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The First Conference of the General Union of Palestinian, and Palestinian Women's Struggle in International Fora

I want to tell you about the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW). After a period of time, we were asked to organise a GUPW conference. The union was formed in Amman, but the first conference was held under the revolution in Beirut. We invited all the international women organisations. It was a big gathering and a very important event for Arab women revolutionaries; all Arab and international women's unions attended. During this conference, we had a disagreement with the leadership. At the time, the 10-point Programme had been put forward. We had always understood that liberation meant liberating Palestine from the river to the sea, through armed struggle, but the 10-point Programme proposed establishing a national authority on any territories we could liberate.² There was a big disagreement about it at the conference. I was one of the people who rejected the 'Gradualist Programme', and as a result, I was suspended from GUPW's leadership. Other Palestinian factions didn't agree with the Gradualist programme, especially the PFLP, which was powerful in Beirut and enjoyed great influence. In Beirut, you found not only Fateh and the Palestinian revolution, but also all Arab and international organisations; everyone who believed in liberating Palestine and in Arab progress had a presence in Beirut at the time. We felt that other parties, not just Fateh's leadership, had adopted the programme, and we struggled against it with all our might. At the conference, they suspended me, but I rejected the decision. I rented new offices for the GUPW's general secretariat, with help from the other factions and Fateh's leadership; the PFLP said they were ready to find us offices. We started working in the new offices and continued our struggle, maintaining contact with international women organisations.

At the time, we were observers in the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF). The previous GUPW leadership hadn't given this much thought, even though entering the WIDF would have given our cause and us an international audience. Two of us were invited to attend the WIDF conference. Our role was secondary, since we were only listeners. We noticed

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² The 10-point programme was adopted by the Twelfth Palestinian National Council in June 1974. Point two called for "the establishment of the independent fighting authority of the people on every part of Palestinian soil that is liberated".

that Europeans led the WIDF, and the conference programme included representatives from all the European countries, but only five representatives from the other five continents. The rest of the world wasn't represented. They all attended the conference, but they were listeners like us. I had an idea that I immediately discussed with Vilma Espín, the president of the Federation of Cuban Women and Raúl Castro's wife; she passed away from cancer last year. I asked her if she accepted the situation, and she asked me, "What situation?". I told her that we needed to participate, and that Asia, Africa, and Latin America were not contributing to the WIDF. I told her this was an opportunity to get an international forum for our struggle. She agreed, but back then they were politically attached to the Soviet Union, and therefore unable to make a political move without them. She suggested we discuss it with Valentina Tereshkova. We told Valentina that we wanted to participate, not just listen to the other countries and their points of view. We said it would be a great step forward in our international struggle. She consulted others. This was at night. Our delegation and the Cuban delegation worked all night drafting internal rules of procedure for the WIDF. We ignored the booklet the conference had drafted previously, and added representatives of all third world countries, especially those going through a period of national liberation. We included representatives of most national liberation organisations. We were voted into the WIDF, and I was elected vice president. It was an achievement we had never imagined.

Later on, the first international conference for women was held in Germany. It paved the way for the conference that would be organised by the United Nations at a later stage. Women from the entire world were there. I attended, and I was a member of the conference leadership committee. It was at this conference that our union was recognised internationally.

The GUPW's most important activities took place between 1975 and 1977. Our union was recognised by all the international organisations. This was followed by the first conference organised by the United Nations, which led to the creation of the United Nations committee for women. Initially, I represented GUPW on this committee, attending the first conference, but later on we had a permanent representative. The first conference, held in Mexico, voted unanimously to condemn Zionism as a racist movement. This was a stunning success. The world recognised that we are struggling against Zionism, which is oppressing us everywhere. A second conference was held in Copenhagen in 1980. Zionism had mobilised all its forces, especially after Sadat signed a peace agreement with Israel. Jehan Sadat was one of the main people who opposed us, along with the Israeli and American delegations. When it was Jehan Sadat's turn to speak, we left the conference. Upon our

return, we asked for a second vote on the decision to condemn Zionism as a racist movement. The conference in Copenhagen voted in favour of the decision, despite Kate Patrick's attempts to intimidate and bribe the African delegations.³ GUPW's activity internationally was amazing. We received delegations from all over the world, and we were received all over the world. We had a presence at every conference to present our point of view. People understood that our cause was the just cause of a people who were uprooted and replaced by foreigners from all over the world. This is the first time something like this has happened in history.

³ Out of the 145 delegations participating in the conference, 94 voted in favour of its Programme of Action, and four against (Australia, Canada, Israel, United States), with 22 countries abstaining. Paragraph five affirmed a commitment to "the struggle to eliminate imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, Zionism, racism, racial discrimination, apartheid, hegemonism, and foreign occupation, domination and oppression". See *Report of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace*, A/CONF.94/95 (19 September 1980). Available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/otherconferences/Copenhagen/Copenhagen%20Full%20Optimized.pdf>