

Listen to the women of Palestine

Not a single female candidate was elected at Fatah's convention – it's time to let in the new ideas Palestinian women can bring



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As Fatah delegates [meeting in Bethlehem](#) elected their new leadership, one could not help but feel that despite the reshuffling of senior figures, the same old faces kept reappearing. Despite talk of reinvention and bringing in "new blood", patrimony and nepotism maintain the same tight grip over the Palestinian leadership – a nephew here, a PLO grandee there, outsiders not welcome. One thing that unites them all, even the newer faces, is that they are all middle-aged or older (even those described as "[young](#)"), and they are all male. Intissar al Wazir, the only woman on Fatah's 23-member central committee, has [lost her seat](#), leaving an all male leadership at the helm of the party that governs the West Bank, and that will also head up the Palestinian delegation to any US-led peace negotiations.

While Fatah seeks to reinvent itself, Hamas is continuing its propaganda offensive, championing itself as [a liberator of women](#), which is as galling as it is inaccurate. Last summer I was sent by [the Advocacy Project](#) to spend three months working in Ramallah with the [Women's Affairs Technical Committee](#) (WATC), a coalition of Palestinian women's NGOs that promotes women's political participation.

The many women activists I spoke to during [my time in the West Bank](#) paint a very different picture. Some women's organisations in Gaza have had their offices ransacked by Hamas security forces. One prominent activist told me, "One member of the [WATC] general assembly was attacked and she was threatened, and some of them, their cars were destroyed. Because they are strong and powerful. They are not afraid to speak. So this is to silence them." In a series of interviews I conducted with women activists, largely under condition of anonymity, many were outspoken in their opposition to Hamas, who they believe is using twisted interpretations of Islamic law to maintain and increase the oppression of women, but were afraid to speak out publicly for fear of retribution. WATC's lobbying efforts for more legal rights for women have taken a backseat since Hamas won the 2006 elections, and activists in Gaza report that existing laws are not being implemented, such as women's right to custody of young children after a divorce. "Our current political situation is going to destroy these [achievements](#)," one activist told me, "Especially since Hamas won the election, we were afraid that this would all be lost."

Meanwhile, Palestine's most famous female politician, Hanan Ashrawi, has announced her intention [to stand down](#) at the next election from her position in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Ashrawi, a long time advocate for peace, democracy and human

rights, assures us that "what you can count on me doing is supporting young women, young leaders – the new generation – to run for office".

So just what difference would it make to Palestinian politics if its senior ranks opened up to women? I asked many of the women I met in the West Bank what difference women's representation might make, and some common themes emerged. Most importantly, they hoped the lives of women would be improved, because seeing more women in power would change public perceptions about gender roles and because women legislators would do more to protect women from "honour" killings, domestic violence, early marriage and the many other problems they face. Polling data certainly indicates, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Palestinian women are more likely than their male counterparts to be concerned about women's rights.

Most of the activists I interviewed also believed that Palestinian women were less likely than men to support the use of political violence. As most public opinion polls on the conflict with Israel and Palestine's internal conflicts do not give results by gender, this is difficult to corroborate. However, women's organisations such as WATC have been actively involved in bringing Fatah and Hamas to the negotiating table, much as women in Northern Ireland played an important role as behind-the-scenes peacemakers. The International Women's Commission, composed of Israeli and Palestinian women leaders, have proven more willing negotiators than their male colleagues and found it easier to co-operate with each other. Indeed, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 gives women's groups the right to be involved in conflict resolution and recognises the valuable contribution they can make.

With public confidence in the two major political parties waning, and 32.9% of Palestinians saying they do not trust any of their leaders, it is clear that something has to change. The future of Palestinians, their society and the peace process depends upon new ideas and perspectives coming to the fore. It is high time Palestinian women were taken seriously and given a chance to demonstrate their ability to lead.