

MARIA HOLT

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*H*ALF THE *P*EOPLE

WOMEN,  
HISTORY AND THE  
PALESTINIAN  
INTIFADA

PASSIA

*Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*

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"And yet I recognize in all this a fundamental problem - the crucial absence of women. With few exceptions, women seem to have played little more than the role of hyphen, connective, transition, mere incident. Unless we are able to perceive at the interior of our life the statements women make - concrete, watchful, compassionate, immensely poignant, strangely invulnerable - we will never fully understand our experience of dispossession.

"I can see the women everywhere in Palestinian life, and I see how they exist between the syrupy sentimentalism of roles we ascribe to them (mothers, virgins, martyrs) and the annoyance, even dislike, that their unassimilated strength provokes in our warily politicized, automatic manhood."

Edward Said,  
After the Last Sky, p.77.



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## INTRODUCTION

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In late 1987, when the Intifada began in the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the longstanding dilemma of Palestine was thrust once again on to the international agenda, and this time with increased urgency. The intifada is now five years old but there is still no solution in sight.

The Palestinian question comprises many parts. It includes a centuries-old attachment to the land, the mutually exclusive struggles of two peoples, ideological developments in a number of directions, the erosion of human and national rights, the intifada as a battle for freedom and dignity and, not least, the role of women both before and during the intifada and, of course, in a future Palestinian state.

To talk about Palestinian women is to touch upon all aspects of the larger question and much besides. Any discussion of women must take into account not simply issues of gender relations, the differing participation of men and women in the national struggle and an envisaged future which is capable of accommodating a diversity of aspirations, but also, and perhaps most importantly, the achievements, hopes and disappointments of women's daily lives in a time and an area of violent upheaval.

The period of the intifada, from December 1987 to the present, has witnessed much change, not all of which has been for the better. This is particularly true in the case of women, who have both benefitted from and been profoundly disadvantaged by events over the past few years. The Palestinian woman in the 1990s cannot be explained simply as a third world woman, tradition-bound but in the



process of modernization. One must be very much more specific.

She is embodied in the Gaza refugee woman, the poet, the mother with sons in prison, the professor of chemistry at Birzeit University, the PFLP activist, the vegetable seller in the Old City of Jerusalem. She is a young girl in Nablus, an elderly woman from a village in the Galilee, a Muslim, a Christian. She is barely literate, was educated at an American University, actively pursues enhanced rights for women, wears an Islamically-approved head-covering. She was married at sixteen, vows never to marry, has ten children, no children, believes in a secular Palestinian state, yearns for an Islamic state in the whole of historic Palestine. In short, she is impossible to define.

Although, in general, a wholehearted participant in her people's struggle for self-determination, the Palestinian woman's involvement is constrained by a variety of factors, some imposed from outside and others resulting from a lack of co-ordination or consensus among women themselves. This state of affairs, it should be added, is by no means restricted to women in Palestine.

Women's organized involvement in the Palestinian national movement began early in the twentieth century. The present situation, however, is considerably more complex. In order to do justice to it, it is necessary to examine it in two contexts: as a classic national liberation struggle and as a phenomenon unique to the Palestinians. At the same time, one must bear in mind the existence of several distinct and somewhat contradictory strands in Palestinian thinking as it relates to women.

Firstly, the nationalist movement, in which the various women's committees play an active role, seeks to place the national struggle above such concerns as women's rights, insisting these are secondary and must wait until independence has been achieved. This position, of late, has been much questioned.

A second strand argues that the notional struggle cannot be separated from the social one. It would be unrealistic, and certainly undesirable, according to this line of reasoning - often described as

"feminist" - to postpone the enhancement of women's rights until the arrival of a Palestinian state.

Thirdly, there is a trend towards conservatism, which includes a strong Islamic element. It can be characterized as a reaction to the apparent lack of success of the national movement under the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the quest for Palestinian independence. In order to compete with overwhelming Israeli power, it is suggested, there must be a return to what is often described as greater "authenticity." This strand in Palestinian thought also reflects a movement in the wider Arab-Islamic world. It does not bode particularly well, one might assume, for women's rights.

I would like to argue that the position of Palestinian women, although it improved significantly in the early stages of the intifada, is now threatened. My argument stems from a number of observations, not least among them a consideration of various extremisms, both within Palestinian society and impinging upon it. These are attributable not only to influence and proximity of Israel and also the Arab world. One should consider, too, the general growth in Palestinian society of desperation, of increasing economic deprivation and of social conservatism.

In order to test my assertion, I propose to investigate a series of questions. To begin with, are the three trends discussed above mutually exclusive? Which one, if any, is predominant? How have women participated in the intifada? Does their participation differ from that of men? What constraints have been placed upon it, particularly by Arab Islamic culture but also by peculiarly local concerns? How have women been disadvantaged, or equally how have they been empowered, by the intifada? Lastly, how real is the danger, often expressed, that Palestinian women are likely to suffer a similar fate to women in Algeria after the waging of their anti-colonial struggle against the French in the 1950s and 60s? Or are such comparisons too simplistic?

Two conflicting opinions are available when discussing women's "progress" (and one must use this word with caution) since

the beginning of the intifada. The first maintains that opportunities for women are much improved and that societal attitudes towards female involvement in non-traditional pursuits, such as employment outside the home, leadership in the community and political activism, are slowly changing.

The opposite point of view sounds a note of alarm. Far from getting better, the status of women has been steadily deteriorating over the past few years. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, in times of extremity, a community should strive to maintain solidarity amongst its members. Any suggestion of dissent might be considered disloyal and even divisive. Secondly, harder economic times have meant diminished opportunities for everyone, but women have been the worst affected. Thirdly, the Palestinian community, perceiving itself under threat, has reverted to tradition and traditional practices. This, again, has tended to affect women disproportionately as they represent the most visible and obvious symbol of communal cohesion. They are recognized as guardians of morality and must behave accordingly.

This, writes Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas who participated in the Algerian liberation struggle, "is the real harm which comes with liberation struggles. The overall task of women during liberation is seen as symbolic. Faced with colonisation the people have to build a national identity based on their own values, traditions, language and culture. Women bear the heavy burden of safeguarding this threatened identity."<sup>1</sup>

In order to reach a better understanding of the many different roles and images of Palestinian women both before and during the Intifada, I will refer to history, from the last gasps of the Ottoman era, then the British Mandate period and the early Zionist penetration of Palestine. There is evidence that, from its inception, women

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1. Helie-Lucas, Marie-Aimee, "Women, Nationalism and Religion in the Algerian Struggle", in Badran and Cook, editors, Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing, p.107.

participated actively in the national struggle; the nature of their participation will be examined.

After 1948, and the loss of most of Palestine, many Palestinians were forced into exile. I will look at how women coped with this new and catastrophic reality, also at the culture of refugee camps and the role of women as preservers of tradition. Neither can one ignore the Palestinians who remained in what became Israel. What effect did this traumatic change in their lives have on women?

With the war of 1967 came a further uprooting. I will discuss the two primary factors of importance at this time: on the one hand, the growing desperation of a society in extremity; and, on the other, the burgeoning resistance movement and women's part in it.

Life for Palestinians was limited and often distressing. Under Israeli occupation, in the West Bank and Gaze Strip, they were confronted with a complete lack of freedom, the gradual erosion of human rights, a feeling of being unwanted in one's own land, and a general state of fearfulness and the removal of human dignity. This situation intensified greatly with the coming of the intifada.

The other life, in the diaspora, often in neighbouring Arab countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, was equally unsatisfactory. The longing to return to Palestine did not, on the whole, go away although it was sometimes possible for individual Palestinians to lead moderately tolerable existences in the host countries.

As the years went by, the Palestinian people, both in the occupied territories and outside, were forced to come to terms as best they could with their highly disrupted lives. The resistance movement took root in the countries bordering Israel and I want to look at women's involvement in this.

One of the threads running through the story of Palestinian women is the development of a distinctly Palestinian national consciousness, the birth of "Palestinianism", together with women's

contribution to and nurturing of this movement. A striking contradiction may be observed: although the politicization of women and their vigorous participation in political life is gathering momentum, they still retain prime responsibility for preserving family life and the Palestinian identity.

Another complicating factor is the question of religion and, in particular, of resurgent Islam. The sources of the Islamic movement's appeal, as Kitty Warnock remarks, "are many. All over the world, people oppressed by colonialism, seeing their culture swamped by Western consumer values and their economies and politics controlled by corruption, absolutism and imperialism, look for ways to shape their fate in a world of their own making."<sup>2</sup>

In the occupied territories, groups have sprung up, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which demand the establishment of an Islamic state in the whole of historic Palestine and a "return" to a more appropriate lifestyle for Palestinian Muslims. In reality, this often translates, most visibly, into a strict dress code for women, together with a greater adherence to traditional moral values and appreciably reduced opportunities outside the home and the family for females. Thus, one is faced with a paradox: on the one hand, the image of the Palestinian woman at the forefront of the revolution, a strong and protecting figure; and, on the other, an unseen individual, submissive to husband and sons, and unlikely to be seen in public without a head-covering. Christians, who comprise approximately 20% [*sic, ed.*] of the Palestinian population are particularly concerned about the trend towards Islamic piety.

To broaden the question still more, I would like to examine ways in which resurgent Islam is acting as a tool of empowerment for Palestinian women. Can parallels be found with the 1979 Iranian revolution? Although many Iranian women would now argue that the Islamic Republic has hindered their progress and their human rights

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2. Warnock, Kitty, Land Before Honour: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories, p.65.

more than it has benefitted them, there is no doubt that the Islamic rhetoric and its visible manifestations were eagerly seized upon by women and men alike in the early days of the revolution. Palestinian women tend to deny any similarities between their struggle and that of Iran. However, the objectives of a number of religious groups and individuals appear to favour the Iranian model.

The focal point of this paper is the Intifada and the effect women have had on it - and it on them. I will look at their roles, their activities, their organizations and the ingenious ways in which they have juggled family life and efforts to support the waging of a revolution which, in effect, is what the Intifada represents. How, I will ask, have women coped with the frequently repressive policies of the Israeli occupation authorities?

The Israelis have had a profound impact on Palestinian life, although this has mainly, one might assume, been negative. Israeli society places a high value on aggressively masculine characteristics, which are alien and unappealing to the majority of Palestinians, both as a people under occupation and as migrant workers in Israel itself. They are unlikely to want to be a part of or even to imitate this society. At the same time, there is a less unsavoury aspect of Israeli life. Despite its many shortcomings, Israel is proud of its democratic system. It permits dissent from the mainstream and also the expression of this dissent. A multitude of peace groups and women's groups have proliferated over the years of occupation and these have gone some way to creating a less acrimonious climate between the two people.

There are other factors to take into consideration. For example, the Palestinian women's movement is both a unique phenomenon and also part of the feminist movement in the wider Arab world. How have the two influenced each other? Is Palestinian family life in the process of unravelling or does it remain as fundamental as ever to communal existence? How, in the absence of a central authority, can justice prevail, particularly when it pits a woman's rights against more traditional values? What is the role of Islamic law in the occupied territories?

Women have responded to their predicament and to the opposite forces at work on them not simply in terms of political and survivalist tactics but also in creative ways. They write, paint pictures, sing and make pots. In short, they are finding techniques, both traditional and non-traditional, to deal with the harshness of life under occupation.

Within the Palestinian women's movement, there is a high degree of formal organization. Its main focus is the women's committees attached to the four main political factions. But the close association with nationalist politics has had the effect of reducing so-called "women's issues" to a position of secondary importance and even making them appear potentially divisive. Although the women involved initially tolerated, and even supported, this state of affairs, some of them eventually began to see a need for functioning organizations of their own. A vigorous debate, which provoked strong feelings on both sides, ensued and efforts were made to amend the status quo.

Beyond the factional groups, others have been formed, claiming to be independent of party politics, with the intention of highlighting women's concerns over and above national ones. There are now a number of women's resource centres, in Ramallah, Nablus and Gaza, which produce written material, run practical courses and, in general, seek to bring women from different backgrounds together, with the objective of ascertaining women's needs, educating them about their rights and preparing them for a future Palestinian state.

But not all women have access to the opportunities offered by such centres. Many women, particularly the older generation, remain illiterate and there is widespread ignorance about precisely what rights a woman is entitled to. This often results in fear and a desperate desire to conform. Thus, in order to understand the women of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, one must, above all, gain an appreciation of their diverse daily lives. What sort of tasks do they undertake? What do they yearn for? What do they most dislike? What does it mean to be part of a Palestinian family, with its duties and obligations? Would it be true to say that the differences between an

impoverished woman in a Gaza refugee camp and an educated, elite woman in Jerusalem are as great as any between women from different cultures? If so, how can a consensus be expected to emerge? Is not the gulf between them simply too wide to be satisfactorily bridged? These are just a few of the problems with which the Palestinian revolution will ultimately have to grapple.

Finally, I will speculate briefly about the way forward for Palestinian women. The peace process, although initially sluggish, is still underway and might, in the fullness of time, lead to an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. What, one wonders, will be the nature of this state? Will it be secular or Islamic-based, or will it try to satisfy both tendencies? And what effect will this have on the position of women?

One tends to fear, in the cold light of a variety of extremisms at present at work in the area, that the future does not bode particularly well for women in Palestine, with or without a state of their own. At present, they are facing something of a crisis of values, as opportunities expand but attitudes, in many instances, grow more rigid. Will Palestinian independence significantly enhance women's potential their range of options? It is by no means certain that it will.

