

Palestinian women, violence, and the peace process

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Introduction

In September 1993, an astonished world watched as Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leader Yasir Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands on the lawn of the White House, sealing what seemed at the time to be the beginnings of a peace agreement that both sides could live with. But the ensuing process of peace building between Israel and the Palestinians has failed to live up to early expectations, and, particularly since the outbreak of violence at the end of September 2000, hopes for a permanent peace settlement seem to have been extinguished altogether. The seven-year 'peace process', however, provided a space in which the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip could move away from resistance to start planning for self-government.

For their part, Palestinian women sought to consolidate the gains they had made as participants in the national struggle; they also looked ahead to their own position in the anticipated independent Palestinian state. In this chapter, I propose, first, to analyse the roles played by Palestinian women in the conflict and in the peace process; and, second, to examine how their participation has been influenced by the many forms of violence to which they have been exposed. I shall argue that a routine and systematic use of violence over a prolonged period of time has had the effect of placing women at a disadvantage when it comes to imagining and constructing the future state. They have been excluded, in other words, from effective participation in their own society.

By *violence*, I mean both the violence of the Israeli occupation, and the physical and psychological violence which women experience within their community. Violence affects Palestinian women in

several ways: first, they are discouraged, on the whole, from engaging in direct violence, but they may sometimes – and in gender-appropriate ways – assist the men of the community who are at the forefront of the fighting; second, women are also disadvantaged by violence aimed at them directly. This comes from the occupying forces, in the form of beatings, verbal harassment, torture, and imprisonment, but also from their own men, in the form of domestic abuse; and, third, while Palestinian women are victims of violence, they are also agents, in the sense that they make choices and frequently act on their own behalf.

The story of Palestinian women's participation in their long-running national struggle is a well-documented one. At first sight, it appears to be an inspiring model of female inclusion in and positive contribution to an anti-colonial movement. If one delves below the surface, however, a number of inconsistencies begin to emerge and these have had an adverse effect on women's role in the peace process. To begin with, although men and women might be expected to employ different modes of struggle, these have tended to perpetuate an imbalance in power relations. Like all members of the community, 'Palestinian women have directly suffered the pains of Israeli arbitrary measures, compounding the suffering they already endure as women living in a patriarchal and conservative society' (WCLAC and WSC 2001).

Male and female roles derive from traditional ways of behaving, which in turn are rooted in Islamic culture.¹ Moreover, the masculine character of Palestinian nationalism has meant that female qualities tend to be undervalued and very particular conceptions of masculinity and femininity established. One result of this is a belief that women should, as far as possible, be protected, which has caused a conflict between the desire to shield women from the ugly reality of violence and the need for every member of society to add their effort to the struggle. A third problem lies in the lack of consensus within women's organisations themselves. Disagreements have arisen between those who believe that the national liberation struggle must take precedence and those who feel that national liberation should go hand in hand with women's liberation; between those who support the Oslo peace process and those who do not; and between some women who support the Islamic movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and others who believe it has had largely negative implications for women.

In order to address these questions, I will begin by discussing, in general, women's experiences of violence in conflict situations. I will then review the historical and current involvement of women in the Palestinian struggle, with reference, first, to the issue of violence in Palestinian society and the impact it has had on women; second, to the role of Islam in Palestinian culture, and in particular the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence as a political movement; and, third, to the scope of women's political activism, in the *intifada* period and beyond.

It is clear that, generally speaking, women have not fared well. While they have worked hard in many areas, their efforts have been impeded both by the violence of the Israeli occupation, which still continues, and by the masculine character of the liberation struggle, which includes strong elements of both structural and actual violence. At the same time, although women are victimised by the male-defined character of both the society and the conflict, one should not lose sight of the fact that they are also contributors in the sense that their support is active and deliberate. While I am not suggesting that women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have by any means succumbed to a masculinist agenda, and although I am well aware that Palestinian men are also victims of the policies of the Israeli government, I believe women's efforts have been distorted and undermined by the prevailing male-dominated culture, which 'often means women internalise a sense of shame and self-blame. This is accentuated in "honour" cultures, since sexual assault and failed marriages are seen to dishonour not just the woman or girl, but her family as well' (British Council 1999:18).

Women, war, and violence

In war, women are likely to experience two types of violations: first, the violence that is done to them that is also done to men, in other words, 'dignified' violence, which is named as an abuse of human rights and widely condemned; and, second, violence that is enacted upon women because they are women, which is not usually counted as a human-rights violation since 'what was done to them smells of sex' (MacKinnon 1998:44). Sexual violence has been described as 'one of the most extreme and effective forms of patriarchal control, which simultaneously damages and constrains women's lives' (Kelly 2000:45).

