

# Local Feminism: Between Islamism and Liberal Universalism

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## 1 Local feminisms in context: new forms of mobilisation: 1978–93

The experiences of the Palestinian national movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories after the war of 1967 showed the importance of public efforts to organise the masses. Mass organisations were associated with different Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) factions; each sought to strengthen its following. While it may be argued that a single organisation would have sufficed, these divisions had the advantage of increasing the numbers of people recruited, by appealing to the partisans of all the political groups. It was also much harder to destroy these new organisations which had a more diffuse regionalised structure than the monolithic organisations of the past.

For these reasons, and against the background of intense national resistance in 1976, International Women's Day, 8 March 1978, was especially important. Some activist women held a meeting which resulted in the creation of the *lajnet al-'amal al-nissaei* (Women's Work Committee). It was largely made up of that generation of women who worked in political organisations, especially in the left-wing parties Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Communist Party, and Fateh, and some independent women. These women tried ceaselessly to join the structure of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) headed at that time by the national veteran Samiha Khalil, who denied them access, fearing their 'militant' background might threaten the powerful charitable organisation's façade of Family Rehabilitation Society (*in'ash al-usra*).

The Women's Work Committee included women who had emerged from the various voluntary work

camp that had proliferated after the 1976 municipal elections, and who had Marxist–feminist orientations towards political work. In time, a partisan power struggle emerged within its ranks producing a succession of women's grassroots organisations (Jad 1990: 131).

The permanent splintering of the women's movement does not reflect differences in the agenda and goals of the different groups. Rather, the common goal of involving the greatest possible number of women in the national movement demanded flexibility. This, (contrary to the membership conditions of the charitable organisations) enabled women from different social classes to participate; thus, the women's movement was not restricted to middle-class women as in the past (Taraki 1989: 62). The first goal of all these organisations was the nationalist struggle. However, 'emancipating Palestinian women' was an item on the agenda of all the organisations, specifically the left-oriented ones. The visible power of women in the streets was opening a wider space for their activism. All projects undertaken by the women's committees provided a permanent pool of recruits, whether in the villages, refugee camps or cities. The process in itself helped many women cadres to develop an understanding of the needs and demands of women with whom they worked. While the number of organised women was limited, they nonetheless represented a hegemonic bloc, which challenged the discourse of the more conservative societies or groups.

At that time, women in these committees believed strongly that the rising generation of Palestinian leaders could not ignore the role of Palestinian women in the resistance; women were going to be liberated through a change in the laws and a long-

term process of social change. This promise is still unfulfilled and the hope remains that the leadership of an independent Palestinian state will bring this to fruition.

## **2 The Palestinian women's movements and the first *intifada***

From the start of the first *intifada* in December 1987, women of all ages and social classes, in particular women from poor neighbourhoods and refugee camps, were an integral part of all dominant forms of resistance. Women's actions were sometimes violent, and they were often involved in serious confrontations with the Israeli army (Jad 1990: 133). Most importantly, the women's role was crucial in sustaining the *intifada* through the intensive internal networks between the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) and the masses. Networking was built on traditional home visits by women, providing support for prisoners, their families, martyrs' families and all other sectors or individuals affected by Israeli oppression during the *intifada*. Women in the Occupied Territories, like female activists in the PLO in Lebanon, were empowered by their important roles in the *intifada*, and began to contest their own party positions. With the massive scale of imprisonment of most of the underground male leadership, women activists replaced them (Jad 1990).

The massive success of the UNLU in organising and mobilising hundreds of thousands of people into peaceful and popular resistance was confronted by a brutal Israeli policy of suppression involving mass arrests, killings, home demolitions, school and university closures, curfews and road closures. The *intifada* also witnessed the emergence of the Islamists as a political movement that strongly contested the space so far controlled by the secular nationalist forces. The first *intifada* was accompanied by economic deterioration and a spread of poverty. This led to contradictory gender effects: an expansion of venues for women in the political public sphere; and at the same time of venues for more sexual control. The Israeli authorities frequently used social conservatism, especially with regard to female sexuality, to control the Palestinian population: firstly, girls and women detained and accused of nationalist activities were sexually assaulted or threatened with such violence, especially during interrogations; secondly, Israeli interrogators frequently threatened sexual violence against

daughters, sisters, or wives as a method of extracting information or 'confessions' from male detainees (Al-Haq 1990: 208, 511–12 cited in Hasso 1997: 175).

