

# Past and Future Struggles: Palestinian Women Negotiate Violent Conflict

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On 6 September 2003 Palestinian women in the West Bank town of Tulkarem organized a demonstration of more than 200 Palestinian, Israeli and international women to protest against the Apartheid Wall that is being built by Israel in the occupied territories. Their action should not surprise us as Palestinian women are well known for their active participation in resisting the occupation. Given the severity of their situation, they have little choice but to focus first and foremost on the national struggle. But does this mean that “women’s issues” will inevitably be sidelined? Are such concerns a luxury, to be attended to once the serious business of war is ended?

Theories of war tend to concentrate on women as victims of armed conflict, but this is by no means the whole story. In this article, I want to look at ways in which Palestinian women have been victimized by war but, equally importantly, at ways in which they have developed sources of strength. I will argue that the tension inherent in their multiple roles has resulted in the emergence of a female “model of resistance”,<sup>1</sup> with the skills and determination to develop her own agenda in a future Palestinian state.

## Theories of Women and War

When considering the participation of women in armed conflict, we should bear in mind the argument that, while war “can be regarded as the cornerstone of masculinity... participation in war... is not normally considered a significant event in the social identity construction process of women”.<sup>2</sup> In war, women experience various levels of vulnerability. When the men of the community are on the battlefield, or have been imprisoned or killed, women find themselves without protection and are more likely to be victimized by the enemy and even by members of their own community. Since women act as symbols, both of the identity and the honor of their group, they are liable to become targets of enemy aggression. Many women suffer feelings of fear, powerlessness and depression, which inevitably have an impact on their coping mechanisms.

Violence lies at the heart of this debate. Fear of violence “limits women’s freedom of movement”<sup>3</sup> and such fears become even more pronounced during periods of conflict. Both men and women “suffer in a world permeated by violence”. However, “in the main, their experiences of violence differ. Men are involved more with the direct violence of armed combat”.<sup>4</sup> It is certainly the case

that women are more likely to be disadvantaged – whether as rape victims, refugees or war widows – by violence in conflict.

But to what extent can one generalize? In some cases, for example that of the Palestinians, an entire population is under siege and everyone is rendered powerless while, in other cases, the women of the community choose to involve themselves in the struggle in a positive way. Women take part in conflict for a number of reasons: out of a sense of duty or loyalty to their country, or because they believe it will lead to a better life for their children. Their involvement may stem from the general mobilization of the group or from a personal belief that action is necessary. More often than not, women are caught up in conflict because they have no choice. Modes of involvement vary from gender-appropriate activities such as child-care, social support and tending the sick and injured, to agitation and political activity, and, in some instances, armed combat.

There has been much general theorizing about how men manage violent conflicts and how women endure them, much of it relating to the broad themes of male power and female passivity. There is evidence that, at times when legal protection is absent, some men take advantage of the situation to reinforce their dominance within the family. For example, in Northern Ireland, the “interaction of militarism and masculinity...means that there is a much wider tendency to use or to threaten to use guns in the control and abuse of women within the context of domestic violence”.<sup>5</sup> One result of this is that women experience feelings of confusion between identification with the larger community and the fear of violence within their own private domain. It has been argued, too, that when conflict “intrudes into the society – as in the case of invasion or colonialism – it may become very difficult to maintain traditional social order”.<sup>6</sup>

### A History of Violence and Activism

Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been living a war situation for over fifty years. They have been exposed to various levels of vulnerability, as a result of Israeli violence, which has intruded into all aspects of their lives. But they have also developed formidable coping mechanisms. Their involvement in the liberation struggle has forced them from their homes to confront the Israeli enemy. They have had no choice but to learn the skills necessary to protect their children.

From the beginning of the 20th century, what may be termed “resistance” activities by Palestinian women have passed through several stages. They began as charitable and social welfare work by a small group of upper and middle class ladies. After World War I, women took part

in demonstrations against British policies in Palestine. Although Palestinian women’s activity during the British Mandate period has been described as “politically unaware,” these women “established an organized and often militant movement that was actively involved in social, political, and national affairs.”<sup>7</sup> During the *nakbah* (catastrophe) of 1948, when the State of Israel was established, over 750,000 Palestinians fled from their land. The dispossessed community was deeply traumatized. Losing Palestine, in the words of one woman, “was like losing a husband or a son.”<sup>8</sup> In this environment, women became the principal symbols of Palestinian identity.

As time passed, Palestinians grew determined to resist the occupation of their land, if necessary by force. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in 1964 and, under its umbrella in 1965, the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW). During the late 1960s and 1970s, through armed resistance activities and the building of national institutions, Palestinians transformed themselves from an unresolved refugee problem into a self-conscious national entity. The attitudes of women were also changing.