In late 1992, stories began to emerge from Bosnia about the mass rape and forced impregnation of Muslim women and young girls by Serbian soldiers, as a form of 'ethnic cleansing' (Vickers 1993:23). After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, there were reports of rape by Iraqi soldiers of Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti women, some of which led to pregnancies, an event so shocking in a conservative Muslim environment that some women killed themselves rather than give birth to enemy babies. In the occupied Palestinian territories, too, according to various sources, 'dozens of Palestinian women and girls have reported that Israeli interrogators have threatened them with rape and subjected them to sexually humiliating practices' (Vickers 1993:32).² It prompts the question as to why this particular method of violence is so routinely employed as a weapon of war. One possible answer, according to Seifert, is that sexual violence against women 'is likely to destroy a nation's culture' (Seifert 1999:150). But it is also the case that male violence against women

... is so pervasive, across so many historical eras and cultural differences, that it seems only explicable by reference to something intrinsic in men as men, some fear, some insecurity or aggressiveness which also inclines men to sustain formal institutions – military forces – which embody and legitimise these violent attitudes and behaviours.

(Enloe 1988:209)

Violence against women in war is two-pronged: by humiliating individual women, it aims to reassert male power in a general sense; and it is intended to demoralise the enemy by striking at its weakest point. Thus, war-related violence against women is inextricably linked to domestic violence and to sexually violent crimes against women. Indeed, it has been argued that the 'questions of women and peace and the meaning of peace for women cannot be separated from the broader question of relationships between women and men in all spheres of life and in the family' (United Nations 1985:8). In light of events in Bosnia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, the role of sexual violence in war has been re-evaluated. Rape and sexual violence against women, as Seifert says, are nothing new (Seifert 1999:145). What is different is that the causes of sexual violence in war are now being examined, and that the rape and sexual torture of women in conflict situations has been redefined as a war crime.

But women are not only victims of sexual abuse by enemy men; they also participate in conflicts in a variety of more proactive roles,

from giving support to fighters and acting as substitutes for absent male workers to engaging in combat. When discussing women and violence in war, it is necessary to acknowledge women's agency. It can be argued, as Pettman says, that 'women's moral and political support and war work are essential parts of war-making' (Pettman 1996:127).

However, even when women are willing participants in their nation's struggle, they cannot altogether escape the shadow of victimisation and are still liable to become the targets of more private violence (in the shape of domestic abuse or ostracism) by their community as a result of their treatment by the enemy. Women tend to be at a disadvantage in national struggles regardless of what they do, and part of the explanation for this is 'the contradictions men demonstrate between their revolutionary political consciousness and their reactionary social-gender consciousness' (Abdo 1991:20).

In situations where women have played an active role in the liberation struggle, for example in Eritrea and Nicaragua, they may still find themselves encouraged to go back and adopt more 'traditional' roles once the fighting has ended, for 'whatever women's participation in wars and armed struggles, even as combatants, they are routinely pushed "back home" and their contribution erased when the fighting stops' (Pettman 1996:126).

Palestinian women, although they have gone some way towards challenging gender stereotypes, have fallen into similar patterns when it comes to moving from struggle to state building. One reason for this has been the problematic role of violence in Palestinian society, both as a means of patriarchal control and as an ubiquitous fact of daily life. Women are said to face 'double oppression', in the sense that violence comes from both the Israeli occupation and their own society.

Women, Islam, and honour

Throughout the long period of struggle, Palestinian society – violated and threatened with extinction – has clung to certain familiar structures. One of the most important of these has been the Islamic framework within which Palestinians have traditionally lived their lives. However, in times of extremity, even such primordial attachments tend to become distorted and used to justify inappropriate behaviour. Moreover, a number of scholars have argued that allegiance to a system of honour and shame, as manifested in the behaviour of women, has had a detrimental effect on the Palestinians' ability to wage an effective liberation struggle. Petzet, for example, has referred

to the concept of honour as 'a defining frame for masculinity' (Peteeet 2000:107). Arab masculinity, she notes, 'is attained by constant vigilance and willingness to defend honour (*sharaf*), face (*wajh*), kin and community from external aggression and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific propriety' (Peteeet 2000:107).

According to Afshar, the concept of honour killing (the killing by men of female family members who are believed to have committed 'crimes' against the honour of the family, for instance engaging in adulterous relationships or even speaking to unrelated males) is seen in many Middle Eastern countries as 'the national duty of men' (Afshar 1998:173). Among Muslims, she suggests, 'women have traditionally been the appointed site of familial honour and shame and the representatives of the public face of the society's commitment to its faith' (Afshar 1994:129).

However, in the Palestinian context, by expending disproportionate energy on the protection of their women, it could be argued that men have failed to make use of women's potential contribution to the defence of the nation and, in addition, are themselves handicapped from playing a full part.