This policy, accompanied by school closures, poverty and restrictions of movement led to many girls dropping out of school and marrying at an early age. It also led to the enforcement of the dress code (veiling) advocated by the Islamists and seen by many young activists as an act of national solidarity on the part of women (Hammami 1991). The *intifada* ended with the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993. In the new phase that followed, Palestinians moved, for the first time in their history, from people to citizens governed by a Palestinian authority.

## **3 The conundrums of post-Oslo Palestine: from militants to citizens without citizenship**

This section concerns the gendered Palestinian nationalism and the gendering of Palestinian citizenship in the aftermath of the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a quasi-state. I consider the importance of the state in the discussion of women's position and citizenship in the Arab world in general, and in the Palestinian case in particular, since states, as national movements, construct and reconstruct gender and citizenship (Kandiyoti 1991; Rai and Lievesley 1996; Molyneux 2001).

The formation of the new PA includes the reconstruction of the Palestinian 'imagined' community (Anderson 1983) within which approaches to gender policies have been reformulated to suit a new era. However, women are not passive subjects of the PA. Therefore, I will also examine the impact of women's activism on PA policies and how it expands the boundaries of their rights as equal citizens.

I will demonstrate that women's activism is not a movement representing all women's interests, but rather a site of conflicting interests, power relations, and variable positionings. I will argue that the Palestinian women's movement, in the process of claiming citizenship rights and empowered by a universal discourse on women's rights, assumed the 'normality' of the newly established PA and that a period of political stability would lead to a fulfilment of their national, political and social rights. However, the feminist use of the concept of citizenship itself is in question under conditions of prolonged Occupation. Citizenship requires a well-defined and established state, which is not the case in Palestine.

Most debates on citizenship refer to Thomas H. Marshall who defined citizenship as 'full membership in the community', encompassing civil, political, and social rights and responsibilities (Marshall 1950; Marshall and Bottomore 1992: 7; Keane 1988).

Feminists have extensively criticised Marshall's definition of citizenship in its assumption that community is a gender-neutral arena, while ignoring gender and/or cultural hierarchies and divisions along race, class and ethnic lines. Moreover, the criteria for citizenship remain implicitly based upon a male subject. In addition, civil rights are limited, according to his definition, to those able to assert their rights through the legal process with financial backup (Pateman 1988; Phillips 1991, 1993, 2002; Yuval-Davis 1991, 1993, 1997; Lister 1997; Voet 1998). Feminists see citizenship as an important notion according to which the relationship between the individual and the state is defined. As such, women's citizenship should be considered not only in contrast to men's, but also in relation to women's affiliation to dominant or subordinate groups, their ethnicity, origin and urban or rural residence (Yuval-Davis 1997).

In the Middle East, the emergence of the notion of citizenship was related to the quest for equality for women in the public sphere, and the attempt to theorise women's status in relation to both the state and community (Joseph 1986: 3–8, 2000; Joseph and Slymovic 2001; Molyneux 1985; Kandiyoti 1991, 2001). This in turn was associated with a theorisation of democracy and a heated debate over the relationship between the state and civil society (Bishara 1996; Norton 1993, 1995). The debate was widened to take in Middle East states and societies which, in some quarters, revived 'an ahistorical notion of Middle Eastern exceptionalism' (Sadowski 1993; Zubaida 1988, 1995, 2000). These neo-Orientalists cast the Middle East as blighted by a failure to modernise due to its essentialised nature (Pipes 1983: 187–8 in Sadowski 1993: 18; Bill and Springborg 1990; Lewis 1964, 1988; Kedourie 1992; Crone 1980).

Feminist evaluations of citizenship in the Middle East suggest the question of women's rights exposes severe 'fault lines in modern concepts of citizenship' (Kandiyoti 2000: xv). The feminist critique focuses on the continuing role of kin-based, communal entities and their incorporation into different systems of governance, either as recognised parts of the political system, or as the source of various forms of

nepotism and clientelism (Kandiyoti 2000: xv). Some feminists have argued that citizenship concepts do not apply and call for a more culture-specific approach (Joseph 1994, 2000; Al-Torki 2000; Charrad 2000). Al-Torki, for example, has argued for working through kinship and communal structures that may act to empower and disempower women simultaneously. Others have argued in favour of citizenship concepts and call for the expansion of women's rights as individuals, and 'condemn the stranglehold that communal and religious forces exercise over them' (Kandiyoti 2000: xv; Hatem 2000; Hale 2000; Jad *et al.* 2000; Amawi 2000).