Palestinian women, in the meantime, fall into several definite camps as regards the future. There is the tendency which supports an independent state based on the Islamic shari'a law; another subscribes to the view that, with the coming of independence, women's rights will naturally follow; a third group believes that only by setting a feminist agenda and vigorously insisting on it, can women hope to expect a reasonable deal in the new state. One must stress again, however, that only a tiny minority of women enjoy the luxury of choice, or even a point of view, on these matters.

The alternative, of course, is a continuation, with modifications, of the present situation of Israeli occupation. If this should be the case, it is most likely that the Intifada, in some form, will persist and women will go on playing their now familiar role, of support, of nibbling at the edges and of keeping things going. The



women of Palestine possess immense resilience. There is no sense in which they can be described as either weak or submissive, yet on occasion these traits are ascribed to them, for reasons of religion, tradition or, perhaps, lack of imagination.

This paper sets out to discover women's genuine aspirations, rather than the ones other people, from within the society and outside it, think they might have or ought to have. The result, needless to say, is a clamour of voices from which no clear consensus emerges. But what is important is that their voices of hope, fear, determination, humour, despair, authority, creativity, submission and much besides, are heard at all, so that we may better appreciate the rich diversity of Palestinian women.



## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Late 19th Century - 1948

Although Palestinian women have been active since the very earliest days of the national struggle, their activities have tended to conform to specific patterns. These have differed significantly from the roles and tasks assumed by men and, in many respects, the same continues to be true today.

The explanation for the split between male and female spheres of action lies in the traditional values of the society which remains, even now, a highly conservative one. Until the end of World War I, as part of the Ottoman Empire, governed from Istanbul, Palestine had little sense of itself as geographically or culturally separate from the rest of the Arab-Islamic world.

Palestinian society, in common with societies throughout the Islamic world, is organized along patriarchal lines; honour and female seclusion are key components. "A woman's main contribution to her family's honour," as Kitty Warnock notes, "was the indisputable reputation for sexual purity ... Women were expected to behave modestly, but it was men who ensured women's chastity by keeping them covered up and out of sight as much as possible."<sup>1</sup> Such male/female relations raise the question of control.

There are several important distinctions to bear in mind when

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1. Warnock, Kitty, Land Before Honour, p.23.

embarking upon a study of Palestinian women. Firstly, one should distinguish between traditional Muslim society, as it existed throughout the Middle East regardless of national boundaries, and the particularities of Palestinian society, which became increasingly pronounced over time.

A second split occurs between the lives of upper and middle class women residing in urban areas and those of poorer urban women and peasant women in rural settings. To begin with, at least, their responses were notably different. There is also, thirdly, the question of education, available in those days only to a tiny elite segment of the population.

Palestinian women, as Mona Rishmawi states, were "influenced by the education boom in the Arab world during the late 9th century which resulted in the spread of schools especially missionary institutions."<sup>2</sup> Schools were also established by the government. In 1914, out of 8,249 students enrolled in Ottoman government schools, 1,480, or 19%, were girls.<sup>3</sup>

Public education during the British Mandate declined and girls were particularly adversely affected. In Rosemary Sayigh's view, inequality between male and female sectors of the Arab population were reinforced since the majority of rural Palestinians preferred not to send their daughters to mixed schools.<sup>4</sup> As Sayigh adds, however, "the government's claim that the population disfavored [girls'] education is belied by the expansion of private schools during Mandate times."<sup>5</sup>

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2. Rishmawi, Mona, "The Legal Status of Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories", in Toubia, editor, Women of the Arab World: The Coming Challenge, p.81.

3. Sayigh, Rosemary, "Introduction", in Najjar, Portraits of Palestinian Women, p.15.

4. *Ibid.*, p.15.

5. *Ibid.*, p.15.

According to Hamida Kazi, women's participation in the Palestinian struggle can be divided into three stages: the first extending from the establishment of Zionist settlements in the closing decades of the 19th century until the creation of the state of Israel in 1948; the second covering the early chaotic years of exile and dispossession, together with the beginnings of the resistance movement, and culminating with the June 1967 war in which Israel took control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip; and the third representing "the contemporary ongoing struggle."<sup>6</sup>

In Kazi's view, the participation of women during the first stage was "passive, inarticulate and unorganized."<sup>7</sup> She records that the first visible manifestation of female activism took place in 1884, in protest against an early Jewish settlement, established near the town of 'Afulah.<sup>8</sup>

During the British Mandate period, the vast majority of the Palestinian population was dependent on agriculture for its livelihood. But the land meant more than this. It provided, in Sarah Graham-Brown's words, "a focus of identity common in peasant societies, based on ties of kinship and identification with village or district."<sup>9</sup> Women, of necessity, participated in agricultural work within a gender-based division of Labour.

Although urban women veiled themselves, rural women, for practical reasons, tended not to be veiled. They worked side by side with their menfolks, although their tasks were different. Besides agricultural labour, women engaged in the production of pottery and the manufacture of clothing. Embroidery has always represented a strong expression of local identity and also a tradition of importance; the degree of elaboration in decorative style varied from region to

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6. Kazi, Hamida, "Palestinian Women and the National Liberation Movement: A Social Perspective", in Khamsin, Women in the Middle East, p.27.

7. Ibid., p.27.

8. Ibid., p.27.

9. Graham-Brown, Sarah, Palestinians and their Society 1880-1946, p.35.

region and mothers passed down the traditional skills to their daughters.

While these arrangements may have worked tolerably well in times of peace, they came under considerable pressure with the onslaught of Zionist penetration into Palestine. During the British mandate period, the Jewish population increased from 56,000 in 1918 to 83,794 in 1922, 174,610 in 1931 and 608,230 in 1946. Palestinian women, as much as men, were determined to fight against the transformation of their homeland which was taking place against their will. But they had to find appropriate ways in which to express their protest and their opposition.

The ensuing situation posed a dilemma, to men as well as women. The men had to decide whether to allow their womenfolk to become more active, and therefore more visible, even though such loosening of personal conduct might lead to demands for even greater freedom and, with these, the breakdown of traditional, male-dominated society. However, the men of Palestine did not really ever make the decision. Instead they were overtaken by events.

In a haphazard and disorganized fashion, the women started to explore what for them was largely unknown territory: the public arena. Needless to say, cultural conditioning over centuries rendered this a traumatic experience. It brought into sharp focus a number of hitherto unspoken taboos and assumptions, on the parts of both men and women. As a result, although women took part in national demonstrations whenever and wherever they could, the basis of society, with its norms and prohibitions, remained firmly in place.

It is important to stress the differences between formal and informal modes of participation and to note how these changed and interacted over time. To begin with, in the early years of the twentieth century, various "good works" were undertaken by associations of elite women, predominantly urban. These, by and large, were concerned with social and charitable issues, political matters at that time being the sole preserve of men.

Soon, however, the dividing line between the social and the political began to blur and this occurred as a direct result of the escalating Zionist presence in Palestine and the threat it posed to the lives of ordinary Palestinians.

By 1920, as Julie Peteet points out, "A growing discontent with Zionist and British policy and actions in their country was evident in increased organizing and activities of the women's associations."<sup>10</sup> That year, a mass demonstration, comprising approximately 40,000 people, took place in Jerusalem, to protest against British and Zionist activities. Some of the participants were women.

The following year, a group of mainly upper-class, educated women formed the Palestine Women's Union (PWU), the first women's organization in Palestine with declared political objectives.

Let us, at this point, examine the increasingly desperate dimensions of a situation which compelled the female members of a fundamentally traditional society to behave in such unfamiliar, and even provocative, ways. First of all, the uniqueness of the Palestinian case was already beginning to emerge. It clearly possessed qualities of unusual extremity in which every citizen, male or female, felt bound, as a matter of honour and also survival, to play a part.

Secondly, the women of Palestine had examples of female activism elsewhere in the Arab world, most notably in Egypt, from which to draw inspiration. One should bear in mind, however, that, at this stage in the struggle, even though political consciousness among women was taking root, it was confined to a tiny minority of the population, an elite group. A more widespread manifestation of female activism would have to wait until the situation in Palestine deteriorated still more.

In the embryonic stage of organization, even the work of the

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10. Peteet, Julie, M., Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement, p.43.

PWU was mainly concerned with welfare work and relief services for the poor, rather than overtly political activities. Priorities started to shift in 1929 when, after widespread violent disturbances in Palestine, the First Palestine Arab Women's Congress met in Jerusalem. It attracted over two hundred delegates and submitted the following message to the British High Commissioner:

"We, the Arab women of Palestine, having been faced with great economic and political difficulties and seeing that our cause has not so far received the sympathy and assistance of which it is worthy, have finally decided to support our men in this cause, leaving aside all other duties and tasks in which we have hitherto engaged ourselves.

"This deputation of all the Arab women in Palestine has now come to lay before Your Excellency their protests and resolutions passed in their first Congress and to ask, as of right, that our demands be granted."<sup>11</sup>

As land sales, and particularly the sale of cultivated land, to the Zionists accelerated, Palestinian outrage grew more acute. The strongest sources of grievance, as Sarah Graham-Brown says, "were loss of land or the threat of it and exclusion from employment by Jewish labour organisations."<sup>12</sup> As a result, "poorer, less educated rural women became involved in the national endeavor, particularly in the armed rebellion in the countryside."<sup>13</sup>

In 1936, a full-scale revolt erupted, in response to an increasingly oppressive British occupation, together with the entrenchment of Zionist power. Ultimately the uprising, sometimes referred to as the "first Intifada", failed. One of the side-effects of this period, however, was an increase in large-scale female activism. Women from all sectors of society participated although, as Peteet remarks, they "remained divided by regional and class cleavages," as

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11. Graham-Brown, *op.cit.*, p.168.

12. *Ibid.*, p.168.

13. Peteet, *op.cit.*, p.52.

indeed did Palestinian society as a whole.<sup>14</sup> The failure of the revolt has been attributed to a lack of cohesion among its constituent elements.

The dilemma, in retrospect, is plain to see. Although women's efforts were desperately needed in 1936, whenever their behaviour deviated from traditionally appropriate patterns and appeared to pose a threat to male control, it tended to be discouraged. Women were forced, therefore, to curtail their activities in order to preserve a vaguely-defined notion of "group solidarity." Ironically, of course, by suppressing female activism, the group contributed to its own destruction.

Nonetheless, women were unable to stand by entirely idly while the national struggle raged around them. As Peteet records, "organized elite women were active in passive forms of resistance and in a support capacity (whereas) peasant women were more actively involved, probably because it was their communities that were coming under direct physical threat."<sup>15</sup> This, as she correctly concludes, was regarded as an "intrusion into domestic space" and, thus, women had little option but of fight back, despite the breaking of taboos involved. Similar responses have been observed during the present uprising: it become permissible for a woman to defend home and family as soon as the attackers cross the boundary and trespass into her private space.

The revolt, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Palestinians, was crushed by the British in 1939. Time was now rapidly running out. Zionist power and infrastructure had become too well established to be easily removed. It cannot be denied, however, as Peteet points out, that, although "the revolt had little outwardly discernible effect on ... women's rights ... the seeds of future organizations had been planted, role models had been established, and in the name of nationalism public challenges to the established order

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14. Ibid., p.53.

15. Ibid., pp.54-55.



of sex segregation and norms of women's public comportment had been registered."<sup>16</sup>

It is a moot point to speculate as to whether the outcome of the revolt would have been any different had women been permitted to engage in it without restraint. Probably not, since the Palestinian side lacked organization, cohesion and national leadership, and besides there can be no doubt that the forces arrayed against it were overwhelming. The Zionists began to prepare for statehood.

Kitty Warnock has written perceptively about the fundamentally important notion of honour in Palestinian society and the role that it played in the defeat of the Palestinians and their flight from the land in 1948. "One function of the ideology of honour," as Warnock says, "was to support the internal structure of the family: to be precise, to idealise men's control over women."<sup>17</sup> Warnock further suggests that the potentially destructive function of honour, as it pertained to female sexual purity, may have been responsible for forcing many Palestinian families to flee from their homes in 1948. "For many Palestinian men," she notes, "saving their women from rape was more important than defending their homes or showing personal bravery and defiance."<sup>18</sup>

In order to enlarge further on this point, which is central to any discussion of female participation in the Palestinian national struggle, in the early days as now, one must examine the relationship between politics and domesticity. Its contours, as Julie Peteet notes, "are contested terrain."<sup>19</sup> Peteet raises several pertinent questions in this respect.

The first relates to duty. How can a women's duty best be defined? Does it spring from a devotion to husband and children, to

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16. Ibid., p.56.

17. Warnock, op.cit., p.22.

18. Ibid., p.23.

19. Peteet, op.cit., p.92.

the wider community, to the nation, or to all three units of loyalty? How desperate must the situation become before the attention of the entire community is forced to focus on the salvation of the national entity?

There is clearly a contradiction between traditional expectations and new demands. To some extent, Palestinian society has modified itself to deal with the extremity of its situation, but there is still much resistance. Some Palestinians argue that the reluctance to acknowledge, and thus utilize, the new realities, particularly as they relate to women, could pose a danger to the very survival of the Palestinian people as a nation.

The second question, stemming from the first, concerns public and private space. Traditionally, men have exclusively occupied the former whereas the latter has been the domain of women and girls. According to Petzet, "[h]onor and shame are dominant idioms governing the behavior of Palestinian women and men ... Families and men secure honor and lose face through the public actions of women kin."<sup>20</sup>

But honour is also associated with the community to which one belongs. The Palestinian flight of 1948 contains two opposite symbolic interpretations. On the one hand, it implies a loss of honour "because the community was unable to defend itself"<sup>21</sup> against Zionist conquest. On the other hand, however, a much-remarked reason why Palestinians fled in such large numbers, as has been mentioned, was "to ensure their women's honour in face of potential Israeli violations."<sup>22</sup>

This evident paradox has, in the interim, been largely resolved. Now most Palestinians insist that land must come before honour. But how does this translate into domestic relationships?