In the 1930s, for example, the uprising following the death of Shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, through its use of Islamic symbols and language, encouraged the participation of the masses in social action; Qassam's ideology has been described as 'Islamic populism' and was aimed at all levels of society (Johnson 1982:54), including women. It was fuelled by a sense of desperation at the rapidly deteriorating situation and the threat to Palestinian national identity. Yet even though women took part in the 1936 revolt, they tended to be protected from the general violence and insecurity that was besetting society. Already a masculine-based nationalism had taken root, or rather a process by which masculinity is nationalised (see Massad 1995), and this was achieved, at least in part, as a result of the honour system.

The Zionists were well aware of the Palestinian Achilles' heel of honour and used it to their advantage during the hostilities of 1947 and 1948. For example, in December 1947, Palmach forces, during an attack on the village of al-Khisas, near the Lebanese border, deliberately targeted women and children (Benvenisti 2000:103). In October 1948, in an attempt to force the occupants of the village of al-Dawayima, on the western slopes of the Hebron highlands, to flee,

the Israeli army murdered women and committed rape during a brutal assault on the village (Benvenisti 2000:153).

According to Warnock, the demands of the honour system prevented Palestinian society from preserving itself when threatened with the overwhelming Zionist force in 1948. She argues that 'many of the Palestinian families who fled their homes did so primarily out of fear that their women would be raped by Zionist soldiers ... For many Palestinian men, saving their women from rape was more important than defending their homes or showing personal bravery and defiance' (Warnock 1990:23). In Warnock's view, defence of the land and defence of women are closely connected. Peteet, too, suggests that, as the 'conflict spread and intensified, women were becoming victims of war precisely because they were women, the crucial repositories of family honor' (Peteet 1991:59).

In Palestinian society, as elsewhere in the Islamic world, honour is a concept 'that is laden with culturally specific semantic connotations' (Afsaruddin 1999:9). Closely bound up with constructions of masculinity and femininity, the demands of the honour system continue to govern relations between the sexes and within families. Zahira Kamal speaks of 'an ideological structure ... based on ancestral traditions ... [which] derives its strength from Arab religious practices and is filled with superstitions ... One result of this structure is that Arab women are ... considered weak, incapable creatures, mere shadows of their men' (Kamal 1998:79). Thus, to a large extent, honour 'is rooted in the sexual behavior of women' (Afsaruddin 1999:9). For Palestinian women, like the majority of women in Arab societies, family honour 'is the concept in whose name most of the restrictions upon ... women's freedom of movement are imposed' (Ein-Gil and Finkelstein 1984:171).

It is important to distinguish, however, between an honour system that victimises and restricts women and one that enables them to play a fulfilling part in their society. For Palestinians forced into exile after 1948, the concept of honour became more than a framework through which to live their lives; it defined the loss of the land and the idealisation of women as guardians of national dignity. The shock of being abruptly removed from their land and dumped into the alien and crowded environment of refugee camps gave rise to feelings of despair and powerlessness among Palestinians, particularly among men. Having lost everything, many men found themselves with only one outlet through which to express their authority – the family – and,

in some cases, this led to abuses of male power within the home. It is conceivable that such conditions, supported by a belief that Islam permits, under certain circumstances, the physical punishment by men of their wives, have been at least partially responsible for providing a basis for violent treatment. When traditional structures are combined with oppressive and humiliating conditions in daily life, the outcome is likely to be a deterioration of women's rights and status.

National struggle, dispossession, and exile

Despite the restrictions placed upon them, Palestinian women have embraced roles other than that of victim. From the beginning of the twentieth century, what may be termed 'resistance' activities by women have evolved through various stages. These began as charitable and social-welfare work by a small group of upper- and middle-class ladies. After 1918, when Britain obtained the mandate for Palestine, women started to take part in demonstrations against British policies. Fleischmann argues that, 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' (Fleischmann 2000:16). She reports that women's 'frequent participation in demonstrations signified their willingness to engage in "unladylike" and even violent behavior, thereby defying cultural norms that prescribed limited public visibility of women' (Fleischmann 2000:24).

After the 'catastrophe' of 1948, the majority of Palestinians had to leave their homeland. Women 'describe the first decade of exile in terms that evoke death and a state of mourning. The loss of country and home and a refugee status were akin to the loss of a loved one' (Peteet 1991:26). Losing Palestine, in the words of one exile, 'was like losing a husband or a son' (Madame Haddad, a middle-aged woman from Jaffa, quoted in Peteet 1991:26). On the other hand, in terms of empowerment, the refugee camps provided women with a new set of roles. As the pivot of family life and the symbol of what it means to be Palestinian, they struggled to keep their families together, to maintain their fragile sense of identity, and to respond to the many hardships of everyday life.

Palestinians in exile realised the vital importance of education – for girls as well as boys – if they were to regain their homeland.

As they became better educated, women started to look beyond home and marriage. Many were keen to participate in the embryonic resistance movement. The PLO was founded in 1964, and under its umbrella, the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) was created in 1965. However, although barriers between the sexes began to break down, traditional values continued to play a central role. This was partly because they were too deeply embedded to change easily and partly because they were an essential component of the attachment to the land of Palestine and, therefore, closely entwined with national identity.

