



Palestinian Women:

Political Activism Since Oslo

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Palestinian women occupy a special place in Arab women's political history because of their dynamic involvement in the long Palestinian struggle. Similar to the case of women in the Algerian Revolution, Palestinian women's participation in the nationalist struggle provided an historical opportunity for their social and economic liberation (Hiltermann 1991; Kawar 1996; Peteet 1991; Sabbagh 1998). On the other hand, the Palestinian women's case is a good example of how the political context mandates parameters of women political participation and their struggle for equality.

This paper will give an overview of developments in Palestinian women's participation in political life since the Oslo agreement and the return of the PLO to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Oslo agreement helped redefine Palestinian women's activism by creating an environment of state formation and civil society development and by availing funding both to the secular non governmental organizations (NGOs) and to women's development projects undertaken by the Palestinian Authority (PA). In fact, the Palestinian women's case is a good example of how the Northern donor community impacts NGO activism in the Arab region, specifically those groups committed to secular change. This is particularly important to the Palestinian women's movement which shares with other Arab women's movements an underlying consensus for an international secular ethos untied to the traditional Islamic norms (see Haddad and Esposito 1998, 50-52).

The advent of Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations was a momentous development for Palestinian politics in that it unleashed energies for state formation, economic development, and democratization in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. With the demise of mobilizational politics following Oslo, women's NGOs rose to the forefront of political activism alongside other progressive institutions. These organiza-

tions are part of a rising Arab NGO movement which is led by a younger generation of urban professionals, who have become disenchanted with stagnant political parties and trade unions (Korany, Brynen and Noble 1998). A number of Palestinian women's centers, led by the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, the Working Women's Society, and the Women's Legal Counseling and Aid Center, exemplify this phenomenon as they stepped into a leadership vacuum left by the weakened faction-sponsored federations of women's committees of the 1980s. As to the returning diaspora-based GUPW, it has always been an essentially nationalist mobilizational organization, therefore, unable to adapt to the demands of project-oriented political and economic development.

Concurrently, on the PA level, women's activism in the area of development is being carried out by women's development offices in several of the ministries, led by the General Directorate of Gender Planning and Development in the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. These offices are working on gender awareness of PA personnel and mainstreaming gender in Palestinian development projects.

It is commonly known that the donor community has become a fact of life in the Palestinian arena since Oslo, they now form the financial backbone of West Bank and Gaza's economic and political development projects, including those by women's NGOs and the PA's women's offices (Palestine Human Development Profile 1996-1997, 31-35; Partners in Peace 1996). Generally, Northern involvement in the development of civil society is a phenomenon evident in many countries of the South, and has, therefore, produced important theoretical concerns in the development literature about loss of autonomy by Southern NGOs and the problem of sustaining development (Fowler



1991, 53-84; Gyimah-Boadi E. 1996, 118-132; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Ndegwa 1994, 19-36).

It is important, however, to recognize that the Palestinian women's movement is grounded in the nationalist mobilizational experience and is, indeed, led by feminist and leftist women who were active in the resistance. There is ample evidence that during the Intifada (1987-1993) women's issues were being discussed in open forums of leftist groups, especially early marriage, forced veiling, and violence against women (Kawar 1996, 99-128; Sabbagh 1998). Clearly, however, the Palestinian women's movement has now materialized as NGOs are led by enterprising, relatively politically autonomous women who are committed to gender issues and women's empowerment. In any case, as will be suggested below, the women's movement's strategies are based on the fact of Palestinian women's economic and political marginalization not just availability of donor funding to certain objectives and strategies.

Palestinian Women's Marginalization

Economically, Palestinian women have had very limited financial resources largely due to the traditional norms that give preference to males in employment,¹ because of the growth in public building projects, supported by donor funds especially from Japan and the United States, or in the residential building industry driven by the prospects of peace (Roy 1999) income, inheritance, property and credit. In addition, under the Israeli occupation, the West Bank and Gaza Strip suffered from many years of low or non existent economic development (average GDP/capita \$1304) and high unemployment. In terms of earned income, women lag far behind men in the rate of employment as they constitute 10%-13% of the labor force (Hammami 1998, 107-110; Roy 1987). Of course, in times of intense political crisis such as the 2000 Intifada, known as al-Quds wal Istiqlal

Intifada (the Intifada of Jerusalem and Independence), economic suffering increases many folds, reducing incomes but also making women's caretaker role extremely important for societal survival.