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20. Ibid., p.186.

21. Ibid., p.186.

22. Ibid., p.186.

It is clear that, as far as the smaller units are concerned, female honour is still regarded as paramount. There have even been moves by certain Islamic groups during the current phase of the intifada to return women to their natural setting: the private domain.

## 1948-1967

"I was twelve in 1948 when the Jews drove us out. We fled from our village when the soldiers came and started shooting people. My grandparents did not want to leave their home; they hid in a cave near the village and the soldiers found them and shot them. My father took my mother and me and my seven sisters into the hills. We hid for a month or so and then collected with people from other villages in a camp UNRWA set up, near where we are now. It was just tents all crowded together."<sup>1</sup>

After the "catastrophe" of 1948, when the state of Israel came into being, the Palestinian population was dispersed far and wide. Needless to say, it was a deeply traumatic time for everyone, and women found themselves assuming several vital roles, not all of which were entirely familiar. During this period, as Rita Giacaman and Muna Odeh observe, "women performed the crucial function of substituting for state services."<sup>2</sup>

One can argue further that some of the functions women were expected to perform seemed to contradict each other. For, while they held Palestinian society together, in the sense of continuity and the preservation of identity, women were also encouraged to assume decidedly non-traditional roles. As Giacaman and Odeh remark, with reference to the parts of Palestine which did not fall under Israeli control in 1948, "women's organizations ... extended their efforts

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1. Umm Ibrahim Shawabkeh, a refugee from Beit Jibrain, quoted in Orayb Aref Najjar, Portraits of Palestinian Women, p.30.
  2. Giacaman, Rita, and Odeh, Muna, "Palestinian Women's Movement in the Israeli-Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip", in Toubia, editor, Women of the Arab World, p.58.

beyond their traditional concern for the poor in their communities."<sup>3</sup> The "Palestine question," they add, "provided the motive and platform propelling women into a new arena as visible actors."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the experience of dispossession, as far as women were concerned, was both destructive but, at the same time, oddly liberating. Let us look at the period from 1948 to 1967 in terms of formal organization and informal achievement.

According to Julie Peteet, the foundations for the women's movement were laid in the 1920s and 1930s and it "underwent relatively little change in structure or ideology until the rise of the Resistance in the mid-1960s."<sup>5</sup>

Others do not share this view. For Rosemary Sayigh, for example, "the impression given in official literature of a gap between 1943 and the forming of the GUPW in 1964-65 is incorrect."<sup>6</sup> She identifies four new forms of activism during this period.

Firstly, several branches of the Palestinian Arab Women's Union (PAWU) survived, mainly in what remained of historic Palestine - the West Bank and Gaza Strip - but also in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt.

Secondly, in the absence of adequate social and relief services, women's "charitable organizations sprang up to meet the social needs of the refugee population" (Peteet, p.60). By the middle of 1953, "there were 871,748 refugees depending on relief from the United Nations ... unemployment of the refugee population stood at more than 50 percent until 1954."<sup>7</sup>

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3. Ibid., p.58.

4. Ibid., p.58.

5. Peteet, Julie, M., op.cit., p.58.

6. Sayigh, Rosemary, "Introduction", in Najjar, Portraits of Palestinian Women, pp.5-6.

7. Najjar, op.cit., p.28.

A third and rather different reaction came from a small minority of educated younger women who chose to join the various opposition parties, such as the Ba'ath Party, the Jordanian Communist Party and the Arab Nationalist Movement. Such recruitment, as Sayigh notes, "found its motivation in the scale of the 1948 disaster, and was facilitated by the weakening of family control over girls as they entered university, worked outside the home, and traveled."<sup>8</sup>

The fourth form in which women expressed their instinct for activism was in support of resistance organizations, which began in the early 1960s to engage in feda'yyiin operations.<sup>9</sup>

There are many stories of heroic endeavour and enterprise by individual women. Samiha Salameh Khalil began her activist career during the British Mandate and continues to this day to be involved. In the 1950s, she was inspired to do something to help the many thousands of refugees. "A group of women who shared my ideas about self-help," she reports, "met on October 1, 1956, and we formed a society that came to be called "Ittihad al-Mara'a al-Arabiyyah" (The Union of Arab Women) of al-Bireh ... Unemployment was high and we needed to help women earn their living in an honourable way instead of begging. We gave women cloth and thread to embroider at home, we would then buy their finished product and sell it."<sup>10</sup>

In 1965, with other women, Khalil founded "Jam'iat In'ash al-Usra" (The Family Rehabilitation Society). From the beginning, she says, "we rejected the ideology of all or nothing. We started on a modest scale and expanded as our resources permitted".<sup>11</sup> From those inauspicious early days, as Kitty Warnock writes, the In'ash al-Usra Society "has grown into one of the major educational and cultural institutions in the West Bank, comprising an orphanage, a

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8. Sayigh, "Introduction", Portraits of Palestinian Women, op.cit., p.6.

9. Ibid., p.7.

10. Najjar, op.cit., p.41.

11. Ibid., p.43.

vocational training college for women, a kindergarten providing training for teachers, a food production and catering service, a centre supplying knitting and sewing home-work to hundreds of women, and a museum and folk-lore institute."<sup>12</sup>

It must be stressed, of course, that the number of women who actively participated in formal organizations was a tiny percentage of the total population. The remainder struggled to survive, coped on an *ad-hoc* basis and somehow managed to keep alive the idea of Palestine.

The mid- to late 1960s, as Peteet points out, "marked a turning point for women and their movement."<sup>13</sup> The formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and, more specifically, the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) "presented women a unified format within which to organize, promote women's development, and support the national cause."<sup>14</sup> The Union, in Warnock's words, "played an important role in mobilizing women in the refugee camps outside Palestine."<sup>15</sup> In her view, however, "most of its activities have been more or less traditional and have encouraged the participation of women in political life as active housewives rather than on equal terms with men."<sup>16</sup>

This is perhaps not altogether surprising given the generally conservative climate of the times, among Palestinians as elsewhere. And it cannot be denied that the Union met a growing need. As Samiha Khalil remarks, "I remember my elation at seeing the word "Palestine" in use again for the first time since 1948."<sup>17</sup>

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12. Warnock, Kitty, Land Before Honour, p.162.

13. Peteet., op.cit.; p.63.

14. Ibid., p.63.

15. Warnock; op.cit., p.184.

16. Ibid., p.184.

17. Najjar, op.cit., p.43.

Still, if one is considering women as an oppressed sector of the community, the organizational developments between 1948 and 1967 must remain necessarily partial. While the achievements of the women of that period were impressive and, as Giacaman and Odeh assert, "laid the foundation for women's legitimate participation in social, political and economic life, they were equated nevertheless straitjacketed by the conceptual formula that equated colonialism and/or occupation with the debasement of women's status."<sup>18</sup>

Women engaged, principally, in "charitable" work because it was safe and did not challenge the entrenched prejudices of their society. Such work had a pronounced class element in that middle-class women "defined the needs of, delivered services to and, indeed, were charitable towards village, refugee camp and poor women."<sup>19</sup> It seemed, on the whole, unable to confront the reality of shared oppression, in the sense that women, from whatever background, were all victims of a harsh colonialist regime. Slowly, as we shall see, this began to change.

### **June 1967 - December 1987**

"The Arab lands have been humiliated ... We were defeated ... We lost the war ... Our grief is insupportable ... the wind plays with the white flags on our roofs ... We have been occupied by the Israeli army ... The shock has removed us from the realm of reality ...

"I am sick unto death with grief!"<sup>1</sup>

The June 1967 war brought further upheavals to the lives of Palestinians. Now a new dimension - Israeli military occupation - entered the picture, as all that remained of historic Palestine was at last swallowed up.

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18. Giacaman and Odeh, op.cit., p.58.

19. Ibid., p.59.

1. Tuqan, Fadwa, A Mountainous Journey: The Life of Palestine's Outstanding Women Poet, p.190.

What impact has existence under occupation made on Palestinian women in the years prior to the Intifada? The effects are many and complex of course. According to Rosemary Sayigh, "Israeli occupation was followed by a sharp rise in women's participation in all kinds of resistance, from demonstrations and sit-ins to sabotage."<sup>2</sup> The women were harshly punished for their activism, thus crushing the embryonic movement. Militancy, therefore, was forced to relocate to, first, Jordan and, then, Lebanon.

However, the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 "ultimately had the effect of reentering Palestinian resistance away from the diaspora and back to the Occupied Territories, leading towards the Intifada of 9 December 1987."<sup>3</sup> The growth of women's organizations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip will be discussed later.

Women's political consciousness has developed rapidly over the last several decades, although under conditions of constraint. This is not, as one might imagine, solely as a result of the occupation with its accompanying deprivations. It also stems from a lack of support from Palestinian popular organizations, which are entirely male-dominated, and resistance from a predominantly conservative Palestinian society.

On an ideological level, as Peteet notes, "the Resistance never did adopt a decisive stance on the question of gender equality,"<sup>4</sup> and this has inevitably had a debilitating effect on the enunciation of a purely female or even "feminist" perspective. Women, by and large, "were to participate in the national struggle, but the emphasis was on national struggle to confront externally imposed forms of repression and domination, not on social transformation and internal forms of domination."<sup>5</sup> This, broadly, is the position of Fatah, the largest of the Palestinian political factions. The Popular Front for the Liberation

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2. Sayigh, Rosemary, "Introduction", in Najjar, Portraits of Palestinian Women, p.7.

3. Ibid., p.9.

4. Peteet, Julie, M., Gender in Crisis, p.65.

5. Ibid., p.65.



of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) tend to take a marginally more class-based approach.

It is generally assumed, however, that a more explicit recognition of a distinct "women's movement" would distract from the central issue of national liberation, and thus weaken it. Such reasoning, on the contrary, may well contribute to the creation of confusion, dissatisfaction and cleavage. As Giacaman and Odeh point out, "[t]he importance of mass mobilization based on national political lines cannot be overemphasized. But the problem is one of providing a balance between national aims and aspirations on the one hand and the creation of a more equitable social order on the other."<sup>6</sup> The Intifada, as we shall see, has gone some way towards correcting this perceived imbalance.



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6. Giacaman, Rita, and Odeh, Muna, "Palestinian Women's Movement in the Israeli-Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip", in Toubia, editor, Women of the Arab World, p.62.

## INTIFADA

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### Women and the Intifada

"Sahar al-Jarmi was only 19 when she was shot dead by an Israeli soldier near the mosque in Balata refugee camp. Her father said the soldier slapped her, she threw a stone at him and he raised his rifle and shot her in the chest. Sahar was the second West Bank martyr in the uprising ..."<sup>1</sup>

The Palestinian intifada (lit. "shiver, shudder, tremor", from Arabic nafada, "to shake off, shake out, dust off") began in December 1987, in response to life under Israeli occupation which is intolerable in two fundamental respects. On the one hand, a climate of fearfulness is all-pervasive, reducing everyday life in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem to the barest bones of existence, in which the basic human rights of the Palestinian population are systematically abused. On the other hand, the ongoing seizure of Palestinian land in the occupied areas by the Israeli government and settler groups has led to the alarming possibility that, should United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 in its entirety, including the central tenet of land for peace, ever be seriously adopted by the Israelis, there would be no land left to negotiate.

As a result, despite the peace talks, the present mood among Palestinians in the occupied territories is bleak. In the absence of a central Palestinian authority, capable of enforcing law and order, the society has become unbalanced. A sense of powerlessness has created

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1. Vitulla, Anita, "Portrait of Sahar al-Jarmi", MECC Perspectives, Issue No 9-10, 1991, p.68.

desperation which expresses itself in three distinct directions.

The first, usually described as nationalist, acknowledges that negotiations with the Israelis, even under the present highly flawed conditions, are better than nothing. Palestinians, it is felt, should accept any Israeli offer, however meager, in the hope that an independent state might be forthcoming at some stage in the future.

A second strand in Palestinian thinking argues that the secular nationalist leadership has failed. The Palestinian people, as a result, is humiliated and demoralized, and the only sensible course to pursue, therefore, is the establishment of an Islamic entity in the Middle East, of which Palestine would be a part. Only by returning to a more "authentic" mode of living in line with Islamic teaching, according to this argument, can Palestinians hope to regain their self-respect and their land.

A third approach to the Palestinian dilemma, advocated chiefly by young male activists, holds that not only must the Intifada continue but it must become an upheaval of real rather than symbolic violence. The Israelis must be forced to pay the price for their oppressive policies, these young men insist, and this means killing people and destroying property. Only then will they be prepared to negotiate in good faith, to the benefit of both peoples.

When discussing the position of women in relation to the three frameworks outlined above, generalizations are appropriate only to a limited extent. Beyond that, one must deal in specifics. The women of Palestine, as everywhere, vary in age, class, occupation, educational achievement and ideological persuasion. They reside in cities, villages, refugee camps. They are wealthy, less well-off, can barely survive. They have nationalist sympathies, support Hamas, are western-style feminists, or claim not to be political at all. Whatever their stance or their status, none is unaffected by the Israeli occupation or the struggle to end it. Their responses occur on many levels, formal and informal; thus, their participation has undergone a number of changes during the course of the intifada.

It would be fair to say that, although a multitude of confusions has risen to the surface since the intifada began and not all the current trends are conducive to the enhancement of women's rights, political consciousness among women in all sectors of Palestinian society has been forced to develop. This has had repercussions that are both negative and positive.