During the 1960s, although the character of the resistance remained militantly masculine, Sayigh and Peteet suggest that some of its leaders, particularly in Lebanon, were committed to the inclusion of women. These men 'campaign against traditional notions of honour and fostered new symbols of a culture of resistance. The slogan *al-ard qabl al-ird* (land before honour) became part of everyday speech and had a strong effect by putting the two sacred values in opposition, thus forcing people to choose between them' (Sayigh and Peteet 1986:118). But this development is less clear-cut than it appears. Hatem, for example, argues that, like its Algerian counterpart in the 1950s and 1960s, the Palestinian liberation movement 'resisted significant changes in personal values women were expected to uphold. The preoccupation with women's honor as part of the definition of a respectable wife was not challenged' (Hatem 1993:42-3). Certainly there was some shift in attitudes towards 'honour' and, as a result, some women were able to participate in the resistance, but enlightened attitudes on the part of a few male leaders failed to transform the status of women substantially. A contradiction remained between the demands of living in a society threatened with obliteration, a 'war zone' in which actual or anticipated violence circumscribed every aspect of Palestinian life, and the existence of an idealised realm in which traditional values continued to occupy a central position.

The occupation: coming to terms with intrusion in the private sphere

The 1967 Israeli occupation brought the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip into a more intimate proximity with those who had taken their land. Suddenly the Israelis were no longer simply 'the enemy outside'; they were in Palestinian villages, on Palestinian

streets, and even in Palestinian homes, which inevitably had a profound effect on women. They suffered violation – both physical and psychological – and trauma. From the early days of the occupation, women had no choice but to confront the Israeli military authorities. They protested against the seizure of Palestinian land, the demolition of houses, and the ill treatment of their children, and, in response, they were arrested, imprisoned, and sometimes physically abused by the occupying forces.

Although one side effect of the occupation was a growth in feminist consciousness among certain sections of society, women were still expected to occupy a traditional position in society. Even though a few women became fighters, some turned to political activism, and many others contributed to the resistance, they continued to be lauded, above all, as the ‘mothers of martyrs and Patriotic Mothers’ (Cooke 1996:174), rather than being accepted – alongside men – as defenders of their nation. This was because, while ‘the mobilization of women in the struggle was needed, it had to be reconciled with the equally important task of cultural preservation. The results were contradictory expectations of women, who were to take on new public tasks in the struggle, but without challenging the old value systems or the roles they played in the personal arena’ (Hatem 1993:42–3).

In many ways, this period marked an important transition for women. While conservative attitudes certainly did not disappear and life undoubtedly became more difficult in many respects, opportunities for women increased. The female illiteracy rate in the West Bank declined from 65 per cent in 1970 to 37 per cent in 1983 and in Gaza from 65 per cent to 39 per cent for the same period. A growth in the number of Palestinian universities gave more women access to higher education (Kamal 1998:80). Increasing numbers of women chose – or were forced – to take paid work outside the home. During this period, too, women established new types of organisation. The year 1978 ‘witnessed the birth of a more progressive and “feminist” women’s movement – namely, the women’s committees’ (Ameri 1999:36).

A crisis of masculinity

The Palestinian uprising – or *intifada* – which began at the end of 1987 witnessed the Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip making a concerted effort to resist Israeli occupation, politically, economically, and culturally. In this section, I will discuss the effects

of the *intifada* on Palestinian women, in terms of victimisation and agency. The *intifada* started as a display of spontaneous anger and a reassertion of national dignity, and has been described as an attempt by the 'young, armed only with stones and facing death and pain, ... to sweep away the older generation in terms of political relevance and actual leadership' (Peteet 2000:113). The effects it had on Palestinian women were mixed, and their responses and activities can be divided into several phases. Although they added their efforts to the general communal rejection of the occupation, women also experienced victimisation both from the enemy and their own society. One should bear in mind, however, that Palestinian males, too, were the victims of brutality and humiliation.

Since the Palestinians lack a state and an army, they have been unable to wage war in the conventional sense. Theirs has been an unequal struggle, using non-violent means, such as civil disobedience and peaceful resistance, and, on occasions, violent methods, such as armed struggle and terrorism. Although there have been some successes in the fight against Israeli occupation, on the whole the Palestinian struggle can be said to have failed, and, in the process, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have experienced bitterness and disillusionment, as well as extreme forms of violence, in terms of forced removal from the land, the humiliation of occupation, negation of identity, and denial of basic human rights. As men have traditionally been responsible for defending the community, their inability to do so and their apparent powerlessness in the face of a militarily superior enemy has caused a crisis of masculinity.