If the political situation improves, the educational data for the West Bank and Gaza Strip suggest that the prospects are good for the expansion of the female labor force. Evidence can be found in the trend toward equalization of literacy rates among the young and a relatively high percent of females in community colleges and universities enrollment (Social Monitor 1998, 24-32). This is important because preliminary data indicate that education beyond the secondary program is much more likely to be associated with employment for women than for men (Palestinian Census Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey 1996). Also, education is associated with lower fertility and lower early marriage rates (Moghadam 1993, 122-31).

Improved educational opportunities for Palestinian women are likely to increase their public roles both as members of the labor force and as participants in NGOs.

Politically, Palestinian women's marginalization is evident in the top political positions. In the early ministerial appointments of the PA only two were women: Um Jihad, long-term chief of the PLO's social welfare program who is Minister of Social Affairs and Hanan Ashrawi who was given the Ministry of Higher Education portfolio (but has since resigned). Below the top ministerial level, only a handful of women achieved the level of General Director, ranked third to Minister and Deputy Minister and sometimes heading a department. Furthermore, although there is no hard data on membership in the Palestinian negotiating teams, women have been invisible — apart from Ashrawi and a few others who participated briefly at the start of the negotiations (Ashrawi 1995). All in all, according to data reported by the Women's Affairs Committee (1999), women occupy no more than nine percent of high legislative and administrative posts in the PA.

In the legislative and presidential elections, held in January 1996, only five women (5.6%) were elected to the 88-member Palestinian Legislative Council, representing a decline (from 9%) in the representation of women in the faction and quota-based Palestine National Council—the representative body of the PLO. Interestingly, in the presidential elections, the Palestinians made an unprecedented step in the Arab world when Samiha Khalil, a well-know charitable society female leader, ran against Arafat. The main political reason for the low number elected to the Legislative Council is that Fateh and the two leftist factions who ran candidates, Fida and the People's Party, nominated few women. Arafat's strategy upon his return to the Palestinian territories has been to consistently patronize notable clans and to conform

to the pervasive conservative social environment in order to maintain support for the peace process.² The other related reason is the adoption of the single-member-district electoral system, known to be disadvantageous to women (Matland 1998, 74-88).

It is difficult to know if nominating more women would have increased their number in the Palestinian legislature. Public opinion data suggest that women (48% of the voters) might have been more likely to support female candidates than men. One survey, for example, showed that women were much more likely than men to think that they should be in the legislature and that their presence is important in order to gain women's rights (Jad 1996). Conservative social norms, however, would have remained an obstacle to voting for women, as appears to be the case in some of the other Arab nations (Baaklini, Denoeux and Springborg 1999, 129, 150, 164, 202, 217).

It is interesting to note that the PLO leadership continues to extend verbal support for bringing women into decision making roles even though it has generally failed to make that a reality (Abu Ali 1975; Kavar 1996; Khalili 1977). A recent PLO Central Council resolution, for example, reiterated commitment to: "work to enhance the role of Palestinian women in all spheres of nationalist work and widen the participation of women in all decision making circles (al-Quds February 4, 2000). In any case, the results of the first Palestinian legislative elections became a call for action by the women's leadership in the GUPW, the women's committees and the women's centers. They accurately saw the relative exclusion of women in these initial steps in state formation and democratization as a failure to capture gains from their history of contributions and sacrifice for national liberation. The consensus following the 1996 legislative elections was that the women's movement must draw on donor funding to enhance women's political education and be very active and visible in advocating women's rights.