These arguments assume that the state exists as a sovereign entity within a well-defined territory, which is not the case in Palestine. While citizenship concepts may be applicable to states with recognised sovereignty, women's strategies to expand their citizenship rights must be viewed in the light of the general social, economic and political structures affecting these rights. The call for rights in a situation where the state does not exist in legal or political terms might lead women to limit themselves to a narrowly defined notion of liberal rights, while their states and societies are falling apart. This might lead to a greater marginalisation of women's rights and demands.

In the Palestinian case, in the post-Oslo era, many Palestinian women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) shifted their attention and energy from claiming their national rights through active and popular resistance to the Israeli Occupation into a focus on what was called the gender agenda. The latter narrowly focused on claiming rights for women from the Palestinian Authority (PA, not a state yet) while the PA itself could not guarantee the physical protection of those who would be its citizens. The drastic shift contributed to some extent to the demobilisation of what used to be a strong and successful women's movement.

The modernising projects of post-colonial states in the Arab world were gendered: policies to increase women's employment and education; control of women's fertility, and the provision of social services were central to modernisation and led to changes in gender relations. However, women's introduction into the labour market did not produce a substantive change in the sexual division of labour. Women were perceived by these national elites both as modern

citizens and bearers of cultural authenticity (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989). This contradiction was figured in most of their national constitutions in which women were defined as equal citizens but with fewer rights than men because the realm of the family remained governed by *shari'a*, which primarily defines women as dependants. This dependent image is not related to the *shari'a* interpretation alone but to many cultural, social, economic and political factors which are not conducive to the prioritisation of equal gender relations (Welchman 1999).

Women's rights and *shari'a* law became part of a dominant debate on the Middle East, including Palestine, with the change of US policy in the region after the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001.

With the USA's assumption of the mantle of the sole superpower, and its invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the inability of the Arab despotic states to change became a theme in US foreign policy. Their recalcitrance 'necessitates' external intervention to bring about desired change and democracy. The US-led intervention, which dismantled one of the most important post-colonial Arab states, not only jeopardised the notion of citizenship but also the notion of sovereignty on which it depends.

While most post-colonial Arab states are faced with different economic, political and social crises, the nascent PA confronts more immediately threatening circumstances. The first concerns the practical limitations of local resources which restrict the PA's capacity to deliver or to act for social transformation. Most of these resources are hostage to Israeli control and punitive actions (Khan and Hilal 2004). The second concerns the very existence of the PA, with the ongoing systematic destruction of its infrastructure and most of its development projects. The third concerns the existing political opposition, which is empowered by the ongoing confrontation and the lack of a peace agreement. The fourth concerns the nature of the PA policies themselves and their impact on the content of women's citizenship.

The unfolding events occurring in the Palestinian territories and society since the signing of the Oslo Agreement renders it difficult to reach anything but provisional judgments on the ongoing crisis. In this context, writing about the Oslo Agreement, the particular event which set the context for women's rights claims, is a somewhat frustrating exercise.

However, it is useful to pause and consider what the Oslo Agreement set in motion and how women's claims relate to the national situation.

The Palestinian quasi-state cannot define its community or its rights, nor can it delineate or control its borders in these terms. Thus, the quasi-state could not determine who is a Palestinian and who is not under the Oslo Agreements (1993–5).

As far as citizenship is concerned, no Palestinian may hold a passport without Israeli approval. Palestinian refugees in the diaspora cannot visit or return to their homeland and they remain stateless. Palestinians resident in Gaza and the West Bank may not visit each other without a permit issued by Israeli security. If both have permits to visit each other, they cannot reach their fellow 'citizens' in Arab Jerusalem, considered after its 'unification' in 1967 as the eternal capital of the state of Israel with its Palestinian residents given a special, revocable status. Other aspects of the Israeli Occupation policies continued to be manifested under Palestinian rule: expansion of Israeli settlements, land confiscation, demolition of houses, restriction of movement, control of economic resources, harassments and arrests.