The Israeli occupation, as Peteet suggests, 'seriously diminished those realms of practice that allow men to engage in, display and affirm masculinity by means of autonomous actions. Frequent witness to their fathers' beatings by soldiers or settlers, children [became] acutely aware of their fathers' inability to protect themselves and their children' (Peteet 2000:107). In response to feelings of powerlessness and shame, young Palestinian boys and men took it upon themselves to confront the occupation. They did it by asserting their own strength, in the form of stone throwing and verbal taunts, and by turning the beatings, torture, and imprisonment inflicted on them by the occupying Israeli authorities into something positive, 'a critical rite of passage into adulthood' (Peteet 2000:114).

Indeed, the *intifada* has been described as introducing

... a new masculine image, which immediately caught the attention of the international media ... The image was that of young boys confronting Israeli soldiers, kaffia masking their faces, throwing stones with one hand and carrying a Palestinian flag in the other ... This conception of youthful, assertive and defiant masculinity, captured in such metaphors as the 'generation of occupation' or the 'children of the stones', inspired both media coverage and popular narrative of the intifada.

(Sharoni 1998:1077)

Although it was undoubtedly the case that the uprising by young boys and men provided a liberating and hopeful interlude for the Palestinian population demoralised by the Israeli occupation, it did little to challenge the status quo. More a gesture of desperation than a seed of revolution, it failed to develop an alternative leadership or a radically different strategy for combating the occupation.

The so-called 'new Palestinian masculinity' also had a number of negative implications for Palestinian women. To begin with, it reinforced the existing presumption of a masculine-based nationalism. Massad argues that 'the mobilizing metaphors of nationalist movements ... reflect the fundamental assumptions of nationalist thought, which establishes the future gender constitution and gender roles of nationalist agency. History shows that other revolutions have foundered on a "nation first, women after" strategy' (Massad 1995:469). Despite the fact that women's active participation in the *intifada* undoubtedly 'pressured the secular leadership into changing part of its conceptual framework, the masculine still reigns supreme in Palestinian nationalist thought' (Massad 1995:482-3). Indeed, as Massad says, although the anti-colonial struggle has transformed the lives of Palestinian women, they 'are still considered subordinate members of the nation' (Massad 1995:483).

Another outcome has been a rise in domestic violence, as some Palestinian men have turned their anger and frustration on female members of their own family, a situation that finds parallels in conflict situations elsewhere in the world. The men,

under tight discipline that [forbade] the use of weapons other than stones, [were] frustrated. The shortened workday, limited to prestrike hours, [meant] that they [were] home more often rather than working and then meeting male friends in coffee houses. The closure of West Bank schools ... resulted in children also being home all day. In addition, military curfews

[forced] the entire family to stay inside for days at a time, often in very cramped quarters. The battering that [followed] in some homes [was] unsurprising.
(Strum 1992:160)

One reason for this is that Palestinian society, 'like all patriarchal societies, discriminates between the sexes in, for example, the upbringing of girls and boys' (Yahya 1992:5). While boys are raised to be assertive and powerful, girls are taught to be 'blindly obedient to male family members' (Yahya 1992:5). As Palestinian psychiatrist Eyad Sarraj puts it, although women suffer from the impact of the occupation,

they also suffer as a result of tradition ... In [Palestinian] patriarchal culture, women and children have always been in a weaker position than the patriarch, the male head of the family. When a husband can no longer contain his anger, his humiliation, his frustration due to the conditions of occupation, he is likely to find an outlet for his anger within the home. Women are often the victims of this anger.
(Quoted in Sabbagh 1998:175)

Second, humiliations inflicted on Palestinian men by the Israeli authorities have also contributed to a heightened aggression against female family members. It is claimed that '[s]ome men who were subjected to beatings and torture return home to inflict violence upon women' (Peteet 2000:120). A third explanation for the violent treatment of women has been 'the growth of fundamentalist movements whose ideologies advocated traditionalism in family relations [and] re-establishing a more authoritarian attitude towards women ... [F]undamentalism reinforced the traditional paternalistic setting where the father is fully authorized to control the conduct of his family members even by violent means' (Jad 1998:59–60). It is likely that violence against women in the home can be attributed to a combination of these factors. Although a 'hot line' for victims of domestic violence has existed in the West Bank since 1994, general awareness of the problem remains relatively low and physical violence against women is tolerated as 'a fact of life' in some sections of the community.

Women, activism, and the peace process

Nonetheless, despite the element of victimisation, one of the most significant effects of the *intifada* 'was the transformation that took

place in women's consciousness of their roles. As they struggled with the soldiers to free their children, women overcame the internal barrier of fear that often prevented them from joining organized activities such as women's work committees' (Sabbagh 1998:3). Such developments, it has been suggested, encouraged women to challenge their position in the patriarchal structure, a process that had already begun. But women were forced to confront not just the traditional and patriarchal character of their society; they also found themselves up against the triumphantly masculine image of the *intifada*, which meant that, whatever successes they may have achieved in the early stages, these were unlikely to be sustained.