Women's Movements Strategies

The Palestinian women's movement is engaged in a multi-sided approach led by the women's centers and focused on raising awareness of women in the areas of democratic rights, women's legal rights, and gender analysis of issues. There is also a great deal of advocacy work, meetings with PA officials, legislative deputies, and faction leaders, and the mass media. These activities serve strategic gender concerns in that they seek, in Molyneux's (1986) words, "the removal of institutionalized

forms of discrimination," "the establishment of political equality," and "the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control of women" (283-84). This contrasts with practical gender concerns that focus on services such as the operation of a health clinic for women, for example.

A major target group of civic education and gender-training workshops are women in rural areas and small towns, reflecting donor interest in rural development. It is important to note, however, that the organizers' nationalist work also taught them that women in the more remote areas require more attention, having fewer opportunities for political participation than those in the cities or on college campuses. Female youth are especially targeted for leadership training through the ongoing Women's Affairs Committee's Sanabel program for 14-20 year olds. Another important group are school teachers because of their important socializing profession. These workshops, engaging both men and women, have been successful in enrolling hundreds throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In all, numbers provided by annual reports show an extensive outreach effort engaging hundreds of women each year through these educational workshops and also through their legal and social counseling programs and crisis hotlines.

Reaching working-class women, however, has been logistically more difficult because they tend to work in small workshops or at home, oftentimes in remote villages. Working-class women are found primarily in agriculture, both in its formal and informal sectors, in services, and in the garment industry (Social Monitor 1998, 44). Part of the difficulty, said head of The Working Women's Society and an experienced organizer among garment workers, is that women's centers have not incorporated a service element in their programs such as kindergartens that can facilitate reaching the grassroots. During the height of the Palestinian women's committees movement, each factional federation of committees operated dozens of kindergartens throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but most were closed or turned over to local women when the funds dried up in the early 1990s. Service can also be especially important in the competition with the Islamist movement with its extensive health and educational services.

A potentially significant, but untapped, group is the small but growing number of urban, professional women, who are employed primarily in teaching, medical arts and the public





sector (Palestinian Census Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey 1996). Growth in hiring professionals has been greatest in the public sector (Roy 1999, 71) and is largely influenced by patronage considerations, benefiting both women and men. A major hurdle to overcome, however, is the double burden that all working women face. Housework and child care can be very taxing on women's time as the region is burdened by one of the highest fertility rates in the world (Hammami 1998, 107-110; Social Monitor 1998, 10). As in other Arab countries, the female labor force tends to concentrate among unmarried women and those of childbearing age (Moghadam 1993, 43). There is also a shortage of professional childcare and the child care industry is largely private and tends to be expensive (Hammami 1998; Directorate of Gender Planning and Development, MOPIC: <http://planning.pna.net/gender>).

The Palestinian women's movement has been able to reach a wide audience through the use of the new Palestinian mass media, including state and private television and radio and the daily newspapers. The more politically-active women's centers have specialized personnel who regularly issue news releases about their training workshops and lobbying activities. The newly-created Palestinian radio and television have been hungry for programming and therefore quite friendly to the women's centers. The most ground-breaking women's media project to date is the Women's Affairs Committee's *Voice of Women*, a biweekly supplement of the West Bank daily *al-Ayyam* discussing women's issues, such as early marriage and violence against women, and also presenting women in non-traditional economic and political roles.

Evidently, the Women's Affairs Committee is the leading framework for advocating gender equality to the Palestinian Administration and the Palestinian Legislative Council. The committee is a loose network of nineteen partisan and independent feminist groups that essentially encompass the Palestinian women's movement. It includes women's rights activists from seven PLO factions, various women's centers, and professional women working in academia, especially from Birzeit University Women's Studies Unit. By favoring decentralization and networking, these groups have maintained their specialization and autonomy as members of factions and societies. Indeed, the Women's Affairs Committee has amassed a great deal of respect and standing primarily from the fact that its leaders have had a long record of leading factional women's organizations and also that some hold

important roles in the PA. For example, the committee's board includes a Palestinian Legislative Council deputy and the head of the Directorate for Gender Planning and Development in MOPIC—

who is a founding member. But their clout also derives from their ability to network and present a unified voice. This was evident in an early success when they managed to repeal a 1995 Transportation Ministry Directive that required a family member to be present when a female takes the driving test (to avoid the opportunity for sexual harassment, it was claimed).