Generally speaking, liberation struggles by no means automatically result in an improvement in the position of women. On the contrary, they tend to reinforce the status quo of male control. A consideration of women's rights is almost always postponed, relegated to the back burner as a "separate agenda," until national liberation has been achieved. An example of this is the Algerian war of independence.

Women can talk as much as they like, can immerse themselves unstintingly in the struggle and feel that they have begun to enjoy a position of parity with men. But, under the surface, an entirely different reality not only exists but seeks to thrive in perpetuity. In other words, men are unlikely to relinquish their power without a fight and thus women, whether knowingly or otherwise, must grapple on two fronts simultaneously. This, then, is the nub of their dilemma.

In December 1990, three years after the start of the intifada, a conference was held in Jerusalem. Entitled "The intifada and some women's social issues," its aim was "to provide women from a variety of political and ideological streams with an opportunity for discussion and dialogue, for the expression of their suffering, their national and social problems and their problems as women; and to propose appropriate solutions and encourage the establishment of independent committees and institutions to follow up on these problems and to try to carry out some of the proposed solutions."<sup>2</sup> The conference participants, all academics, attempted to assess what women had achieved and where they should go from there.

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2. News From Within, 5 January 1991.

Eileen Kuttab identified two phases of the intifada. The first was characterized "by a massive, spontaneous and broad-based uprising as well as by a general national awakening, accompanied by the extensive mobilization of Palestinian women to the struggle in all its forms."<sup>3</sup>

The second period involved a retreat from confrontational activism. "The decrease in women's participation in politics and the struggle," however, "did not mean that there was a coincident decline in the women's social movement, but rather that the basis of their struggle in this period was entirely different and reflected the general characteristics of the period."<sup>4</sup>

Kuttab suggests a number of reasons for the change in female modes of participation. Firstly, the intifada has lacked a social programme which could assist in institutionalizing women's role in the struggle. Secondly, the relationship between the women's movement and the national movement proved incapable of translating "the dialectical relationship between the national and social issues into practical terms."<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, democratic organization, such as that provided by local committees, declined, leaving women without a clearly defined role. Finally, the upsurge in groups insisting on a return to religious and traditional values has had an adverse effect on women.

Islah Jad also sought to distinguish between two phases of the intifada, this time in terms of the family. At first, she opined, "the intifada led to a decrease in the father's authority, since he was no longer the only one responsible for controlling his sons and daughters."<sup>6</sup> With the decline in female participation during the second phase, however, some of the positive gains achieved by women were negated.

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3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

Jad notes a paradox. On the one hand, the initial positive stage opened up the possibility of greater freedom within the family for young people. At the same time, the rise of "fundamentalist political movements" discouraged such freedoms, whilst striving to re-establish more traditional family practices. One wonders if a synthesis might be forthcoming.

In Reema Hamami's view, women's participation in the intifada has gone through three phases. The first involved mass mobilization, during which all citizens, regardless of sex or age, took to the streets in protest. This lasted until April 1988.

During the second stage, popular committees were established, thus formalizing the structure of the Intifada. This period witnessed a retreat to more traditional roles by the mass of women.

A third phase began when the popular committees were outlawed by the Israeli authorities, at the end of 1988, and were forced to transform themselves into underground movements. "Increasing Israeli repression," in Hamami's words, "gave rise to internal ideological conflicts among the Palestinian factions, and to a decrease in women's activity."<sup>7</sup>

It seems clear that, for most of the conference speakers, women's position has declined. Spontaneous anger and protest by the general population were replaced by a more organized and ideological rigidity, from which women tended to be excluded. As Reema Hamami concludes, women "cannot ignore the responsibility of the Palestinian national movement for our reaching this state - because of its lack of a political and social plan for dealing with this situation."<sup>8</sup>

At the present time, two contradictory developments may be discerned as far as women's intifada-related activities are concerned. The first involves consolidation: women are being encouraged to organize and to speak out. Running parallel to this resolve, however,

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7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

is its opposite: a growing fearfulness, a reluctance to place oneself outside the mainstream.

The following sections will explore some of the contradictions and constraints that women are experiencing, both as they are applied by the Israeli occupation and also by Palestinian society itself. How, we will ask, are they fighting back or, alternatively, why are they not fighting back?

## **Formal Organization**

Although the intifada radically changed the nature of women's informal participation in the national struggle, the roots of formal organization are deep. The first women's organization in Palestine, as already mentioned, was formed in 1921, although its primary focus was welfare-oriented work. It was an elite grouping, organized from the top down.

The late 1970s saw a shift away from the more traditional charitable-based societies to organizations that include a political as well as a social agenda. From the beginning, however, there has existed a degree of conflict between nationalist concerns and gender-relevant issues.

Historically, as Nahla Abdo suggests, "women's active participation in liberation movements, those of socialist and/or nationalist forms, has been marked by a split in identity."<sup>1</sup> The split may be further subdivided: firstly, a woman's instinctive desire to play an active part in the revolutionary struggle is often seen as being in conflict with her traditional role as a wife and mother, which tends to confine her to the home. A second clash occurs between a woman's identity as a nationalist and her identity as a feminist. The two, although by no means mutually exclusive, often cause dilemmas in terms both of concrete action and organization.

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1. Abdo, Nahla, "Women of the Intifada: gender, class and national liberation", Race & Class, Vol 32, No 4, 1991, p.19.

If we look at women's experiences in liberation struggles around the world, we find a number of cases which might give Palestinian women cause for anxiety. The prime parallel examples are Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s and Iran in 1978-79, where the two images - women as victim and women as fighter - were used to great symbolic effect. Although women appeared to be empowered and certainly took an active part in the struggle, they were relegated to highly traditional roles as soon as victory had been achieved. One wonders how Palestinian women will deal with this, although there is already evidence to indicate that they are aware of some of the potential pitfalls. In Algeria, as Suha HindiyeH points out, "during the revolution, there was not a strong women's movement,"<sup>2</sup> whereas in Palestine such a movement already exists.

Abdo is optimistic. In her view, women activists possess "a heightened feminist consciousness."<sup>3</sup> Resistance in the intifada, she asserts, combats not only Israeli military occupation and an accumulation of oppression, but women are also waging "a struggle against the traditional Palestinian patriarchal structure."<sup>4</sup>

We must ask ourselves, however, to what proportion of the Palestinian female population can these words realistically be said to apply. It could equally plausibly be argued that the majority of women participate in the intifada for other reasons, in ways that are traditionally acceptable, instinctive, spontaneous and unfettered by formal organization.

At the same time, it is important to take a broader view. The mass movement is undoubtedly buttressed, both historically and practically, by a network of women's organizations, developed over many years by a dedicated nucleus of female activists.

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2. HindiyeH, Suha, in conversation with Penny Rosenwasse, "Voices from a Promised Land: Palestinian and Israeli Peace Activists Speak Their Hearts," p.56.

3. Abdo, op.cit., p.22.

4. Ibid., p.22.



In the late 1970s, according to Giacaman and Johnson, a "new generation of women, many of whom had been politicized in the student movements at the Palestinian universities, founded grassroots women's committees that, in contrast to the charitable society network of women's organizations, sought to involve the majority of women in the West Bank who lived in villages - along with women in camps, the urban poor, and women workers as well as intellectuals and urban middle-class women - in a united women's movement."<sup>5</sup>

In March 1978, the Palestinian Union of Women's Work Committee (PUWWC), "the first grass-roots women's committee to be established under Israeli rule,"<sup>6</sup> was formed under the slogan "towards a unified popular women's movement." The optimism for unity did not last long and the organization very quickly "split into four groups representing ideological divisions within the Palestinian movement, both because of their political differences and because each group felt the need to stress its own priorities for women."<sup>7</sup>

The PUWWC's successor organizations are the Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (FPWAC), which identifies with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees (UPWWC), which is supportive of the Palestinian Communist Party; the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC), which follows the line of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); and, lastly, the Women's Committee for Social Work (WCSW), which aligns itself with Fatah.

Of these, in Joost Hiltermann's opinion, the WCSW "is the closest ideologically to the earlier charitable societies in that it

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5. Giacaman, Rita, and Johnson, Penny, "Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers", in Albrecht and Brewer, editors, Bridges of Power, p.133.
  6. Sosebee, Stephen, J., "The Palestinian Women's Movement and the Intifada: A Historical and Current Analysis", American-Arab Affairs, No 32, Spring 1990, p.87.
  7. Najjar, Orayh Aref, Portraits of Palestinian Women, p.121.

provides services to women rather than mobilizing them."<sup>8</sup>

By the eve of the intifada, as Giacaman and Johnson point out, "the women's committees had developed to include seasoned women leaders and a base with firm roots in towns, villages and camps. While not the generators of women's mass participation in the uprising, the committees played a major part in shaping that participation."<sup>9</sup>

Why, then, was it felt necessary to have four separate organizations to represent women's interests in the occupied territories? In general, the differences between them lay in the positions they took on the national question rather than their approach to women's issues. It suggests a confusion between priorities. The national struggle, obviously, must take precedence. Most importantly, the level of political debate rose significantly. There began to be some inkling that women's interests had to be addressed.

Several phases of political action by women during the intifada have been pinpointed. When the uprising started in 1987, "the women's committees immediately began actively participating in street demonstrations."<sup>10</sup> Women and schoolgirls regularly engaged in spontaneous confrontations with the Israeli army and a spirit of exhilaration emerged from these clashes.

The second phase witnessed the creation of a network of neighbourhood and popular committees. Although women were active in these, as Hiltermann notes, "it is not clear if they made any gains in their rights as women through such involvement."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, their role in these committees "became an extension of what it traditionally

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8. Hiltermann, Joost, R., "The Women's Movement during the Uprising", Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol XX, No 3, Spring 1991, p.50.

9. Giacaman and Johnson, op.cit., p.133.

10. Sosebee, op.cit., p.88.

11. Hiltermann, "The Women's Movement during the Uprising", op.cit., p.51.

had been in the society: teaching and rendering services." <sup>12</sup>

In September 1988, the neighbourhood and popular committees were declared illegal by the Israeli military authorities which led, in November of that year, to the start of the third phase. At this point, the women's committee began to think and plan in terms of future state structures. This led to closer co-operation between them and, in December, the Higher Women's Committee (HWC) was established, uniting the four committees under one umbrella.

The formation of the HWC, in Hanan Ashrawi's words, "as part of the nation-building programme of the Intifada has signalled a qualitative leap in the history of the women's movement, especially in its endeavours at articulating a gender agenda and a theoretical framework for the women's organizational and development projects within the emerging national infrastructure." <sup>13</sup>

Or, as Hiltermann puts it, women leaders "felt that only through the joint action made possible by such a body could the crucial issues of education and the legal situation created by the religiously-based family law be addressed effectively." <sup>14</sup>

The formation of the HWC was a progressive step because factionalism, on the whole, has had a debilitating effect on the embryonic women's movement. Insisting as it does upon divisions along nationally-defined lines, it has the effect of inhibiting the articulation of a women's agenda for a future Palestinian state. Women, and this is still to some extent true, participate in the uprising in a gender-specific manner without, at the same time, having a forum in which to express their concerns about themselves as a matter of priority.

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12. Ibid., p.51.

13. Mikhail-Ashrawi, Hanan, "The Pursuit of Peace: How to Break a Mold of Discourse", *MECC Perspectives*, No 9-10, 1991, p.79.

14. Hiltermann, "The Women's Movement during the Uprising", *op.cit.*, p.53.

Others are more optimistic about the future. In the event of an independent Palestinian state, in the words of Suha Hindiyeh, director of the Women's Resource Centre, "We have to start thinking of laying the basis for a strong women's movement. That's why we're planning to ... attempt to put forth women's legislation in every aspect - family law, women workers, and many other issues related to women - drafting these legislations and discussing them with the other Women's Committees, with the Palestinian women's movement as a whole, so as to present it to our government when it comes."<sup>15</sup>

The activities undertaken by the women's committees have been wide-ranging but, in general, have tended to retain some basis in women's traditional roles. Typically female tasks, such as the provision of sewing and literacy classes, were stepped up once the intifada became a fact of life. At this point, the range of activities was broadened to include the setting-up of child-care facilities, the organization of relief and emergency services after Israeli army raids, work on behalf of prisoners and their families and the promotion of a "home economy" of locally-produced food and clothing.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, there were attempts to depart from purely gender-specific activity.

Rita Giacaman has identified several areas in which the women's committees have enjoyed relative success. The committees, she says, "were crucial in developing the role of women outside the domestic sphere."<sup>17</sup> Discussion centred around "the theme of how best to incorporate women into the economy,"<sup>18</sup> with the result that "the women's committees have ... boldly stepped into the sphere of food production, such as pickles, biscuits, and orange juice."<sup>19</sup>

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15. Hindiyeh, op.cit., pp.53-54.

16. Hiltermann, "The Women's Movement during the Uprising", op.cit., pp.50-51.

17. Giacaman, Rita, "Palestinian Women in the Uprising: From Followers to Leaders", Journal of Refugee Studies, Vol 2, No 1, 1989, p.140.

