday for women workers only in 2006, we, Palestinian women (Christian or Muslim) have been struggling for our rights by taking the lead in various fields including education, health and social services, charitable organizations, as well as on the national level. For International Women's Day, yesterday's Arabic newspaper al-Quds focused on Palestinian women prisoners and their sacrifice. The study of the Ministry for Prisoners Affairs confirms that since 1967, about 150, 000 women have been incarcerated in Israeli prisons, the largest numbers being during the first intifada. Today, there remain 36 women (21 having been released lately), but it is important to remember that Israel has refused to hand over the remains of 7 martyred women killed since 1978.

The Palestinian woman is "Samida". She is steadfast and stands firm, amidst all travails. The Jerusalem woman, according to Dr. Ali Qleibo from Al Quds University, is "Mahyubeh," meaning fearsome. She has stature and imposes respect. Hundreds of names of devoted women challenging traditions and norms are documented in books or engraved in our minds. They are the beacons that guide us and empower us to act.

What was remarkable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the spirit that drove women to "serve," out of care, out of love, not counting hours or expecting monetary reward for overwork, sleepless nights and being exposed to dangerous

situations. Our country and Jerusalem needed us, and we were ready to give and give further.

As far as I can remember, I have always been part of voluntary work, but the 42 years of surviving an oppressive Israeli Occupation through women's groups, the church, and international organizations is an experience that has enriched my life. I hope that other women make the best of their gifts and talents to serve themselves and their own community. I have come to be known as a professional volunteer (My children gave me the title) but I must admit that had it not been for God's grace and the support of my family, in particular, my husband George, I could not have roamed the world as an advocate for the Palestinian Cause, nor as Christian witness working for justice and peace.

The following few examples illustrate the different ways in which we can become channels of peace and tools of empowerment and liberation. I have served the Armenian Apostolic Church through my representation in the World Day of Prayer Committee in Palestine and contributed with a wonderful team to the writing of the service for 1994 entitled "Go, See and Act". The havoc that it caused, especially in Germany was a challenge to us Palestinian Christian Women to spend hours and weeks discussing the basic principles of our faith based on the Crucifixion leading to a victorious Resurrection.

I have also served the Arab Orthodox Church as a member of the Cultural Committee of the Arab Orthodox Club in the 70s, and participated in the first Arab Orthodox Conference held in Jerusalem.

In the eighties, I volunteered my services at the Arab Rehabilitation Center for the handicapped (then in Bethlehem, now in Beit Jala ) with the help of my seven year-old daughter Natasha, whose eyes filled with tears of joy when a little girl was able to take a few steps by herself! For a few weeks, I was further blessed to help several potential physically handicapped artists at the Princess Basma Center on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem to create Christmas cards that generated income to the institution.

Moreover, I have been part of the International Family Planning and Parenthood Association, working to encourage women to maintain and develop their feminine rights in reproduction and health care. Following in my father's footsteps, I serve wholeheartedly in the National Association for the Visually Impaired in Beit Jala and the Library for the Blind in Jerusalem, demanding equal rights for all children created in the image of God.

It is amazing how much women can give!

I have been blessed in serving the community as a staff member in two local movements with international connections. I have been part of the YWCA, from a very young age, as a volunteer, a youth leader, a camp organizer, an art teacher and later as a Board member. But the challenge came as a staff member for fifteen years, while teaching Business English and coordinating programs. It was a privilege to infiltrate through business English all forms of moral values and interests in so many other subjects in a one year-course. These were the years of the First Intifada when we had to defend the students from the harassment of the soldiers and protect them from being imprisoned. My duties as a program coordinator enabled me to mix, work and learn from the courageous women in the refugee camps, learning to trust in God and persevere in the strife for a just peace. Sharing the joys and sorrows of the grassroots, organizing non-violent educational tools as promoting only local products, being part of over 150 women organizations and putting together art exhibits were all enriching experiences. As I was teaching, I gained immense knowledge on patience, tolerance, acceptance, resilience, and empowerment.

Both through the World Day of Prayer Committee and the YWCA, I understood the meaning of "it is a small world." It is because of my contacts in many countries, the participation in international conferences and speaking tours that I could fulfill my obligation as a woman asking for the inalienable rights of my people.

By joining the Palestinian Liberation Theology Movement that became to be known as "Sabeel", in 1993, I found myself on appropriate ground for a renewal in my journey of faith. Spiritually empowered, I could now serve better the ecumenical community, theologically, legally and morally. For 17

years I have walked the contemporary way of the cross of the Palestinian people with the certainty that suffering cannot last and that we have to seek justice and pursue it. Life is sacred and we have to preserve it. Steadfastness rooted in faith cannot but yield positive results.

In 1995, I became acquainted with the Christian Peacemakers, a pacifist group of international devoted people who arrived in Hebron to stand “in the way of conflict.” What a great witness of faith! Totally convinced of their mission, I readily accepted to serve on the International Steering Committee for the past three years.

God calls us to serve and work in strange paths and the small contributions we bring, when not for personal benefits, mould and enrich us, and lead to needed transformation. Through our work for maintaining Human Rights, we are still facing the challenges of dealing with forced marriages, reducing honour-based killings, rape and trafficking with women, not to mention, reducing and addressing domestic violence.

Theoretically, International Law, conventions and declarations of human rights are ideal binding regulations and measures, but practically, how often are they implemented to safeguard and protect the oppressed?

How do I see the future? What is the vision? Though not optimistic, I do not lose hope.

My message to all women and men to- day is:

Nobody can make you feel inferior unless you allow it. Chin up and push for your rights as the poor widow who kept pestering the unjust judge in the gospels until she got her rights.

Every woman can do more than I did if:

1. She has a genuine love and commitment to her country and community.
2. She recognizes her talents and develops her skills confidently but not obnoxiously.
3. She receives the support and encouragement of her loved ones and family.

4. She is involved in civil society and knows that individuals cannot live or work in seclusion.
5. She has faith and trusts in God

We are called to resist injustice and to live in liberty and with dignity.

How do we resist? The letter to the Ephesians states clearly in chapter 6: 14-17  
Take up the full armor of God... stand firm having girded your loins with truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace:

In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.

In closing, for those who have dreams, there are no limits or challenges that can deflect them from attaining and realizing them.