Having feminists work in NGOs and in the PA raises the question of cooperation among women's centers and governmental women's offices and how that can affect Palestinian women's structure of political opportunity. Informally, there is a great deal of personal communication among women in the NGOs, the legislature, and the PA, dating back to their history in the Resistance. Also, as mentioned above, some in the PA are members of women's centers governing boards. On the institutional level, however, there are no mechanisms of cooperation, such as community advisory boards to PA offices. Currently, it appears that the responsibility for gender issues in the PA is primarily in the hands of MOPIC's Directorate of Gender Planning and Development.

Clearly the PA's women's offices contribute in important ways to the fight for gender equality, but how their work will proceed after independence is difficult to envision at

this stage. Their initial preoccupation after they were founded (1995-1996) has been to design their strategic plans and do some planning coordination through the Inter-ministerial Women's Committee. This attempt at coordination has been led by the Directorate of Gender Planning and Development and supported by funds from UNIFEM and UNDP (Rizeq 1997). During the early years of the transitional period, PA women's offices were preoccupied with jurisdictional struggles in their respective ministries and with raising funds from donor sources, as the Palestinian tax base is currently rather weak. (The Palestinian case may very well be

unusual in that both governmental and nongovernmental women's institutions rely heavily on donors to fund their development projects.) More recently, the General Directorate of Gender Planning and Development has turned its attention to carrying out extensive gender-sensitivity training of PA personnel aimed at both policies and strategies of action. This project is currently limited to three

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ministries, Agriculture, Local Government, and Labor, but it is expected to expand to other ministries later on. These gender planning activities inside the PA represent an expansion of women's political involvement which now includes pioneering feminist activism within the new Palestinian bureaucracy.

Finally, the political work of the women's movement is made possible by the body of international donors that supported the creation of the PA and the rebuilding of Palestinian civil society.

Role of Donors

The strategy of supporting NGOs as important actors for sustainable development is a prevalent model of donor funding to countries of the South because NGOs are considered closer to the people, more transparent and easier to monitor (see Fisher 1998; Hulme and Edwards 1997). By late 1990s, there were fifty-one Palestinian NGOs, including the women's centers, who were beneficiaries of donor democracy and civil society grant projects. Their activities covered a wide array of causes: human rights, women's empowerment, agricultural relief, children's rights, worker rights, former prisoner rehabilitation, small enterprise development, university education and research, media capacity building, and women's empowerment (Panorama Center unpublished data 1998).

Several countries in the Northern donor community emphasize democracy and gender-sensitivity training programs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The major donors, however, are the European Union and the United States, which lists democracy as one of four pillars of its development goals (Abu Yousef 1997; Zagha and Jamal 1997; USAID 1998). The European Union's main project for human rights and democracy in the late 1990s was the MEDA-Democracy Program which provided training for both genders but had no relationship with any of the women's centers. The United States Aid and Development Agency (USAID) locates its Palestinian democracy goal within a more general "governance" thrust. It supported several Palestinian NGOs' projects, including ones by the Women's Affairs Committee and the Working Women Society.

Prior to the peace process, Western funding for women's groups consisted primarily of helping factional women's committees to open kindergartens, and each federation of committees operated dozens in the late 1980s. These projects produced enduring relationships between feminists in the donor community and those in the women's committees,

starting, what Carapico (1997) calls, a "horizontal sisterhood" based on global feminism. Interestingly, a number of donor representatives in the West Bank and Gaza came from a history of solidarity with the Palestinian cause during the Intifada and have a more trusting relationship with some of the leaders of the women's centers. Networking is an important empowerment tool and donor funding has made it possible for Palestinian women's organizations to communicate with their sisters, regionally and internationally through electronic mail, web pages, and through international conferences sponsored by United Nations agencies such as UNIFEM.