18. Ibid., p.140.

19. Ibid., p.141.

Other achievements include the creation and operation of nursery schools and kindergartens in refugee camps, villages and poor urban neighbourhoods, and "the provision of literacy training to hundreds of women."<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, according to Giacaman's analysis, while "the women's committees movement did succeed in placing issues of concern to women and women's status in society ... on the national agenda, it did not fundamentally challenge the division of labour based on gender that is at the core of women's oppression in Palestinian society today."<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, it is clear that as the intifada got going there was a change of emphasis within the women's committees. Having built up a core of experienced leaders and a broad-based support group throughout the community, they were in a position to assume a more militant role. In the early days, women were notably active in the streets: "marching in demonstrations, building barricades to prevent the army from entering camps or villages, smuggling food and other provisions into curfewed areas, physically preventing the arrest of youths, and supplying rocks to youths during clashes with the army."<sup>22</sup> These were highly visible and dangerous acts and several dozen women were killed by the Israelis during the first few years of the Intifada.

Priorities were gradually clarified, both in terms of what women wanted to do and what was deemed appropriate and necessary. Women activists, as Joost Hiltermann points out, "employed their experience and legitimacy they had accrued as community leaders to co-ordinate the new neighborhood committees which carried the uprising from its initial spontaneity to a disciplined mass revolt."<sup>23</sup> This undoubtedly contributed to boosting women's confidence and, as well, allowed them more space to manoeuvre.

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20. Ibid., p.141.

21. Ibid., p.140.

22. Sosebee, op.cit., pp.88-89.

23. Hiltermann, Joost R, "Sustaining Movement, Creating Space: Trade Unions and Women's Committees", Middle East Report, May-August 1990, p.34.

According to Leila Diab, four forms of activism among Palestinian women have remained constant: the first can be described as "passive resistance"; secondly, the staging of strikes and demonstrations against the occupation; thirdly, the vital task of keeping alive the Palestinian national identity by, for example, establishing various training programmes for women; and, lastly, preserving the social welfare and educational institutions.<sup>24</sup> Diab sees the process underway in the intifada as one of empowerment. "The community's socio-economic and political problems," she comments, "cannot be resolved without the participation of Palestinian women who have had to bear the responsibility for providing for their families due to the fact that most of their men are either imprisoned, deported or dead."<sup>25</sup>

While this may well be true, it does not take into consideration the corresponding status of women which, it could be argued, has not changed substantially as a result of intifada activities. On the contrary, the recent growth of a reactionary trend in Palestinian society throws into question the durability of the gains made by women.

As Rita Giacaman concludes, "during periods of struggle for national liberation, active participation of women in public life - be it in political leadership or in economic or social life - does not necessarily guarantee the continued radical transformation in the condition of women and their status in society in the period after liberation. We must draw on, and learn from, the experience of our Algerian sisters, who ironically signalled the beginning of their own downfall after liberation by calling for conformity to Arab-Islamic culture in the process of protecting the family unit."<sup>26</sup>

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24. Diab, Leila, "The Palestinian Woman: An engendered defiance of the occupation", Al-Fajr, 8 January 1990.

25. Ibid.

26. Giacaman, *op.cit.*, p.144.

## Women and Democracy

On 8 May 1992, a conference entitled "Mass-Based Women's Organizations and the Question of Democracy" was held in East Jerusalem. Sponsored by the Bisan Women's Research and Development Committee, its objective was to explore the relationship between the "democratic option" and the work of the various Palestinian women's organizations. Equally important, as one of the organizers explained, is the role of democracy "in unleashing the creative potential of Palestinians and in furthering the development of the intifada as an integrated popular movement."<sup>1</sup> Over a hundred people, most of them women, attended the conference.

One of the contributors, Liza Taraki, discussed the origins and development of the Palestinian women's committees. She pointed out that, since the traditional organizations had been unable to accommodate women's concerns, women had created their own organizations. However, these too had been co-opted into the mainstream, as female accoutrements to the four male-led factions.

During the 1980s, the women's committees "focused on three major issues: offering free or inexpensive services, e.g. daycare, especially to working women; providing vocational training; and mobilizing women for political action."<sup>2</sup> But, in Dr. Taraki's opinion, "the committees have not really dealt with the basic problem: lack of involvement in political decision-making and problems within their family structures."<sup>3</sup>

She concluded that, although the intifada had been a turning-point, women's freedoms were now under threat and it was up to the

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1. Kuttab, Eileen, Co-ordinator of the Women's Studies Committee of the Bisan Centre, quoted in "Palestinian Women's Organizations and Democracy", summary of proceedings of seminar sponsored by the Women's Research and Development Committee of the Bisan Research and Development Centre, News From Within, 3 June 1992, p.9.

2. Taraki, Liza, *Ibid.*, p.10.

3. *Ibid.*, p.10.

women's organizations to undertake "a political and social development strategy that stresses as a very important element the issues of women's work and educational rights and women's control over their own lives."<sup>4</sup>

A second speaker, Islah Jad, addressed the role of democratic organizations in civil society. She defined a democratic institution in a civil society as "one whose goals and programs are derived from the discussion and participation of its members."<sup>5</sup> As far as Palestinian women's organizations are concerned, she said, "there is a difference between organizational unity and a unity of goals."<sup>6</sup>

In Ms. Jad's view, Palestinian institutions do not operate in a democratic fashion, and "women's committees in particular have become used to restricting themselves to the social limitations of religious and family structures and the political limitations of parties."<sup>7</sup>

A final contribution came from Eileen Kuttab, who asked the question: Are the Palestinian mass-based women's organizations, as they are currently constituted and programmed, in tune with the political and social changes and concerns which occurred during the Intifada, especially in terms of women? "<sup>8</sup>

Ms. Kuttab was of the opinion that women had been adversely affected by, on the one hand, the tendency of their organizations to put party interests above all else and, on the other, a general decline in the democratic process. It had become a matter, she considered, for elite groupings and needed to become more mass-based. There is a great urgency, she said, to embark upon a general social programme

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4. Ibid., p.11.

5. Jad, Islah, Ibid., p.11.

6. Ibid., p.11.

7. Ibid., p.12.

8. Kuttab, Eileen, Ibid., p.12.



for women.<sup>9</sup>

From the proceedings of this conference, it is reasonable to deduce that politically-conscious Palestinian women fear that, far from making progress, they are actually moving backwards. Their difficulties stem partly from a crisis in the democratic process. Even though women are engaged in the arduous task of articulating their needs and have formulated, to a large extent, a plan of action to realize these needs, they face several hurdles that are impossible, in the present situation, to overcome.

Firstly, as was pointed out by some of the conference participants, democracy itself is in decline. It is clear that the Palestinian community in the occupied territories has made enormous efforts to create democratic institutions, many of which, under normal circumstances, would no doubt have been successful. However, a combination of conservative tendencies within Palestinian society and the force of Israeli repression has rendered it a task too overwhelming to complete.

A growth in religious-based groups, secondly, has meant that there has been a change in emphasis as far as women are concerned. Now the prevalent feeling is for survival and the preservation of the family.

Finally, as a result of increasing hardship, together with escalating intifada violence, women have retreated from the forefront. Their demands have been muted. They accept that the Palestinian situation is one of extremity, in which all members of the community must act in harmony. In these conditions, a separate "women's agenda" is seen as divisive.

## **Paradoxes and Contradictions**

An imbalance in power relations between men and women in Palestinian society has meant that women's involvement in the national movement has been forced to conform to predetermined patterns.

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9. Ibid., p.12.

Women have experienced difficulties in participating effectively "and the social system itself represents further obstacles since in Muslim culture the place of women is separated from that of men."<sup>1</sup>

Men, as we have already discussed, have fashioned the liberation struggle along patriarchal lines. Paradoxically, as Mai Sayeh remarks, "men agree in principle that women should be activists; but there comes a time when they feel that women should withdraw. Deep down, they think that it is up to them to make the revolution and not to women and that consequently it is the man's job to decide how far the women's involvement should go."<sup>2</sup> Women's contribution, therefore, is expected to contain subtle, "feminine" qualities, otherwise it might be mistaken for competition. In other words, it should be socially-acceptable.

Women, as Hamida Kazi rightly points out, "are caught in a trap where they have to find a balance between challenging their subordinate position and political exigencies which demand upholding the same cultural values in the interests of national integrity which restrain women from participating in the movement."<sup>3</sup> Most women, she adds, "either find it difficult to continue their political involvement, or content themselves with the secondary roles available to them."<sup>4</sup>

A second paradox becomes apparent here. "In a crisis, and especially under occupation, it is the women who pays the price. She is the person who has to put up with the cleaning and trying to keep the children healthy when all are now living in a tent and almost in the street. She is the one who suffers when her son is in prison, who stands by her husband and supports him if he is in prison. She takes

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1. Kazi, Hamida, "Palestinian Women and the National Liberation Movement: A Social Perspective", in Khamsin, Women in the Middle East, p.32.
  2. Sayeh, Mai, Choosing the Revolution, in Gadant, editor, Women of the Mediterranean, pp.87-88.
  3. Kazi, op.cit., p.35.
  4. Ibid., p.36.

over."<sup>5</sup> This is a self-sacrificial image but also contains a heroic dimension.

Then there is another image: Palestinian women, against all the odds, have developed a reputation for toughness. Their confrontational challenge to the frequently thuggish occupation authorities has been much remarked upon, in books, articles and documentary films.

How have these images, of resilience and confrontation, dealt with the constraints that traditional Palestinian society with its plethora of assumptions has placed on women? Let us begin by categorizing the constraints: there are those, on the one hand, which are woven into the fabric of Arab-Islamic culture and can be observed throughout the Middle East; and those, on the other, which result from the special conditions brought about, firstly, by the Israeli occupation and, more recently, by the intifada.

Into the former category must be placed the familiar Islamic image of womanhood. It is an idealized vision, apparently little affected by progressive policies in other areas of life. It elevates a woman's reproductive and domestic functions, with their accompanying baggage of female honour, purity and seclusion, at the expense of any other skills or talents she might possess. Education was originally made available to her so that she could better bring up her children. And, initially, for a woman to seek employment outside the home was regarded as an act of desperation either in the face of overwhelming poverty or in the absence of a male bread-winner.

Many women felt compelled to rebel against this highly restricted version of life but they did so in ways calculated to cause as little offence as possible. They hid their intentions behind a facade of socially-approved behaviour. Thus, the early women's organizations, while seemingly engaged solely in social welfare work, were secretly

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5. Khass, Mary, who works for UNRWA in the Gaza Strip, quoted by Lipman, Beata, Israel: The Embattled Land, p.148.

beginning to formulate a political agenda.

Consciousness of their predicament, both nationally and as women, started to develop but, alongside it, an awareness that nothing must be allowed to disturb male control. For women, just as much as men, realize that to threaten the foundations of the patriarchy is to bring about social disintegration, which would affect the Palestinians' struggle for their rights and freedoms in a wholly negative way. A semblance of continuity in terms of gender roles must, therefore, be preserved.

With the initial flight from Palestine, in 1948, such certainties were thrown into question. However, rather than being transformed, they were reinforced as a means of keeping alive a very vulnerable Palestinian identity. When Palestinians realized, in the 1960s, that they had to take responsibility for their own destiny and to fight back, women too were allowed to become fighters. But their numbers were small, they were regarded as being outside society's definition of womanhood, and their chances for leading normal lives were considerably reduced.

In the background, the various women's organizations continued to flourish and, slowly, a different sort of Palestinian woman was emerging: a mature and politically aware human being, a challenge to societal norms. She is a paradox but an inevitable one. Her identity is increasingly under threat.

When the intifada began in the occupied territories, women were forced to re-evaluate their roles. It was clearly of the utmost importance for all Palestinians, irrespective of age or gender, to revolt in visible and meaningful ways against the occupation. But this could not be fully effective as long as women and children were confined to the background. Neither were women prepared to hang back although, as always, they attempted to operate within the carefully-preserved bounds of social acceptability.

As a result, their tangle of roles represents a large contradiction within Palestinian society. On the one hand, as Angela Williams, UNRWA's Director of Relief and Social Services remarks, "I think

for people who have not met Palestinian women before one of the most immediate impressions is how well-educated they are, how resourceful, how articulate and how very highly motivated ... it perhaps comes as a surprise to some people to find how much more freedom of movement the Palestinian woman has within her community than some of her neighbouring Arab women."<sup>6</sup>

Yet, at the same time, they are doubly disadvantaged, victims both of the Israeli occupation and of a male-dominated society. Their "true" identity, whatever that might be, is in danger of being either wrongly defined or denied altogether.

### **Opportunities: Women and Work**

There has been much debate about the precise nature of women's participation in the intifada and the degree to which their status in Palestinian society has changed as a result of intifada-related activities. Two views predominate.

The first asserts that women's position has improved as a result of involvement in the intifada. The other acknowledges that, although women's range of options, including access to the public space, appeared to expand in the early days of the intifada, the gains have not been sustained. Indeed, a number of retrogressive elements have begun to have a detrimental effect on the status of women. One also needs to consider women's participation and their status in economic terms.

In order to evaluate the progress achieved by Palestinian women over the past five years, we should first define "progress". It can be measured with some accuracy by examining changes in educational and employment opportunities and numbers of women in leadership positions within the society. Another indicator, although this is less easy to define, refers to social gains such as changes in the

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6. Willimas, Angela, UNRWA's Director of Relief and Social Services, "Palestine refugee women: Resilient and resourceful", Al-Fajr, 10 June 1991.

marriage age for girls, rights of divorce and inheritance and, even more amorphously, an increase in social "freedoms."