In the wake of the 1967 war, in which Israel seized control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, women organized themselves to provide support services to the population. The occupation brought “a more intimate form of oppression as the occupying forces entered homes and harassed even women and children.”<sup>9</sup> This “intensified Palestinian nationalism in gendered ways by provoking a politicized response to the invasion of the private sphere.”<sup>10</sup> In the occupied territories, Palestinian women developed new organizations in the 1970s, affiliated to the main political factions. These were radically different from earlier organizations, which were on the whole run by urban middle class women and had tended to focus on welfare concerns. In contrast the “women’s work committees stressed forming cooperatives for food processing and for agricultural products... Most importantly, they engaged women in political discussions which soon turned into discussions about women’s issues and women’s rights.”<sup>11</sup>

With the start of the *intifada* in 1987 came unfamiliar – although equally urgent - roles for women. The early days of the *intifada* were, in many ways, an exhilarating time for women as they participated, for example, in the construction of alternative educational facilities, as schools were closed all over the occupied territories. Girls and women also took part in spontaneous confrontations with Israeli troops on the streets of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It seemed to many women that the struggle for women’s rights was proceeding alongside the national struggle; increasing numbers were

engaging in feminist debate. During this period, “the large-scale political mobilisation of Palestinian women was not perceived as a challenge to social stability but rather as a necessary and valuable contribution to the national struggle.”<sup>12</sup> But it was also an insecure period in which Israeli repression grew progressively harsher and collective punishment became routine.

By the early 1990s, in the view of Hamami and Kuttab, two negative trends began to emerge. The first was some adverse social effects on women of the *intifada*, in terms of control over women’s mobility, constraints on women’s behaviour, and a tendency towards earlier marriage for girls. Second, it was becoming apparent that the national issue could easily be hijacked “by an ideology that saw women’s political activism not as a contribution to national liberation but as a threat to it.” Women activists were being physically attacked by young men in the name of religion and Islamic dress was being imposed on women.<sup>13</sup>

In September 1993, to the surprise of many observers, the government of Israel and the PLO signed a Declaration of Principles (known as the Oslo Accords), which gave Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip limited autonomy. Many saw this as a decisive move towards the creation of an independent state in the occupied territories, and Palestinians began to work towards self-government. Planning failed, however, to take into account women’s aspirations for equal rights of citizenship. The new Palestinian Authority (PA), headed by Yasir Arafat, was almost exclusively male and the proposed constitution largely ignored women’s concerns.

In response, women’s groups produced a Declaration of Principles on Women’s Rights, which states: “We, the women of Palestine, from all social categories and the various faiths, including workers, farmers, housewives, students, professionals, and politicians, promulgate our determination to proceed without struggle to abolish all forms of discrimination and inequality against women, which were propagated by the different forms of colonialism on our land, ending with the Israeli Occupation, and which were reinforced by the conglomeration of customs and traditions prejudiced against women, embodied in a number of existing laws and legislation.”<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, developments were interrupted in September 2000, when a second *intifada* erupted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This has been very different from the first uprising, especially for women. In the words of a West Bank woman: “During the first *intifada*, it was easier for women to take part in protests... But in this latest struggle, because the Israelis used guns and tanks so quickly, women have kept back.”<sup>15</sup>

### Negative Impacts of War on Palestinian Women

The long conflict, and particularly the current situation, have had a negative impacts on Palestinian women. Women and girls have been victimized by a deliberate Israeli policy of brutality and terrorization. Between 28 September 2000 and 18 August 2003, 128 Palestinian women (not including girls under 15) have been killed<sup>16</sup> and hundreds more injured; most of them “accidental victims” of indiscriminate Israeli attacks. For example, an 18-year old woman in Hebron, Areej al-Jibali, was killed when two bullets struck her in the back while she was hanging laundry outside her house. On 1 September 2003, eight-year old Aya Fayad was shot dead as she rode her bicycle. According to her mother, Aya “was excitedly awaiting the first day of the school year. She was delighted with her new books, and for days she had insisted on carrying her new school bag and wearing the new clothes her mother had bought in preparation.”<sup>17</sup> Another school girl, 14-year old Ghazala Jarada, was injured in the head by a rubber-coated bullet as she was returning home from school.

Some women have died as a result of not being able to reach hospitals. Others have been forced to give birth at Israeli army checkpoints. Abir Taisir Najjar, for example, went into labor on the morning of 18 March 2003 in Nablus. The ambulance in which she was travelling was stopped at an Israeli checkpoint. In Abir’s words: “My screams grew bigger. My time was due. The soldiers at the checkpoint ignored our presence and they searched the ambulance slowly despite my screams and my critical condition. What hurt me more was that a soldier opened the door of the ambulance in the rear and searched the vehicle there without any consideration or mercy.” By the time the ambulance was permitted to proceed, Abir had given birth.<sup>18</sup>

There has been a significant rise in psychological illnesses as women see their children terrorized, their homes demolished, and their towns and villages turned into war zones. Many women admit to feeling depressed and demoralized. Iman Greieb, for example, whose neighborhood in Beit Sahour near Bethlehem was shelled for over five hours by the Israelis, while she and her four children covered in terror in their home, commented: “The shelling of my home where I was with my children has affected me deeply; it has taken part of my heart. I no more feel capable of happiness, whatever may happen to me and my family.”<sup>19</sup>

