



Thrive Outside the Box

By Hala B. Tannous



There comes a time when a girl becomes a woman with her own beliefs, views, and dreams. Some of the latter she shares with no one other than herself and maybe her mom, her best friend, or her favorite sister – until there comes a day when she shares them with her partner. The moment she shares her inner thoughts and feelings with anyone other than herself, she risks either losing enthusiasm or, if she is lucky, thriving!

In most communities, we tend to copy what our mothers and families did. But if a Palestinian girl wishes to change, she would shout out loud – even if her voice isn't heard – "I will not live in my

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mother's dress – *jilbab oummi*. The dress represents the tradition, the garment that all Palestinian mothers have been wearing, proudly, without knowing that metaphorically this dress could become a cage, a box where dreams are kept. For generations, they did not know how to fly out of this small space and soar into the sky.

When general education was introduced, only boys could take advantage of this opportunity. Some families, however, wondered why their girls couldn't benefit as well from elementary education, even if some were more concerned about prestige than education. Some schools offer classes for girls and boys together, where – as equal to each other – they experience what it is like to be challenged by someone from the opposite sex in all academic subjects. Through this merge, they could perhaps be allowed to explore and discuss even the forbidden topics that certain societies consider taboo, either religiously or socially as a habit or practice, or through the inheritance of customs and traditions. This can be through open discussions or secretly, exactly as if they have been waiting for the morning sunshine to tell them "Come on, wake up and run out to where you can be yourself and speak your dreams out loud."

Some countries might consider Palestine a gender-sensitive country due to the propaganda that women are taking over some of the reputable and important positions, but statistics show low female participation in the labor force. According to a report published in 2012 by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the female employment rate remained low, despite a rise over the last ten years, with 17.4 percent of females in the labor force in 2012 compared to 10.3 percent in 2001, whereas the male labor force participation rate was still around four times higher than that of females. This news is distressing, considering that females make up 49.2 percent of Palestinian society.

Women are still looking at life from the inside of a box, in hope that one day they would be able to access life outside, achieve their goals and dreams, and work their way beyond the box. But we are faced, again and again, with many obstacles that tell us: "Women, stay in the box, go back to your kitchen; look out the window and dream of justice. As a woman, your only savior should be a man!"

Well, is this true? I suppose, in some cases women and men need each other to complement their roles. But I would like to stress that each person is complete on his or her own. Women can be as successful

as men, if the community is ready to accept this, but often they cannot gain acknowledgement for their achievement. And while it is ironic that opinions in this regard may vary, we all know deep inside our hearts that this is not a topic to argue about; men and women are equal in too many ways. Above all, we are both human beings and were created by the same force or power that gave us life; we both have hearts that beat nicely to someone's ears; our blood is same color; and we all have hair on our bodies! The extra parts that the creator added ingeniously

to each body are an added value, for both species to breed, for mothers to feed. Being respected as equal is not a privilege; it is a right of life and necessary for survival as a human being. To know that this right was taken fiercely from anyone is most discouraging. But women must resist being demotivated and continue to fight; ours is a peaceful fight and it must be respected.

While still living in the box, let us read more statistics on the social status of females in Palestine: According to the PCBS, in 2012, 6 out of every 10 women aged 15 years and above were married; 3 women out of 10 had never been married, 5.8 percent were widowed; 1.5 percent divorced; 2.2 percent were engaged for the first time; and 0.2 percent separated. But this is a mere statistic about the relationship between men and women that does not mention the love, compassion, companionship, and contentment which both need and through which

both benefit from each other's presence in their lives.

Here is where we jump outside the box in order to thrive. In order to proceed eagerly towards achieving our dreams, some would say don't look back, don't let anything stop you. But I would say, please keep looking back! Do not go back, just learn from that place where you once were forced to stand still, fighting to get out. Now that you are fully capable of spreading your wings and flying, don't let anything pull you back. Use positive energy and just proceed and extend your hands to those who need you, those who cannot see the light outside the box but are still handcuffed by tradition and taboo. Use your own judgment in evaluating your actions. If you do not agree with another person's assessment of this action as immoral and from your own perspective you do not consider it shameful or contradicting the true teachings of religion, do not just blindly follow your society's traditions. Be innovative and try to walk away from the box that is

To stand out is not an easy job, but to be part of the herd is effortless, and many people choose the effortless way. But is this the life we want? We each have one life to live, and we have the opportunity to choose the way we want to live it. Be innovative! Leave a mark and an impression, a legacy that can show that your life was worthwhile.

cuffing your hands and weakening your voice; never let your weakness take over, stay strong and determined.

To obtain refuge and strength when you feel weak, look at the roles that great, strong women played in the Palestinian community. Choose a role model, and proceed with the thought, "If she could do it, so can I. She made a difference, I will too." We have to start somewhere and prove first to ourselves that we all matter, we are equal, and we deserve respect. If people, male or female, do not recognize our value, then give them a reason to look up and see us shining like a star. Maybe they need to close their eyes not to be blinded by the light that we radiate, but let them feel its warmth, let them open their hearts to receive us. We matter, we are part of this community. We are here, next to each other, hand in hand making the changes that are needed for everybody to thrive and prosper – outside that fake box.

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