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A theoretical challenge for Palestinian women's centers, from the perspective of traditional interest group theory, is how to achieve sufficient autonomy from their funding sources. Palestinian analysts addressing the NGO-donor relationship suggest that donor support reduces NGO autonomy by creating new priorities and behaviors in the domestic political environment and raising concern about the sustainability of the political liberalization process (Barghouti 1994; Giacaman 1994). The Palestinian NGO community, according to Hammami (1995) and Bishara (1996), are professionalized

groups that "deliver development" which isolates the masses from partisan politics. The imprint of donors is quite evident in the emphasis on civic education and women's development, so that Palestinian discourse on women's empowerment is now filled with Western terminology: "Democracy," "gender," "advocacy," and "workshops." This is an especially sensitive issue for openly political NGOs, sometimes referred to as "political shops" such as the women's centers who can be described as intermediaries for donor democracy and gender equality agendas.

On the other hand, professionalism has meant greater organizational efficiency and movement toward strategic planning and accountability (auditor checks, quarterly and yearly reports), mandated by the donors community. One positive consequence is that open agendas and financing have increased the centers' credibility at a time when corruption has become an important issue in Palestinian politics. The performance of the Palestinian NGO movement generally receives a high rating (actually the highest along with Arafat) among various political actors such as the legislature, the cabinet, and the political parties (Center for Palestine Research and Studies, Results of Poll #42, July 28, 1999). In any case, it is extremely difficult to empirically determine where economic self-interest ends and where

ideas and issue commitment begin, especially since most in the women's NGO leadership have been active in the political struggle since their youth.

The most pressing challenge to the secular Palestinian women's movement is the general resistance of the Islamic movement to gender equality in the area of personal status law and to gender analysis of social problems in general. The Islamic challenge to secular social policies has placed gender at the center of Middle Eastern discourses on Western-style development policies. Indeed, gender has been used, as Hatem (1995: 187-208) reminds us, by both the Islamists and the government as an indicator of power. From its side, the Palestinian women's community has made sure that gender remains part of public discourse by discussing in the media such topics as women's political representation and violence against women. But personal status law remains the most charged issue to tackle in the current stage of state formation.

This is particularly evident in the confrontation between feminists and Islamists in 1997-1998 over the Palestinian Model Parliament on Women and Legislation, sponsored by the Women's Legal Counseling and Aid Center. The purpose of the Model Parliament, whose membership was both female and male, was to bring about a comprehensive debate on women's rights in such areas as education, employment and personal status and to come up with a set of basic principles to submit to the legislature. The Model Parliament was attacked in a number of Friday sermons during 1998 by clerics who branded the project as a conspiracy by the West. In particular, they rejected any consideration of a secular family law or any serious modifications of the laws that were on the books (Jordanian in the West Bank and Egyptian in Gaza Strip.)

The controversy, which was aired in televised debates between secular leftist and religious leaders, was finally defused in a strategic retreat of the women's leadership and their allies in the PLO factions. The compromise, called the Nablus Declaration, was signed by a large number of Islamic clerics and secular leaders and it held the right to discuss changes in personal status law but also proclaimed the principle that "Shariah is the only source of personal status law" (Al-Ayyam April 21, 1998)—a net defeat for the secularists. Clearly, secularization of personal status law proved to be an extremely politically sensitive and divisive issue and, according to many in the Palestinian women's leadership, an unattainable goal at the present. Indeed, in public opinion surveys in the 1990s Palestinians have



revealed a pervasive social conservatism and authoritarianism, especially in the villages, on a wide range of issues, including support for veiling, for religion-based personal status law, and discomfort with women as political leaders. (Hanf and Sabella 1996; Heiberg and Ovensen 1993).

Furthermore, there is a consensus among the women's leadership that Arafat is supportive of women's rights but that he has to appease the Islamic movement in order to maintain national unity, as he negotiates with the Israelis. Arafat typifies the modernizing Arab governments' ambivalence concerning gender equality due to calculations concerning the balance of power vis-a-vis the Islamic movement. This ambivalence is particularly reflected in the draft Palestinian Basic Law which would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex at the same time that it would uphold Shariah as a source of law.