A recent publication by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) reports that in 1950, when UNRWA began its educational programme, only about a third of the refugee children attended school and, of these, 74% were boys. Today, in contrast, almost all children go to school and the male/female ratio is 51:49.<sup>1</sup> Nearly half of UNRWA's 10,000 teachers are women and, out of the nearly 900 students enrolled in the agency's teacher training course, 60% are female.<sup>2</sup>

Another commentator reports that approximately 50% of the agricultural workers in the West Bank and 13% in Gaza are women; women comprise 35% of service workers in the West Bank and 65% in Gaza. As far as the professions are concerned, women constitute about 13% in the dentists' union, 30% in the pharmacists' union, 8% in the physicians' union, 7% in the journalists' union, 4% in the engineers' union and 6% among lawyers.<sup>3</sup>

As regards working in Israel, the numbers have declined: in 1979 women made up 4.5% of workers from the occupied territories; by 1983 this percentage had fallen to 2.5% and, since the intifada began, the numbers of female workers have gone down even more.<sup>4</sup> In Fishman's opinion, "the social revolution occurring among Palestinians in the intifada is passing over the heads of the women."<sup>5</sup> He concludes that "the contribution of women to the economy of the occupied territories is the result of economic distress, not of economic development."<sup>6</sup>

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1. "Palestine refugee women: Resilient and resourceful" (adapted from a publication by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency), Al-Fajr, 10 June 1991.
  2. Ibid.
  3. Fishman, Alex, "The Palestinian woman and the Intifada", New Outlook, June-July 1989.
  4. Ibid.
  5. Ibid.
  6. Ibid.

Susan Rockwell has written perceptively of some of the problems faced by women workers in the Gaza Strip and, in particular, of "Gazan society's negative opinion of female employment."<sup>7</sup> Rockwell identifies the ongoing conflict between traditional morality and economic necessity in Gazan society. As she points out, however, the large number of refugee women in wage labour illustrates how "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has created specific motivating factors for employment."<sup>8</sup>

The pressures on women in Gaza are formidable. On the one hand, their desperate circumstances leave them little choice but to enter the workforce. At the same time, conservative elements within the community are pronounced and these tend to favour a more traditional role for women.

A recent study of women and work in a Gaza Strip refugee camp discusses the "housewifization" process, whereby "the role of women in the economy is disguised, in relation to the domestic perception of women, as housewives and mothers who are outside of the productive spheres. The work of women in the home has enabled the Israeli economy to profit from the exploitation of cheap Palestinian labour."<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the report's authors add, "general economic repression does not necessarily increase the need of women to work and move outside the "private" sphere. Instead this only extends the need for housewives as a family support network. Indeed in the Palestinian case, the national question has served only to strengthen the invisibility of women's work in the home. As a result of occupation women are increasingly "protected" as symbolic of the family and social fabric."<sup>10</sup>

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7. Rockwell, Susan, "Palestinian Women Workers in the Israeli-Occupied Gaza Strip", Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol XIV, No 2, Winter 1985, p.122.

8. Ibid., p.127.

9. Lang, Erica, and Mohanna, Itimad, A Study of Women and Work in "Shatti" Refugee Camp of the Gaza Strip, p.171.

10. Ibid., p.172.

Although economic activity has increased with the intifada, they argue, "traditional roles have been reinforced rather than rejected."<sup>11</sup> The fact that women were conscious, they conclude, "in spite of the economy and its dependence on sexually well-defined work roles, is significant and an important pre-condition for mobilisation and change."<sup>12</sup>

## Effects of Islamic Resurgence

The growth of the so-called "fundamentalist" movement in the Islamic world in recent years has had a profound effect on Palestinian society. This has been particularly pronounced during the current phase of the intifada.

There are a number of reasons for the upsurge in popularity of Islamically-inspired groups in the occupied territories. These can be attributed, on the one hand, to the influence of Islamic movements in other parts of the Arab world and, on the other, to the Israeli occupation. The occupation, to begin with, removed all vestiges of authority from Palestinian hands, which resulted in a partial breakdown of traditional social structures. The ability of parents to control their children was reduced, causing particular anxiety in the case of daughters.

At the same time, the absence of a central authority, together with the insecurities and irregularities which this state of affairs imposed on the population, meant that the forces of conservatism were able to consolidate their position as upholders of tradition.

Thirdly, the occupation brought Israeli society, with its Western-style modernity - and, in Palestinian eyes, promiscuity - uncomfortably close. As the highly visible lifestyle of the conquerors, it posed a threat to Palestinian values and especially to the behaviour of young people. Inevitably, many youngsters, while rejecting the

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11. Ibid., p.172.

12. Ibid., p.174.



Israeli model utterly, have secretly sought to imitate some of its desirable aspects.

Although the overall effect of Islamic groups or parties on the nationalist movement is open to question, their impact on women has tended to be somewhat negative. This is by no means universally true, of course, since women, as well as men, can be found within the ranks of the Islamic movement. Arguing on the basis of freedom of choice, however, it would be reasonable to say that Palestinian women who do not wish to adopt Islamic dress and who may prefer to combine family life with a career should be permitted the same degree of personal freedom as women who opt for a more traditional life-style. The question of rights is a crucial one.

When discussing "fundamentalist" tendencies within Palestinian society, one must start by addressing the "crisis" being confronted by the Arab world as a whole. It includes historical, social and economic dimensions and, in addition, a perception of inadequacy or failure vis-a-vis the more powerful West. Having failed to imitate the technologically superior Western states, and in particular the USA, some of the Arab states, or groups within states, are reverting to what they insist is a more "authentic" approach to the systemic problems faced by their societies. Islam is an obvious and familiar tool with which to start.

Obviously the debate about whether Islam is a progressive or a reactionary force is a complex one and cannot even begin to be adequately addressed within the scope of this paper. It is important, however, to take some account of the impact religion is having on the Palestinian struggle. One should add that it is equally crucial not to fall into the trap of equating the Western feminist movement with modernity while dismissing Arab-Islamic culture as backward.

The other point that needs to be stressed is a proclivity among Islamically-motivated groups to place a disproportionate emphasis on the dress and behaviour of women as a barometer of their success. If the majority of females appear in public with their bodies modestly shrouded, or do not appear in public at all, this is regarded by certain

groups as a sign that their policies are proving effective.

One must bear in mind, at the same time, the other side of the picture. As sociologist Liza Taraki points out, "some fundamentalist groups are trying to impose their will on Palestinian, Arab and Muslim societies, such as making [women] wear the long garb that covers their entire body and a head cover. But this does not necessarily mean the stifling of women's skills. Some women even dress this way to make it easier for them to mix and penetrate a male-dominated society."<sup>1</sup>

There has been much written about what exactly the Qur'an means in its vaguely-worded injunctions about women, their role in society and their position in relation to men, and a fierce and vigorous debate continues to rage. But what is perhaps of more significance is the effect of the present climate of opinion on individuals. Let us examine the two basic, yet conflicting, schools of thought as these apply to the Palestinian situation.

The first sees Islam as a powerful weapon in the struggle against Israeli occupation. "Fundamentalism in Palestine" according to Manar Hasan, "is an offshoot of Sunni fundamentalism in the Middle East, and essentially constitutes a political party which is nourished by the real hardships suffered by the masses - while revealing the inability of other parties and organizations to respond to their distress."<sup>2</sup>

Secular nationalism, in other words, has proved to be ineffectual in the face of Israeli power and, thus, a new weapon is needed. Worse, as well as failing to win Palestinian independence, the nationalist movement has contributed to a moral decline in society, in the view of the Islamists. It has encouraged young women, for

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- <sup>1</sup> 1. al-Helo, Nehaya, "Palestinian women more productive than many of their counterparts: Stereotyping is intentional", Al-Fajr, 1 June 1992.
  2. Hasan, Manar, "On fundamentalism in our land", News From Within, October-November 1992.

example, to believe they are entitled to freedom of choice in matters of education, career and family. Such notions, claim the Islamic parties, can only bring about social disintegration. Women active in the feminist movement are viewed as "corrupt, licentious and apostates whose blood it is permissible to spill."<sup>3</sup> The situation is a desperate one, so this line of reasoning goes, and, therefore, desperate remedies are called for.

One such remedy was the forcible imposition of the Islamic hijab (headcovering) in the Gaza Strip in the late 1980s. This campaign provoked uncertainties on classic levels.

On the one hand, it seemed to be a classic Islamist assault on the downward spiral of moral values, as embodied in the unveiled woman. At the same time, it also sought to occupy the nationalist high ground by arguing that "the headscarf was a form of cultural struggle, an assertion of national heritage."<sup>4</sup>

Reema Hammami has written with insight about the attempted redefinition undertaken by the Islamists. It became clear, she argues, that the "intifada hijab" was "not about modesty, respect, nationalism or the imperatives of activism but about the power of religious groups to impose themselves by attacking secularism and nationalism at their most vulnerable points: over issues of women's liberation."<sup>5</sup>

The national movement, reports Hammami, was slow to champion, or even speak out about, women's rights in the face of this determined onslaught by Islamic groups on the female population of Gaza. The Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) seemed to be of the opinion that confrontation with such groups would ultimately be divisive. As Hammami points out, "(k)eeping the religious groups in the fray and the national consensus going was

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3. Ibid.

4. Hammami, Reema, "Women, the Hijab and the Intifada", Middle East Report, May-August 1990, p.26.

5. Ibid., p.26.

deemed more important than confronting sexism and reactionary elements."<sup>6</sup>

By the time the Unified Leadership issued a statement on the question of women and the hijab, towards the end of 1989, it was too late. "The inability (or reluctance) of activist men," in Hammami's words, "to deal with the hijab campaign represents both the weakness of the left and of feminist agendas in the West Bank and Gaza."<sup>7</sup>

Despite an intensely energetic debate about the rights and wrongs of the Islamic resurgence movement, women are finding themselves with restricted freedom of choice, at any rate in Gaza. Plans to expand the campaign into the West Bank have so far been less successful. But women there are fearful of attitudes, modes of behaviour and unwelcome dress codes being foisted upon them against their will. They are unsure how they can respond.

The problems of course are all too real. Palestinian society is indeed confronting an attack on its very survival. Life is uncertain and family values, as a result, are apparently eroding. But, one can argue, this is not because Palestinians are straying from the proper path of Islam. It is rather that they face an unusually formidable opponent: the Israeli state, which has been zealous in its identification of Palestinian weak points. These include the exaggerated importance placed on female honour, a reverence for the old notable families, a reluctance to depart altogether from the formal framework of Islamic law and cultural norms and, lastly, a deep-rooted distaste for overt political involvement by women. The Israelis have used these tools against the Palestinian people to impressive effect.

As Manar Hasan notes, Israeli "oppression is ... accompanied by a consistently positive attitude towards the traditional patriarchal leadership and towards patriarchal social values, and even allows the traditional leaders to autonomously enforce traditional practices on

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6. Ibid., p.28.

7. Ibid., p.28.

their communities, at least in the spheres of religion and family law."<sup>8</sup>

It is true, to begin with, that the Israeli authorities were relatively tolerant towards the formation of Islamic parties, such as Hamas, and of the activities of these groups in the occupied territories which were interpreted by the Israelis, correctly, as being highly divisive. Only later, when these groupings began to speak openly of the violent overthrow of the Israeli state, did the government declare them illegal.

The second school of thought regards Islam in its fundamentalist incarnation as a reactionary force in the national struggle and something to be resisted. Hamas, for example, rejects the PLO platform. It offers instead not merely a compelling ideology for those adrift in a sea of despair, but also an alternative political vision.

Most fundamentalists, as Islah Jad and Reema Hammami assert, "are profoundly motivated to seize control of state structures and constitute themselves as state authority based on some form of religious ideology."<sup>9</sup>

In a recent paper, Jad and Hammami discuss at some length what they describe as a "reconstituted extended family ideology and structure."<sup>10</sup> The Israeli authorities, they suggest, "saw the ideology of extended family as inimical to the creation of political movements based on ideology and thus inimical to nationalism."<sup>11</sup> Later, the ideology was also "appropriated by fundamentalists."<sup>12</sup> Both the Israelis and the fundamentalists used the extended family ideology as a way of controlling women and of undermining female individualism.<sup>13</sup>

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8. Hasan, op.cit.

9. Jad, Islah and Hammami, Reema, "Women and fundamentalist movements", News From Within, October-November 1992.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

Since social structures and their underlying ideologies are subject to change and "in practice the creation of political structures based on factional or ideological allegiance was increasingly breaking down the notion of family as the central and defining social and political force in Palestinian society,"<sup>14</sup> the attempts by both Israeli authorities and fundamentalists to introduce an artificial ideological motivating force was bound to cause confusion and division.

Suffice to say, by way of conclusion, that the Islamic faction in the occupied territories is increasing in prevalence at the present time. It claims powers that emanate, on the one hand, from a realistic appraisal of the situation and, on the other, from narrow ambition. While opinion polls continue to place the secular PLO far ahead of the Islamists in terms of popular appeal, there can be little doubt that resurgent Islam is a force that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, since they reject the current peace negotiations with the Israelis, groups such as Hamas feel compelled to provide an alternative and often highly violent strategy.

Women's responses, so far, have incorporated a mixture of apprehension, resignation and determination. Without the active support of the nationalist male leadership, however, the room in which they have to manoeuvre is shrinking by the day.

### **Palestinian Women Detainees**

"Khamiseh Mahanna, a 26-year old Sawahreh village [near Bethlehem] resident, is in urgent need of eye surgery, but has been held for some time for sentencing. As she slowly goes blind, Khamiseh waits in a prison cell for her final day in court."<sup>1</sup>

A matter of great concern for Palestinian families since the occupation began has been the appalling possibility that one of their

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14. Ibid.

1. Turjman, Ghada, "Women's Organization for Political Prisoners: Working to make life easier for detainees", Al-Fajr, 16 March 1992.

female relatives might fall into the clutches of the Israeli military authorities. . This fear has become more acute as female activism escalates. With the intifada the dangers have increased still more.