Meanwhile, the PA cannot protect its 'citizens,' although it was assigned the mission of guarding Israeli security, which in practice meant preventing any act of resistance to the ongoing Occupation. The Oslo Agreement also led to the stratification of the Palestinian citizenry. A VIP-A citizen status was given to selected PA personnel to facilitate their movements between different areas under the PA's control. A small stratum of high-ranking personnel, mostly males, were granted this privilege (Roy 1998: 19–25). The impact of these conditions and sanctions has left deep scars on the Palestinian community at large and on gender relations in particular. The interim period of five years, as defined in the Oslo Agreement, expired in May 1999. With the outbreak of the al-Aqsa *intifada* in September 2000, all these 'privileges' were withdrawn and the PA was depicted as a terrorist group with a terrorist President (the 'Israeli Osama Bin Laden', no longer a partner for peace according to Prime Minister Sharon).

#### **4 From home-grown feminism to universalism**

The role played by Palestinian NGOs before the Oslo Agreement differs significantly from their role in the post-Oslo phase. Before the formation of the PA,

Palestinian society was organised in and around political parties and grassroots mass organisations. NGOs linked to these parties under the umbrella of the PLO encouraged and financially supported the parties and their satellite organisations. While the PLO and its political parties were banned by Israel, their satellite organisations were to some extent allowed to work since they were seen as service provision organisations. Between the end of the 1987 *intifada* and the Oslo Agreement, the NGO sector was used as the main channel of foreign aid which resulted in service delivery at the grassroots level, including clinics, schools, kindergartens, and income-generating projects. This resulted in these NGO actors becoming important and acquiring even more power than their parent parties.

The role of NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza shifted under the influence of the state-building process initiated by the Madrid Conference in 1991. I argue that the dual dynamics of state building and 'NGOisation' led to more fragmentation and demobilisation of all social movements. The NGO approach, of small projects of limited duration, did not prove to be equipped to mobilise or to liaise with other social movements and groups on issues of national concern. The limited life cycle of 'projects' induced fragmentation, rather than bringing about what Tarrow has called 'sustainable networking' (Tarrow 1994).

NGOisation also has a cultural dimension, spreading values that favour dependency, lack of self-reliance and new modes of consumption. For example, advertisements in Palestinian newspapers commonly describe collective community actions, organised by groups of youth, such as cleaning the streets, planting trees, painting the walls, etc. followed by a little icon indicating the name of the donors who funded 'these projects'. Many of the NGO activities are held in fancy hotels, serving fancy food, distributing glossy material, hiring 'presentable' youth to help organise the event or the activity. This has led to the gradual disappearance of the 'old' image of the casual activist with the peasant accent and look.

Thus NGOisation as a process also introduces changes in the composition of the women's movement (Goetz 1997) which results, I argue, in a shift in power relations. My study shows a shift from 'power to' women in the grassroots to 'power over' them (Agarwal 1994) by the new elite.

In what follows I deal with a widely used approach by many NGOs in the Palestinian context in which the feminist slogan 'the private is the public' was applied to 'engender' the national agenda.

How can women's feminist organisations promote women's rights within Palestinian society while the rights of the whole society are being systematically violated? How can they justify work for feminist social change in circumstances where people still need to secure their basic needs? Some feminist NGOs address these questions in two ways. Firstly, they ensure their work is decentralised, practical and relevant to the daily lives of women and men under the Occupation through the establishment of local committees on women's rights and training some cadres on women's rights. Secondly, through the media and educational programmes, they try to promote a new understanding of 'patriotic acts' as including the activities women perform in private as well as public, such as caring for their families, lobbying for women's rights and fighting violence against women. Women's private and public activities represent important acts of resistance to an Occupation that undermines the social infrastructure of Palestinian society (IDS Bridge 2003).

In this statement, the national arena seems to be reconfigured in terms of bringing what women do in private to the public, through the medium of publications, and giving 'new meanings' to what is 'patriotic' through training, workshops and advocacy of universal women's rights. The new meanings are expressed through presenting the resistance to domestic violence and lobbying for women's rights as a 'patriotic act'. This raises many questions about how the connection is made between discourse, participants and organisations (Tarrow 1994), between the private and the public (Pateman 1988; Eisenstein 1989; Phillips 1993), between how different women's interests are perceived by themselves (Molyneux 2001), and by 'the outsiders – animateurs' (Friedman 1992: 144). The answers might also reflect the lack of consideration given to the role of collective overt actions in articulating and constituting a women's gender agenda.