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Conclusion

This paper supports Jacqueline Wolchik's (1998) argument that women enter the process of democratic transition from a marginalized condition and then organize and make strategies that bring gender into the political arena (12-13). In the mid-nineties, the Palestinian women's movement has made great strides in framing women's issues in gender terms and in reaching a wide audience of women, girls, and educators of both sexes through civic education and leadership workshops. Organizationally, the women's centers are recognized as the leaders of the women's movement by the mass media, public authorities, and the critical Islamic movement. It is also important to note that the women's movement's visibility and credibility derive to a great extent from its ability to network across the spectrum of secular nationalist women's groups. Finally, the women's movement strategies of action have been characteristically those of entrepreneurs who, in Dahl's words, have the political "skill and drive" and make use of the "unusual opportunities" availed by Northern donor countries "for pyramiding a small amount of initial resources into a sizable political holding" (Walker 1991, 43).

There are a number of implications of these findings on the question of Palestinian women's political future. First, transnational funds and expertise have strengthened women's NGOs' independence from government (historically represented by the PLO) while increasing their accountability to Northern donors. Women in dependant-capitalist countries, such as Palestine, face the challenge of making demands in an economic and political environment in which accountability tends to be upward toward external



A women's delegation is required ... check with the boys whose turn is it to head the delegation.

actors and a state that can no longer promise extensive social welfare to its citizens. At the same time, the future Palestinian state, though expected to be low in resources, cannot be neglected in the analysis because it will be an important participant both as supporter of political norms and also as the institution responsible for mediating the ongoing secular-Islamist competition.

Second, a long term challenge is for the women's movement to become more inclusive of grassroots interests. Project-based strategies have maintained some connection between urban women, political activists and women in small town and village communities, and some of the projects are preparing young women for political organizing by developing their political skills. The project-based approach, however, has not been conducive to aggregating women's interests or building a representational organization of women, which requires party sponsorship or membership commitment. Access by women's centers to a few thousand women, though impressive, tends to be temporary due to the short tenure of these projects, and the numbers reached fall short of the tens of thousands affiliated with the factional women's organizations of the 1980s.

Fundamentally, the Palestinian women's movement would have to overcome the problem of women's economic powerlessness and the diversity of their interests, whether class, economic condition, rural-urban divide, and religiosity (see also, Abdulhadi 1998). The power of social conservatism and political religion will be particularly challenging since the contemporary Palestinian women's movement currently fits within a global governance paradigm that emphasizes secularism, project-oriented NGOs and feminist networking: Palestinian, regional and international. During the mid-

nineties, Palestinian Islamic women's activism tended to be *ad hoc* but now they are becoming more organized and might eventually pose a serious challenge to the secular women's movement. Such a challenge should not necessarily mean the inability to find a common ground for a unified political stand. Indeed, Islamist women have been known to be critical of rigidity among their male counterparts on such issues as the imposition of the veil and women's seclusion (Prusher 2000).

Finally, as the end of 2000 brought renewed Israeli violence toward the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, women's attentions have again become focused on the practical concerns of caring for families, especially those of the martyrs and the wounded. Unfortunately, the project-oriented, donor-funded organizational framework of the Palestinian women's movement has been ill equipped to gear up and deal with such a crisis, apart from Internet activism which disseminates information and urgent messages calling for support. In the 2000 Intifada, ordinary women quietly participate in the struggle through their care giving, traditional roles as mothers, sisters, and daughters. As in other times of crisis, Palestinian women's political participation acquires the character of being at once critical to national liberation but also invisible to decision makers and the media.

END NOTES

1. Due to these traditional gender roles, women in the blue-collar workforce have not benefitted
2. For references on gender and the Palestinian presidential and legislative elections of 1996, see Documentation of the 1996 Palestinian Elections in Terms of Women; Jad 1996.

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