Palestinian society, as we have discussed, is predominantly patriarchal and includes a well-defined place for women. Although the national struggle, over many years, has had some effect on the traditional frameworks, they continue to maintain a high degree of control.

The Israeli authorities understand only too well the horror felt by Palestinian society at the thought of sexual threats being made against its women and girls. The Israelis have used these feelings of revulsion to good effect in order discourage female activism.

A recent book by British barrister Teresa Thornhill details the treatment suffered by Palestinian women detainees at the hands of the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Some of the women's accounts are profoundly disturbing. They reveal an Israeli state apparatus prepared to go to extreme lengths to prevent any expression of Palestinian national sentiment. Thornhill surmises that "the military justice system exists to serve a political function rather than one of genuine law-enforcement."<sup>2</sup>

When a woman is arrested she usually spends a period of "days or even weeks without being able to contact her family and children, without seeing a lawyer, without receiving medical care should she need it and without being taken to court."<sup>3</sup> During this period she is subjected to a process of intense interrogation by several GSS officers, almost always male, in order to force her to confess, even though the evidence against her may be flimsy or even non-existent.

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2. Thornhill, Teresa, Making Women Talk: The Interrogation of Palestinian Women Detainees, p.6.

3. Ibid., pp.17-18.

A number of techniques are routinely used to extract a confession. The standard GSS procedure, as Thornhill indicates, "is to try to destroy the detainee's physical well being."<sup>4</sup> The woman will be deprived of food and sleep, confined for long periods in uncomfortable and unsanitary conditions, and subjected to psychological torture and sexual harassment. Actual physical attacks also sometimes occur. Many women report that permanent damage has resulted from GSS interrogations. Often a woman will make a "confession" to escape the torture to which she is being subjected.

Once made, a confession is almost impossible to retract even though it may have been obtained under duress. The objective seems to be to imprison as many politically conscious Palestinians as possible, on extremely spurious grounds. The practice has two immediate consequences. The first is to make the Palestinian population wary of engaging in overtly political activity. The second reflects the tarnished state of the Israeli judicial system, which flouts its international obligations and even its own basic legal rules. It is now regarded with little respect in the wider world and with helpless despair in the occupied territories.

For women detainees, quite clearly, the implications of their situation are considerably graver. Traditionally, Palestinian families have regarded contact between their womenfolk and the Israelis as a threat to the honour of the entire family. It used to be the case that, if a woman was arrested, it would be regarded as a matter of shame and her marriage prospects would correspondingly be diminished.

As the occupation has continued to drag on, however, and particularly since the start of the intifada, attitudes have been forced, to some extent, to change. This was largely a result of mass participation: everyone, regardless of age or gender, has felt compelled to become involved in the liberation struggle.

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4. Ibid., p.18.



Women have inevitably been drawn into the conflict, often in highly visible ways. They have assumed roles at the forefront of the confrontation with Israeli military personnel, partly out of necessity but partly through choice. They participate in mass demonstrations, protect children and young men from soldiers and join "political" organizations, such as women's committees.

All these tasks are liable to bring women into conflict with the authorities, which may then lead to detention and imprisonment. This has become so widespread that some Palestinian families have started to take a pride in the political activities of their daughters and wives. Imprisonment no longer automatically means a young woman is unfit for marriage. As ex-prisoner Terry Boullata reports, "Often during interrogation sessions the Shabak would try to taunt me, saying that because I had been in detention nobody would want to marry me. I used to retort that, on the contrary, men would be queuing up to marry me once I got out."<sup>5</sup>

Although parents may secretly prefer their daughters to keep a safe distance from the dangers of the intifada and may even have tried to bring this about by, for example, arranging early marriages for them or removing them from school and keeping them busy at home with domestic duties, this is no longer viewed as the only honourable course of action. The prevalent ethos of the intifada is that it is almost as heroic for a woman as for a man, to devote herself to the cause, and this occasionally includes being imprisoned for it.

Index on Censorship reports that, in February 1992, "Amnesty International called on governments around the world to stop one of the most demeaning human rights violations inflicted on women: rape or sexual abuse at the hands of soldiers, police and prison guards. Women are raped or sexually abused in all regions of the world, and many governments persistently refuse to recognize this as a serious human rights violation ... Dozens of Palestinian women and girls detained in the Israeli-Occupied Territories have reportedly been

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5. Ibid., p.38.

sexually abused or threatened."<sup>6</sup>

Ex-prisoner Rabiha Thiab confirms this. The Israeli interrogator, she tells us, "cleverly chooses to attack women where they are most vulnerable; in our society, a woman's value is equated with her honour. To quickly get information, the investigator usually forces her to take off her clothes and then threatens to inform her family [that she undressed in front of man]. This is just one of the means of forcing women to confess.

"Various physical and psychological measures were used against me and are usually used on both men women. Among these measures are: being bound with heavy chains and left to stand for hours under the scorching summer sun or left out in the heavy winter rain and wind; having the head covered with a sack to encourage suffocation. Generally speaking, men are more often exposed to greater physical torture while women are subject to greater psychological torture."

Rabiha concludes: "While both our men and women in Israeli prisons are subject to the occupier's violence because they are Palestinians, our women, because of their sex, are subject to another form of violence, patriarchal violence. The instruments of torture and the way they're used reflect these two layers of repression suffered by our women."<sup>7</sup>

## **Conflicting Israeli Influences**

The influence of Israel reaches into every corner of Palestinians' lives. Although largely experienced as destructive, it has a number of less negative qualities. Thus far the occupation, while claiming to be benevolent, has been, in fact, highly repressive and often brutal. The Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has witnessed the least attractive side of Israeli society which, in their eyes, is an overwhelmingly militaristic one.

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6. Index on Censorship, 4/1992.

7. Interview with Thiab, Rabiha, "Palestinian Women's Experiences in Prison", edited by Fatima Abu Hanieh, Sparks, No 5, October 1992, pp.14-15.

This perception tends to make a different impression on men and women. For while many Palestinian men may wish to emulate the soldierly aspect of Israeli life and to fight back, women, on the whole, are repelled by it.

This does not mean of course that they have been able to avoid contact with the occupation authorities. There has been little choice in a situation where soldiers are liable to barge unannounced into a women's home at any time of the day or night. This realization has made a mockery of any notion of the sanctity of the private space, usually understood to be the realm of women, in Palestinian society. The threat of intrusion, which is constantly present, has raised the general level of anxiety, particularly among women and children.

But women have also chosen to confront the occupation in ways that can be described as both active and passive. A common instinct has been to protect, especially when young children are involved. A woman might protect a child by placing her body between the child and the soldier or soldiers that threaten it. Her protection might include shouting at the soldiers or screaming, which may well have intimidating effect, hiding fugitives in her home, and defying a curfew to get food or medical supplies.

As well, women engage in non-violent protest: demonstrations, sit-ins, the organization of alternative education when schools are closed, and the operation of an alternative economy. For example, "During the uprising, the women's committees began to establish women's productive cooperatives, in response to the food shortages caused by army curfews and the boycott of Israeli products."<sup>1</sup>

Although Israeli soldiers seem more reluctant to harm women, this has not stopped them from shooting women and girls, beating them, firing tear gas at pregnant women and making women and their children homeless by demolishing the family dwelling as a form of

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1. Hiltermann, Joost R, "The Women's Movement during the Uprising", Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol XX, No 3, Spring 1991, p.51.

collective punishment. It is true that females are less likely than men to be imprisoned which perhaps stems from a residual feeling that women are less effective, less threatening. Although by no means widespread, it has been noted by a number of observers that army personnel appear to exercise marginally more control when females are involved. But, equally, women are frequently the targets of petty acts of vandalism, such as the overturning of their vegetable stands in the market, the smashing of household possessions or the expression of sexual taunts.

There is another side to Israeli society. With the continuation of the occupation, groups within Israel have sprung up to oppose it, among them a number of women's groups. But, often, an uneasy relationship exists between these groups and the Palestinian women whom they work to support. As part of the oppressing society, they are perceived as having split loyalties. However, organizations such as Women in Black, whose members hold a silent anti-occupation vigil for one hour every Friday afternoon in cities throughout Israel, and the Women's Organization for Political Prisoners (WOFPP), which works to ease conditions for and to publicize the plight of Palestinian females held in Israeli prisons, have been remarkably effective.

Most of the work of the WOFPP, which is based in Tel Aviv, is carried out on a voluntary basis. One of the volunteers, Hava Keller, admitted recently that many Israelis regard her as a traitor for helping Palestinians. "This organization is not welcomed by the Jewish people," she said, adding that "many of the organization's volunteers keep their membership secret because they are afraid of reprisals."<sup>2</sup>

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the occupation have provided fertile ground for an assortment of creative endeavours. One of these, a rather unusual film, was released this year in Israel. Made

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2. Turjman, Ghada, "Women's Organization for Political Prisoners: Working to make life easier for detainees", *Al-Fajr*, 16 March 1992.

by an Israeli man, David Bencheitrit, and entitled "Through the Veil of Exile", it explores the lives of three Palestinian women. For the film-maker, "this is a film about exile and identity. Exile from the land is one exile, and I would say the simpler one. The other is the internal exile in which these women find themselves, and this exile is deeper and more difficult to cope with. This is an exile of women who are struggling for their liberation in society and who find themselves contemptuously relegated to the lifestyles they tried to change."<sup>3</sup> He adds that he was "looking for women who could relate, through their personal stories, the pain and drama of being a refugee, uprooted, and lacking identity. I chose these women because they embodied these elements, but also because they rebelled against their own society as well as against the occupation."<sup>4</sup>

It would probably be fair to venture that the gulf separating Israeli and Palestinian women is too wide to be easily bridged. Their priorities, inevitably, are quite different. For Palestinians, men and women, the national question and the ending of the occupation are always foremost in their minds. Israeli Jewish women, on the other hand, being in the position of inhabiting their own independent state, can enjoy the luxury of indulging in occasional soul-searching. Certainly the more liberal among them agonize about the harm they are doing to the Palestinians but there is also much energy devoted to opposing the fundamental inequalities in Israeli society between men and women, resulting from Jewish law and tradition.

Yet, interestingly, even when an Israeli woman leaps to the defence of Palestinian rights, she often does so for reasons other than simple justice. For example, Rivka Ben Aharon, a Jerusalem schoolteacher, in response to the growing Jewish hatred of Arabs, declares, "I felt I had to do something to diminish the hatred even a little. I felt the values which are so important to me, and on which democracy in Israel is based - and perhaps also our moral survival in

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3. Shir, Hana, "Through the Veil of Exile", New Outlook, September-October 1992, p.31.

4. Ibid., p.31.

this country - were being undermined. I could not sit by idly."<sup>5</sup>

More mutual forms of interaction also occur, for example dialogue groups and conferences in which Palestinian and Israeli women participate on an equal footing. Although reservations remain about dealing with the wider Israeli "peace camp", meetings between women are generally regarded in a more positive light.

The importance of such discourse, as Hanan Ashrawi remarks, lies in "the actual reality from which it emanates, going back to the early days of the occupation when few courageous voices among Israeli women were raised in solidarity with the Palestinian people in general and Palestinian women in particular."<sup>6</sup> However, now, she adds, "some Israeli women are challenging the norms, policies and political programmes of their own government within a militaristic, rigid and highly structured status quo" and, thus, despite the asymmetry, "Palestinian and Israeli women have developed a mutual discourse based on a shared understanding of principles."<sup>7</sup>

This "shared understanding" has been able to translate into formal declarations of intent. The first conference between Palestinian and Israeli women took place in Brussels in early 1989. On that occasion, although there was "a willingness to address the issues directly and to deal with each other in a straightforward manner, without power struggles or a struggle for ascendancy in political positions,"<sup>8</sup> it proved impossible for the two groups to agree on the signing of a final joint statement.

At a second conference in Brussels, however, in September 1992, attended by 40 Israeli and Palestinian women, agreement was

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5. Quoted by Lipman, Beata, *Israel: The Embattled Land*, p.61.

6. Mikhail Ashrawi, Hanan, "The Pursuit of Peace: How to Break a Mold of Discourse", *MECC Perspectives*, Issue No 9-10, 1991, p.76.

7. *Ibid.*, p.77.

8. Lewis, Harriet, "It is Possible to Agree on Principles", an interview with Hanan Mikhail Ashrawi, *New Outlook*, June-July 1989, p.7.

reached on three fundamental points: firstly, there must be a two-state solution; secondly, the PLO must be recognized as the representative of the Palestinian people; and, thirdly, the peace process must be supported. The final outcome of the conference was "a request to the European Community to fund two centers, one in East Jerusalem and one in West Jerusalem, for the defense of human rights, women's rights, the promotion of cultural and educational activities and the publication of their work and activities."<sup>9</sup>

Israeli society has had an impact on Palestinian women in more subtle ways too. It places on their doorstep an alternative societal model. Although far from being a haven of women's liberation, Israel tends towards a Western approach which allows women certain rights and freedoms. This cannot help but make some impression on Palestinians who come into contact with it.

### **Women, Culture and Identity**

"The emerging role of women in the intifada and the increasing recognition of the gender agenda as a significant factor in the struggle for national independence are generally creating a feminist perspective which has been noticeably absent in Palestinian culture."<sup>1</sup>

Although most of the discussion so far has concerned politics and survival, there is another dimension to life in the occupied territories, which will be discussed under the broad heading of "culture and identity." Depending on which viewpoint one adopts, Palestinian women's culture is either an endangered species or a tough survivor of inhospitable places.