Abdo notes that 'the discourse on women and the *intifada* has focused largely on one particular image of social relations, that [of] "the heroic mother" ... The actions of such women have given rise to the national heroine known in the literature as "*Um al-Shaheed*" or the "Mother of the martyr"' (Abdo 1991:25). But the concept 'motherhood-nationhood', she says, 'became a prominent feature in Palestinian popular culture when it was taken up by the national male leadership. Motherhood and the glorifying of the "mother of the martyr" were incorporated in the national ideology of the movement, and particularly in the ideological construction of its armed struggle' (Abdo 1991:26-7). Another - later - female image was '*Um al-Asirah*' or the 'Mother of the female political prisoner', which, Abdo suggests, was 'a liberating image. Taking pride in a daughter in prison presumes a willingness on the part of women to confront some age-old repressive traditions embodied in the concept of "women's honour"' (Abdo 1991:30). Although these images of motherhood may be regarded as positive, they do little to challenge the underlying patriarchal structure of society.

Enloe's analysis of the role of women in nationalist struggles is useful in helping to understand the dilemmas experienced by Palestinian women. She suggests that 'a woman who begins to go out of her home in the evening to attend nationalist meetings in the name of securing a better future for her children may meet strong resistance from her husband ... He may even beat her to stop her from attending such meetings' (Enloe 1988:55). Experiences such as this may lead to a heightened feminist consciousness. When women became involved in nationalist activities, Enloe argues, many of them may not have imagined that 'critiques of foreign rule ... would lead to critiques of relations between husbands and wives. In fact, many women became

involved as good wives and good mothers. It was only later that they concluded that they would have to overcome male resistance in their homes and neighborhoods if they were to be able to participate fully in the movement' (Enloe 1988:55). But for women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, there was a wide gulf to be negotiated between understanding the confining structures of their patriarchal society and acquiring the necessary power to challenge them.

Women and the Islamist movement

Since the late 1980s, a political Islamist movement has flourished in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As Roy suggests, its strength, especially in Gaza

is rooted in the territory's extreme poverty, isolation, and traditional social structures, and its growth has been nourished by a profound sense of popular despair over the steady disintegration of daily life and the consistent failure of the nationalist movement to achieve any political resolution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and to end the occupation.

(Roy 1995:22)

But one could argue that Islamism, far from being a foreign implant or merely a response to 'bad times', is woven into the fabric of Palestinian society.

As with Islamic movements elsewhere, the tendency has been for Islamists to take women and the family as the starting point of an ideal Islamic community. To some women, the Islamist trend is empowering. They see it as the only realistic hope of liberation for the Palestinian people. The confrontational brand of Islam espoused by groups such as Hamas³ presents both a challenge and a compelling alternative to the apparent failure of the secular nationalist movement to achieve any significant progress. But while many women welcome the growing popularity of militant Islam, others regard it as an imposition. In the Palestinian territories, Islamist groups have sought to impose upon women a set of rules that some people – both male and female – argue are not Islamic.

The so-called '*hijab* campaign' in the Gaza Strip in the early part of the *intifada* is an illuminating example of what many women see as the removal of choice. Hammami describes it as 'fundamentally an instrument of oppression, a direct disciplining of women's bodies for political ends' (Hammami 1990:25). She argues that the Islamists have used the *hijab* as an instrument of social pressure. It is clear,

she says, that the *intifada hijab* is ‘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’ (Hammami 1990:28). On the other hand, as Abdo suggests, ‘the issue of *hijab* and Muslim fundamentalism [may have been] overplayed by the Israeli and Western media to divert attention from the major struggle against Israeli aggression’ (Abdo 1991:33). It is important to separate the political programmes of groups such as Hamas from day-to-day religiosity. As Ameri notes, ‘the question of Muslim fundamentalism goes beyond a dress code. It touches people’s daily lives through its impact on institutions such as schools and the law’ (Ameri 1999:43).

Nonetheless, the question of control remains a central one. By enforcing a particular mode of dress on women, Hamas supporters have been able to assert their power. When one looks more closely at the movement, it is clear that many of the young men drawn to it perceive themselves as powerless and lacking in the means to improve their situation. By using coercion and even violence against the female members of the community in the name of religion, they are able to gain some sense of self-respect. It has little to do with Islam and more to do with the struggle for power or dignity.

Women’s political struggles

Many analysts of the Palestinian women’s movement concur that women experienced a degree of empowerment through their involvement in the *intifada*. But although women from all segments of society were mobilised to take part, both spontaneously and by way of political organisation, it proved difficult to sustain their gains. Following the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, Palestinians acquired partial autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and started to plan for government and eventual statehood.⁴ But Palestinian women leaders found ‘themselves outside the male-dominated political circles where official policy regarding the future of autonomy in Gaza and the West Bank [was] being determined’ (Shalala 1995).