There are also reports of an increase in domestic violence against women. This has resulted from the lack of an independent judiciary and police force as well as men’s perception of their own powerlessness, which seeks a release in aggression against weaker members of the family. A survey carried out in the West Bank revealed that

between 44 and 52 per cent of the women interviewed said they had been exposed to psychological violence; and 21 – 23 per cent admitted experiencing physical violence.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, “when a woman is physically abused by her husband and asks for support and protection from her relatives, her relatives often force her to return to her husband under the pretext of the children’s welfare.”<sup>21</sup>

However, attitudes may be changing. Another public opinion poll on the issue of violence against women revealed that 49.3 per cent of respondents believe Palestinian customs and traditions constitute a stumbling block to the progress of women; and 37.9 per cent said that the Palestinian Authority had not established a sufficient number of institutions to combat violence against women. According to one of the poll’s organizers, “such a survey aimed at disclosing and unveiling the repercussions of a sensitive issue like violence against women, and also to shed light on its being a reflection of the prevailing male culture in our Palestinian society. This culture is exploited by the men to impose their control and domination on women”.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, Palestinian women are subjected to violence by the international community and international media, in the forms, first, of failure by international bodies and individual states to protect Palestinian civilians from the aggressive policies of the Israeli occupation and second, of myth-making that portrays Palestinian nationalism as terrorism. To the dismay of families who do everything they can to protect their children, Palestinian women have been portrayed as “unnatural mothers.” The “official Israeli propaganda and much of the Israeli media have promoted the idea of Palestinian mothers pushing their children to be killed on the frontlines of the clashes. This adds further pain and suffering to Palestinian women. They are dispossessed of their humanity, while their morality and love for their children is questioned.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the extreme gravity of the situation faced by the Palestinian population, and even though they have been disproportionately victimized by acts of violence, Palestinian women have had relatively little involvement in the waging of violence through a combination of historical patterns, traditional practices, the particular circumstances of the conflict, and local constructions of masculinity and femininity. However, it was reported in March 2002 that a special unit for female suicide bombers had been set up in the West Bank. According to a leader of al-Aqsa Brigades: “We have 200 young women from the Bethlehem area alone ready to sacrifice themselves for the homeland”.<sup>24</sup>

The emergence of the female suicide bomber must be regarded as a significant deviation from the conventions

of Palestinian society. In a community that values appropriate gender roles, the woman who is prepared to sacrifice herself, even for the sacred national struggle, is likely to be regarded as abnormal. The suggestion that large numbers of young Palestinian women are now prepared to die violently for the cause indicates either that the desperation of the Palestinian plight has unbalanced normal gender hierarchies or that the position of women in Palestinian society is undergoing radical change.

Some commentators argue that the polarization of Palestinian society and, in particular, the growing centrality of militant Islamic groups, constitutes a setback for women. The element of insecurity in Palestinian society, caused by intensified Israeli repression, has led to the reduction of freedom and choice for many women. Families, anxious about their daughters’ safety – for example, at university or in the work place – often prefer to keep the girls at home or marry them off early. As a result of the Israeli re-occupation of most of the West Bank in 2002, women’s organizations have found it difficult to maintain their activities.

### Conclusion

As this brief survey illustrates, Palestinian women have been active throughout the national liberation struggle. With an increase in educational opportunities for girls, together with changing attitudes, women have been able not just to contribute towards the waging of the struggle but also to create a space in which they can push for enhanced women’s rights. It is clear that they have been empowered by their participation in the resistance movement. Women are fighting back, not just against the Israeli occupation but also against some of the negative traditions of their own society. They have shown on countless occasions their courage and steadfastness in the face of unimaginable suffering. They have lost their children, suffered miscarriages, and seen their homes destroyed and their husbands imprisoned.

What measures are available to protect women from the violence of armed conflict? One way would be to alter radically the way we try to resolve conflicts. UN Resolution 1325 (2001), the first resolution ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women’s contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace, reaffirms “the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building” and stresses “the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.”<sup>25</sup> A proposal has been put forward for an “international women’s commission,” which would be “formally attached as an advisory panel to any Middle East peace negotiations...

The commission, made up of Palestinian, Israeli and international women peacemakers, would have a specific mandate to review all documents in the light of how they would impact on women, children and normal, non-military society."<sup>26</sup>

A second way to protect women is through the strengthening of civil society. As Mary Kaldor argues, "war and the threat of war always represented a limitation on democracy... Global civil society...is about 'civilizing' or democratizing globalization, about the process through which groups, movements and individuals can demand a global rule of law, global justice and global empowerment."<sup>27</sup> Global civil society is offered as an alternative to

war. For women, who tend to be associated with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other non-violent and constructive alternatives to war, the notion of the increased globalization of civil society provides the possibility that Palestinian women, in the future, will be able to play a more respected role in their society.

Finally, the resilience and extraordinary strength shown by Palestinian women living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are positive indicators that the latest round of Israeli state violence against them, their families and their homes will not succeed in breaking either their spirits or their determination to resist until a just solution is finally achieved.

## ENDNOTES

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19. Reported by Randa Siniara of Al-Haq, in a presentation to the Sanabel Committee in support of Palestinian women and children, 29 April 2003.
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