We should first define what we mean by "culture." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, culture refers to "the cultivating or development (of the mind, faculties, manners etc); the training,

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9. C Cook, Mary, "Palestinian and Israeli women meet in Brussels", *Al-Fajr*, 5 October 1992.

1. Mikhail-Ashrawi, Hanan, *From Intifada to Independence*, p.38.

development and refinement of mind, tastes and manners; the condition of being thus trained and refined; the intellectual side of civilization". In the Palestinian context, an essential cultural task is to preserve the national identity in the face of determined opposition.

"When Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, it clashed with the population when it changed the curriculum, censored textbooks, or deleted parts of books."<sup>2</sup> The education system, anyway, was far from perfect, being based on the Jordanian system (that of Gaza followed the Egyptian model), which itself discouraged any expression of Palestinian identity and was generally considered out-of-date and lacking in creativity.

For the Israeli state, even more, it was of the utmost importance to negate any manifestation of "Palestinianism". Without a clear national identity, the Palestinians become just another Arab sub-group with no special claim to the land. Thus, the Israeli authorities have sought to systematically suppress all mention of the words "Palestine" and "Palestinian," any display of the Palestinian flag or even its colours, the dissemination of material suggesting the Palestinian people may have a historic attachment to their land, and even expressions of nationalist sentiment in poetry and theatre. Of course, the more repressive the Israeli tactics have been, the more determined have been Palestinians not simply to preserve the tattered remnants of their culture but to develop and celebrate it in every possible way.

Palestinian culture, as Hanan Ashrawi asserts, "is an expression of and a vehicle for national and political legitimization in the context of the intifada as a process of de-legitimizing Israeli occupation while affirming the legitimacy of Palestinian rights and realities. The intifada's rejection of Israeli attempts at creating a counterfeit and abnormal reality of occupation by imposing norms and structures external to the genuine Palestinian experience and self-definition, lies

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2. Najjar, Orayb Aref, *Portraits of Palestinian Women*, p.182.



at the center of the substance and role of Palestinian culture."<sup>3</sup>

Women occupy a special place in the Palestinian cultural endeavour. Although disadvantaged in certain basic respects, they paradoxically carry a disproportionately heavy responsibility for the maintenance of a national identity under siege. They have long struggled for greater equality in education because they know that progress for women will be hard going without a change in attitudes. At the most elementary level, as pioneers in women's rights recognized, a woman without education will be ill-equipped to prepare her children for adulthood.

Education is one side of the coin while, on the other, is self-expression in its many forms and intricacies. From the young women learning traditional embroidery in a Gazan refugee camp to the Ramallah mother taking her children to Dabkeh (the Palestinian national dance) classes, from the poetry of Hanan Ashrawi to the ceramic art of Vera Tamari, all retain an urgent and authentic Palestinian content which seems in little danger of being lost.

There are, however, a number of complicating factors. The embroiderers in Gaza, for example, may well prefer more garish, non-traditional patterns. In the face of encroaching modernity, it is sometimes difficult to remember that one is concerned, above all, with survival. In addition, as women are exposed to new ideas and expectations, as far as education, career and family life are concerned, they may start to equate the traditional aspects of Palestinian life with stale old ways which have lost the power to entice.

As in other areas, one may discern formal and informal dimensions to the cultural enterprise, and also ancient and modern expressions of it. Alongside the determined preservation of, for example, Palestinian embroidery or oral poetry, a self-consciously modern political art has sprung up.

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3. Mikhail-Ashrawi, Hanan, *From Intifada to Independence*, p.38.

"A nation," as Vera Tamari comments, "must have art ... Most of our art is political though, and there are dangers in that. Political art expresses and maybe purges people's feelings about their situation, and it is useful if it shows people abroad what we are experiencing, but such an approach used exclusively doesn't teach people to enjoy art for itself and doesn't develop their sensitivity. Some of our artists have fallen into the trap of using the same political themes and symbols over and over again. We've lost a lot as far as self-expression goes."<sup>4</sup> The "political themes and symbols" to which she refers include doves, chains and clenched fists which, she says, are international socialist symbols rather than Palestinian ones. There is a danger of diluting the unique quality of "Palestinianism" and a further danger of excluding women altogether since Art, in the formal Western sense, tends to be an exclusively male preserve. The more informal versions utilize the energies of women, for example in women's committees, but their relative invisibility tends to render them less valid. Cooking, for example, is not an art form, even though it involves the vital task of preserving Palestinian national dishes. Women telling each other stories is regarded as gossip although, in reality, it is helping to keep alive Palestinian oral history.

Another informal manifestation is the cultural weapon of dress. Anthropologist Shelagh Weir has identified a "phenomenon" whereby the "richly embroidered costumes worn by women of village origins have not only become an increasingly self-conscious statement of their own Palestinian identity and national aspirations, but are also, in various modifications, performing the same task on behalf of Palestinians generally, whatever their place of residence, social background or usual modes of attire."<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon can be understood, she says, "in the context of a beleaguered, fragmented society which has seen its land occupied and appropriated, its villages and institutions destroyed, and its people dispersed. In these circumstances, culture and tradition become suddenly more precious ... At the same time, visual symbols are needed which can condense

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4. Najjar, *op.cit.*, pp.212-213.

5. Weir, Shelagh, *Palestinian Costume*, p.273.

and assert potent sentiments such as attachment to territory, the right to statehood, continuity from the past, present existence, cultural and social merit, and so on."<sup>6</sup>

Let us end with a poem by a woman. Fadwa Tuqan was born in Nablus in 1917. When the Israelis occupied the West Bank in 1967, she declared, "I'll die on my doorstep. I'm not going to flee to another country. Unthinkable." In a poem entitled "Enough for me," she writes:

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Enough for me to die on her earth  
be buried in her  
to melt and vanish into her soil  
then sprout forth as a flower  
played with by a child from my country  
Enough for me to remain  
in my country's embrace  
to be in her close as a handful of dust  
a sprig of grass  
a flower.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Ibid., pp.273-274.

7. Tuqan, Fadwa, *A Mountainous Journey: The Life of Palestine's Outstanding Woman Poet*, p.231.

## CONCLUSIONS

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The experiences of women in Palestine, both before and during the intifada, indicate movement in a number of directions. I would like, therefore, to draw conclusions on three levels: from the perspectives of, firstly, actual gains; secondly, impressions of progress or otherwise; and, thirdly, expectations as to the shape of a future Palestinian state.

Women, according to Hanan Ashrawi, "did not sit back and ask the men to grant them freedom and equality; women in the intifada went out and actually did things. They confronted the army. They built barricades. They threw stones. They helped prevent the arrest of men. They took on-the-spot decisions. As a result, it's very difficult for a man to challenge a women and say no, you can't do this, because she's already done it. The whole system of taboos, and the definitions of honor and shame have changed. Now it is the national issue which determines what is shameful and what is not, not the social issue."<sup>1</sup>

These are bold assertions which, although they undoubtedly contain a great deal of truth, fail to completely take into account the behaviour of men. Male responses are complex because, on the one hand, men may welcome greater female participation and even encourage it; at the same time, they cannot help but retain a residual, and often not even fully articulated, determination to preserve traditional male privileges. The degree of disapproval is not directly

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1. Mikhail-Ashrawi, Hanan, talking to Harriet Lewis, New Outlook, June-July 1989, p.8.

related to class. However, education and affluence, on the whole, are more likely to result in a more liberal attitude towards the concept of a women having the right to make her own choices.

Having said that, it is also clear that attitudes are changing rapidly in Palestinian society. With the present upsurge in Islamic extremism in the occupied territories, however, and the deteriorating state of the Palestinian economy, which increasingly render freedom of choice for anyone a luxury, certain constraints are making themselves felt. These increasingly throw into question the progress women thought they were making.

There are two principal types of progress, the first being statistically determinable while the second tends to be more impressionistic. We have already discussed improvements in education and work opportunities for women. But while these have been encouraging, they have had little impact on the fundamental structure of Palestinian society. As Hamida Kazi suggests, "mere participation does not necessarily lead to equality and emancipation."<sup>2</sup>

One has to ask, of course, what sort of "emancipation" are Palestinian women actually seeking? Do they want absolute equality with men? Or are their goals somewhat different? It is permissible, in this respect, to refer to the entire female Palestinian population because, rather than a series of specificities, one is attempting to identify a general tendency sweeping through the society, which affects some women a great deal and others hardly at all.

As has been comprehensively demonstrated in this paper, women have contributed to the intifada struggle with determination and vigour. They have done so in ways both formal and informal, with ingenuity, courage and ideological fervour. The Women's Action Committees, on the one hand, can be regarded as a success because they have been able to articulate a "gender agenda," have

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2. Kazi, Hamida, "Palestinian Women and the National Liberation Movement: A Social perspective", Khamsin, Women in the Middle East, p.38.

empowered women to actively involve themselves in communal and anti-occupation activities, and have had some impact on the shape of the future state.

On the other hand, they have tended to fall short of fulfilling the expectations of a large segment of the population, partly because they are utilized by very few women - and these, on the whole, a politically-aware elite - and partly because they are divided along nationally-determined factional lines rather than according to women's needs.

As Huda Abd al-Hadi remarks, "Palestinian women are energetic, enthusiastic and generous in their struggle. Nonetheless, women's participation in the struggle has not reached every house. This is due to a major mistake on the part of the women's grassroots committees, who are committed to the PLO but disapprove of [and often exclude] politically-independent women. From the point of view of our national struggle, the committees should avoid factionalism and welcome all women, especially independent ones, so as to gather a wider range of women for the struggle."<sup>3</sup>

Slowly there has been a change in the intensity of women's participation. They have been inhibited by a combination of factors: battle weariness, for one thing, in the face of insurmountable odds and few real gains; the insistence of other priorities, notably survival and the provision of as normal life as possible for their children; and male pressures, mainly conservative and religiously-based ones. Thus, women have chosen, or been forced, to withdraw from the front line without achieving an irreversible improvement in their status.

Several indicators support this assertion. Firstly, the actions - or lack of action - and the language of the male Palestinian leadership. As already indicated, there has been a distressing absence of tangible support for women's rights, although this is perhaps now changing. Hanan Ashrawi again: "Women are still predominantly seen through

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3. Abd al-Hadi, Huda, talking to Amal al-Jawhari, Sparks/Wamid October 1992 (adapted from Al-Mar'a, No 14).

their reproductive role, supportive rather than active, but increasingly often you hear at least lip-service paid to women as initiators. Our task is to naturalise this new image, to make it an integral part of our culture, and feminist issues and linguistic structures and perceptions part of our everyday vocabulary. We must end the superficial glorification and romanticisation of the role of women."<sup>4</sup>

It is considerably easier for women in privileged positions, such as Dr Ashrawi, to utter, and even believe, these stirring words. For others it is little short of unimaginable.

Secondly, there is a fear among many women, and educated women in particular, of being overwhelmed by a conservative backlash, which seeks to impose unwelcome life-styles, such as the wearing of Islamic dress, upon them. Fundamentalist groups operate, to some extent, by intimidation. Women, more and more worn down and worn out, grow increasingly unwilling to assert themselves; it is less stressful to conform.

Thirdly, in the absence of a Palestinian legislative body, the community must look to traditional authority figures for guidance. But pronouncements by such people, whose ideas may well be rooted in an inadequate and reactionary understanding of religious law, tend to be biased in favour of the existing system of entrenched male dominance.

Women, in many cases ignorant of their rights under the Islamic shari'a law, are severely disadvantaged. Worse, a woman is very often afraid of insisting upon her rights in case she is abandoned by her husband or disgraced in the eyes of her community. In response, two women's legal centres have been set up to combat discriminatory practices of this sort. But they are regarded as flying so blatantly in the face of the familiar and the safe that large segments of the Palestinian public, including some of the people they exist to help, are unable to take advantage of their services. Such suspicions,

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4. Mikhail-Ashrawi, Hanan, quoted in Warnock, Land Before Honour, p.187.

one hopes, will subside with the passage of time since - and this is crucial - a fundamental source of inequality is discrimination on the basis of law.

Finally, there is the question of naturalness and unnaturalness. A women's "natural" role, as it is understood in Palestinian society, is to behave modestly at all times, to marry, to bear children - the more the better in the Palestinian context - and to put home and family ahead of all else. An "unnatural" woman works outside the home, possibly chooses not to marry or to have children, is politically active and even, on occasion, takes up arms on behalf of the revolution.

Is there any evidence to suggest that such notions are in the process of transformation? The answer has to be a highly qualified "yes". As has been illustrated, the stigma of having a daughter in prison has been reduced; parents are discovering a new pride in the overt activism and high public profiles of their daughters; husbands and wives are working side by side in the liberation struggle. But this applies only to a small proportion of the population, the vanguard one might call it.

For the vast majority of Palestinian women, life is very different. A young girl in a Gaza refugee camp is still brought up to regard marriage and the production of sons as the pinnacle of her achievement. But even she, in response to the desperate harshness of her life, may be forced to work outside the home, even to start her own business. Another vanguard. And, painfully slowly, attitudes begin to shift.

Talking to Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, one gets a sense of fear, of helplessness and desperation but also of defiance, of exhilaration at the gains so far achieved. Although it is rarely advisable to generalize, it would probably be safe to say that, despite the many qualms expressed in this paper, Palestinian women are in no danger of following in the footsteps of their post-revolutionary Algerian sisters. They have already come too far.



A Palestinian state, when at last it comes into being, holds great promise for its female citizens. It will almost certainly provide a diversity of opportunities, along with the frustrations felt by women the world over. The struggles of Palestinian women will not, even then, be over, but there is little doubt that their hard work and ingenuity will prove an inspiration to women everywhere.



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