Discourses are not innocent, but can become very powerful. The more dominant a discourse, the more it operates as a set of rules about what can and cannot be said and done. When a discourse becomes powerful, we have to ask how it affects NGO

practice in its interplay with alternative and everyday discourse (Hilhorst 2003: 11). Thus, new discourse is not about the use of new jargon or new vocabularies, it is rather about building social power and building a social movement.

The content of democratisation is not separated from the form of organisation nor from how participants put forward their interests and ideas in order to find the best way to politicise them. This might contradict claims that NGOs are the engines for democratisation. Palestinian NGO structures are more exclusive than inclusive. Furthermore, rather than functioning as a mobilising structure, NGOs proved to be agents of fragmentation which were used as a power base for a newly formed elite to promote their own position in the leadership of the women's movement and other social movements. The process of consultation and networking which was meant to achieve a broad representation of women's interests ended up representing only the views of the NGOs themselves.

We may note similar outcomes in the literature where the participation of local communities is seen as detrimental to guaranteeing a 'real' expression of their needs and interests. Farrington *et al.* (1993), warn that many development agencies (whether governmental or non-governmental) seek 'participation' simply in order to get local agreement to a predetermined agenda.

The study of some active feminist NGOs in the Palestinian context revealed that 'real' participation was considered, by some, as a hindrance and it was not seen as enriching the agenda under discussion. Although many feminist NGOs had set up a series of workshops as a consultative mechanism at the end of which it was apparent that there was a divergence of views, the feminist NGOs nonetheless tried to preserve their visions and ignored the feedback. The time, effort and resources invested in the different workshops and mechanisms used to enhance the 'participation' of women did not inform or redirect the predetermined universal agenda: that total equality in reforming law should be the guiding principle used to represent all women's interests.

The approach adopted by many women's NGOs, based on individual and universal women's rights, worked on the assumption that social power rests with the state, in the form of the PA, and not in

other social and political groups opposing and competing with it (i.e. the Islamists). This approach, based on international conventions, ignored to a great extent home-grown, locally developed feminisms and the historical realities of different layers of colonialism and Occupation and the roles imposed upon, or accepted by, women (Nesiah 1996: 1).

An NGO, targeting the state to secure women's rights, might not provide a sufficiently robust power base to support claims for all Palestinian women's rights. I argue that this approach provided important grounds for the Islamists, as a powerful social and political movement, to discredit and de-legitimise these claims as not representative of the 'true' interests of women and to cast aspersions on feminists as lacking authenticity.

As I argued above, discourse is not mere words but rather 'collective action frames for social movements and its power structure' (Snow and Benford 1988: 198; Tarrow 1994: 122). The 'new' discourse based on liberal individual rights, used by the new NGO elite, might be interpreted to discredit old forms of organisation and as a means of co-opting popular organisations. The NGO discourse was used to forge a space in the public arena at the expense of old mass-based organisations. It recast the 'old' basis for legitimacy founded on resisting the Occupation and sacrificing for the nation as a basis for women's subordination and isolation. This old basis for legitimacy portrayed women as 'givers' to their communities and caring for their people. Women were valued for this role which opened for them new spaces in the public and private spheres. Moving to a strict 'gender agenda' based on universal rights, led to the portrayal of feminists (mainly by their Islamist opponents) as 'takers' of individual rights at the expense of the 'collective' plight of their nation.

## 5 Conclusion

I argued in this article that, in a context of unachieved national independence, separating women's rights from collective national rights risks leading to the marginalisation of women as a social group and subsequently to fragmentation.

The point here is to question if the purportedly 'counter-hegemonic' discourse of universal rights is deployed to increase or decrease women's social activism and their political power. I believe any

counter-hegemonic discourse must take into account the 'totality of the historical situation, which includes both the structural and superstructural element' (Bobbio 1987: 89) whether this is the continuation of

the Occupation, an impotent authority, weakened political parties, weakened women's organisations or the growing power of Islamic movements. I do not believe that NGO activism begins to do this.

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