Anxious not to be excluded from the process, women’s organisations worked hard to draw attention to their own demands. The potential for achieving women’s equality in the new era of Palestinian self-rule, according to Ameri, is shaped by two factors:

'first, the past and present efforts of women's organizations to stimulate feminist consciousness and, second, their successes and failures in building participatory structures and traditions capable of realizing women's sociopolitical rights' (Ameri 1999:29). While she is correct to identify women's organisations as a key element in enabling the mass of women to participate in the political process, the lack of consensus among organisations has led to a dilution or fragmentation of women's aspirations.

Under the terms of the Cairo Agreement of May 1994, the newly created Palestinian National Authority (PNA) promised to operate within the framework of a draft Basic Law for the National Authority in the Transitional Period. The Basic Law has come under fire from some Palestinian women's organisations that criticise it for making no mention of equality between men and women. Afraid of being marginalised in any future Palestinian entity, in January 1994 some of the women's committees, the GUPW, human-rights NGOs, and others formed an umbrella group to produce a 'Women's Charter' to be presented to the PNA for inclusion in the constitution. The document aimed at 'cancelling out the laws that discriminate against women, guaranteeing the rights of women in the political, economic, social and educational spheres, and their equality in front of the law ... [It] also demand[ed] that the state of Palestine comply with international women's rights laws' (Rimawi 1994). Finally published in August 1994, the Charter is 'tellingly circumspect on the crucial issues of family law and personal status' (Usher 1994:17). One reason for this omission was the continuing struggle between the secular and Islamist versions of a future state.

The greatest problem, in the words of one critic, is that 'given the male-dominated Palestinian cultural tradition, there is a sharp lack of women with the kind of political and leadership skills needed to advance the women's agenda' (Ghada Zughayyar, director of the Jerusalem Center for Women, quoted in Nolen 1996:20). In order to address this omission, women's groups were again galvanised into activity. Co-ordinating their efforts was the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), formed in 1992 after protests that women were not adequately represented in the various PLO technical committees. In 1995, the WATC implemented a project entitled 'Palestinian Women and the Electoral Process', with the objective of 'improving women's abilities to participate in public life' (*Palestinian Women's Network* 1995:10). In January 1996, the first Palestinian

election, for an 88-seat Legislative Council, took place in the autonomous areas. Twenty women ran for office and five won seats in the new parliament. Although the project had aimed at achieving 30 per cent female representation on the PLC and only five women (5.7 per cent) were elected, the project was judged to have been a success. It will be remembered, the organisers commented, 'for having offered a combination of comprehensive, well-balanced and much needed skills, techniques and information that satisfied the participating women's needs and encouraged a number of them to participate in the elections as candidates' (Candidate Training Project, West Bank and Gaza, 14 April – 15 May 1995).

Some Palestinian organisations suggest that domestic violence continues to present an obstacle to women's development. A recent public-opinion survey carried out in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem on violence-related issues revealed that 49.3 per cent of respondents believe that Palestinian customs and traditions are a stumbling block to women's progress; and 56.8 per cent do not accept that the Palestinian man's treatment of his wife is characterised by violence. At the same time, 50.7 per cent support a man's right to punish his wife physically if she does not obey him; 41.3 per cent believe a man may beat his wife if she lies to him; 49.2 per cent approve of the physical mistreatment of a woman by her husband if she 'underestimates his manhood'; and 61.7 per cent claim that intervention by the police in marital disputes is undesirable (PWWS and PCPO 2001).

Precise figures on the extent of domestic violence in Palestinian society are not available since, as al-Haj notes, 'when a woman is physically abused by her husband and asks for support and protection from her relatives, [they] often force her to return to her husband under the pretext of the children's welfare' (quoted in Yahya 1992:5). However, a number of measures have been taken by women's organisations to highlight the problem; to combat its effects; and to educate women about their rights. For example, a Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling has been set up in the West Bank to advise women on their rights under Islamic law in matters such as marriage, divorce, and the custody of children. The extreme conditions of the *intifada* left little room for the observance of such rights and some male community leaders took advantage of the situation to impose their own notion of social order. In 1995, the Women's Empowerment Project, which runs vocational and counselling

courses for women victims of violence, was created in the Gaza Strip. But in the opinion of its director Shadia Sarraj, real protection for women needs the support of the Palestinian Authority, 'especially in education and law' (Usher 1997).

Future hopes

Palestinian society has experienced a broad range and different forms of violence, both from outside and from within. For men, the traditional defenders of national and family honour, there has been little they have been able to do either to save their society from harm or themselves from humiliation. Palestinian women, as a result, are doubly victimised. They are victims of Israeli state violence and also of violence within their own society. Their experiences are bound to confuse them. They have seen their male kin brutalised and humiliated, their children terrorised, and their homes destroyed. They have become accustomed to living in an environment of relentless violence.

But Palestinian women face another form of violence. Within their own society, they are subjected to a seemingly insoluble conflict between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. They have been exposed to theories of women's rights and feminism, and, at the same time, to the 'fundamentalist' agenda of the Islamists. Tugged in several directions, they must maintain family stability, act as an example of appropriate female activism in a conservative Arab-Muslim society, and avoid threatening the precarious authority of their men. A final variety of violence to which Palestinian women are exposed is the international violence of gender oppression which dictates, first, that violence is an acceptable method of dealing with disputes; and, second, that women are destined always to be the victims of such violence. Sharoni suggests that an 'ongoing systematic gender-sensitive analysis of the contents and multiple effects of peace agreements, the processes designed for their implementation and the obstacles they face is necessary if peace is to become more than the mere end of physical violence and military confrontation' (Sharoni 1998:1089).

As the Palestinians continue to struggle for a state of their own in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, thwarted at every turn by Israeli intransigence and the creation of facts on the ground, women are concerned about their own rights and how these might best be protected by law. There is no doubt that their strong involvement in

anti-occupation activities, particularly during the *intifada*, bestowed upon them both experience and a degree of empowerment. Unfortunately, however, this has failed to translate into tangible political gains. Although some women's groups united to produce the 'Women's Charter', a number of women 'expressed their frustration over the way [it] was written without consultation with the grassroots membership ... While women in general feel betrayed by the [Palestinian Authority], political women feel betrayed by the male leadership of their political parties, and women at the grassroots level feel betrayed by their women leaders' (Ameri 1999:47). As Sharoni notes, the signing of a peace agreement 'in and of itself does not create the conditions for gender equality' (Sharoni 1998:1089).

By considering the trends and developments discussed above, it is possible to gain some idea of where the Palestinian struggle is going in terms of future female involvement patterns, whether in the struggle for a state or the process of state formation. At the heart of this speculation lies a debate on whether 'the *intifada* propelled women into public life ... [or] succeeded only in provoking a conservative backlash which has driven women back into their homes' (Usher 1992:37). Giacaman believes that, although repression inflicted massive damage on women's organisations during the *intifada*, 'in the course of the resistance women mounted against both Israeli repression and Islamicist reaction, something emerged which is in fact genuinely irreversible. And this was the qualitative change in consciousness these struggles wrought' (quoted in Usher 1992:39). It has been, in other words, 'an experience of empowerment' (Usher 1992:39).

At the same time, the latest outbreak of violence between Palestinians and Israelis, ignited by Ariel Sharon's visit to al-Haram al-Sharif at the end of September 2000, is a cause for great concern. According to Sharoni, the militarisation of Palestinian society has been overlooked, as have been 'the new conceptions of masculinity that have emerged as a result, and the relationship between militarised masculinities and violence against women' (Sharoni 1998:1083).

In view of these factors, the outlook for women's political activism would appear to be grave. A combination of external aggression and repression from within has, in my view, marginalised women's organising, and there is a danger that this state of affairs will persist even when – or if – peace negotiations are restarted. In the present

precarious situation, as Ameri notes, 'women's issues are of extremely low priority and one fears ... that the derailed women's movement may not get back on track for some time yet' (Ameri 1999:52-3).

As the formal peace process appears to have collapsed, and with it any semblance of law and order, Palestinian women are exposed to new threats of violence. Between the end of September 2000 and the end of January 2002, 42 Palestinian women and girls (including two 3 year-olds, one 2 year-old and one 4 month-old infant) were killed by Israeli security forces and settlers (Miftah 2002). Most of these were 'accidental victims' – women or girls who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time or who died as a result of being prevented from reaching a hospital – although it was reported on 27 January 2002 that a suicide bombing in West Jerusalem had been the work of the first-ever female bomber. It is difficult to predict how relations between Israelis and Palestinians will now progress. If some form of peace process is able to proceed and the Palestinians are allowed to resume the business of state building, women may have the opportunity to consolidate some of the gains they have made.

Although the present situation gives little cause for optimism, women's achievements over the last 50 years are heartening. Palestinian women have struggled for greater access to education, for the right to work, for broader participation in the political process, and for the realisation of their rights as human beings. They have been both courageous and outspoken. The most positive message to take from Palestinian women's involvement in the national struggle is that, unlike Algerian women in the 1950s and 1960s, Palestinian women are unlikely to be forced back into the home. Although there is a long way to go in terms of equal rights and participation, women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have made impressive progress in that direction.

Notes

- 1 See also reports by the Women's Organisation for Women Political Prisoners (WOFPP) in Tel Aviv, Amnesty International, and *Palestinian Woman's Experience of Violence*, published by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Palestine Section, June 1991.
- 2 Although the majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are Sunni Muslims, there is a significant Christian minority (estimated at between 3 and 10 per cent).
- 3 Hamas, which is the Arabic acronym of the Islamic Resistance Movement (*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*), first appeared in February 1988 as 'the *intifada* wing of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) in Palestine'.
- 4 The Israel-PLO Agreement on the Gaza Strip and Jericho Area, 4 May 1994.

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