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Simona Sharoni

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## Gender and Conflict Transformation in Israel/Palestine<sup>1</sup>

By Simona Sharoni<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

A careful examination of women's involvement in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in Israel and Palestine provides a unique perspective on key turning points in the history of the conflict in the past two and one-half decades, since the first Palestinian uprising, known as the *Intifada*. The article analyzes the changes in modes of organizing, as well as in the broader vision and key strategies of women's organizing, mostly at the grassroots level, on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide. By exposing the gendered dimensions of the conflict, women activists have begun to transform the cultures of their respective collectivities, ensuring that gender and other inequalities and oppressions are not overlooked. Notwithstanding the challenges facing women in both communities, the article concludes that the women who have been working for justice and peace in the region constitute a critical mass that will not only impact the nature of conflict transformation but will also be instrumental in envisioning post-conflict realities.

*Keywords:* dialogue, solidarity, resistance, Israel/Palestine.

### Introduction

The 1987 Palestinian Uprising triggered an unprecedented level of political participation on the part of Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women. Women took to the streets in Israel and Palestine calling for an end to the occupation and urging their leadership to pursue a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through separate, parallel and joint initiatives, women in both Israel and Palestine have made significant contributions to peace and reconciliation in the region. Over decades of activism, significant changes occurred in modes of organizing, as well as in the broader vision of the movements and their key strategies. Because most of these changes coincide with significant turning points in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they offer a unique perspective on the root causes of the conflict, the prospects for its resolution, and the challenges facing those who have sought to shape its peaceful transformation (Sharoni, 2010).

This article examines women's involvement in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in Israel and Palestine, with a particular emphasis on grassroots organizing in the past two and one-half decades, since the first *Intifada* in December

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article will appear in the *Encyclopedia for Women in Islamic Cultures*.

<sup>2</sup> **Simona Sharoni** is Professor of Gender and Women's Studies and Chair of the Gender and Women's Studies Department at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. She is the author of *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance*, (Syracuse University Press, 1995). Her research and writing included a comparative analysis of gender dynamics in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the North of Ireland as well as a critical examination of militarization and especially the interplay between political violence and violence against women. Her current work is on the ethics and politics of solidarity as a feminist practice as reflected in struggles for justice and peace around the world, especially as they apply to the struggle for Palestinian self-determination and a just and lasting peace in Palestine and Israel.

1987. Three distinct turning points that illustrate transformative processes involving individuals and groups in both Palestine and Israel are examined here:

1. A transition from struggles for inclusion, voice and visibility to new frameworks of peace-building and conflict transformation;
2. A move away from treating so-called “women’s issues” in isolation to articulating connections between women and gender issues and the politics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict;
3. A shift from joint ventures, based on dialogue and an emphasis on similarities among women, to parallel initiatives, based on recognition of the unique needs and expectations of various constituencies within the Palestinian and Israeli collectivities.

### **Beyond “add women and stir”: New frameworks for peace-building and conflict transformation**

With the outbreak of the first Palestinian Uprising, known as the Intifada, in 1987, the international media took notice of the active participation of women in the arena of Palestinian-Israeli politics. Mainstream media commentators were largely unaware that, for Palestinian women, the long history of political involvement and organizing at the community level and within the national liberation movement triggered their seemingly unprecedented political mobilization. The Intifada provided Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, who had participated in literacy programs and skill-training courses operated by the women’s committees, with both an opportunity and an excuse to join the women’s movement and to put what they had learned to use. The involvement of some women in the national liberation struggle notwithstanding, a majority of women in Palestine became politically involved as a way to protect their homes, families and communities. In the course of this involvement, women learned crucial skills, which prompted them to challenge the exclusion of women from the official decision-making levels in the political arena.

On the Israeli side, Jewish women, whose political involvement was previously marginalized in the name of “national security”, were inspired by the visibility of Palestinian women at the forefront of the Intifada. The result was a plethora of exclusively female and implicitly, if not explicitly, feminist initiatives calling for justice and peace. Groups like Women in Black, the Women’s Organizations for Women Political Prisoners (OPFPP), Israeli Women Against the Occupation (SHANI), the Women’s Peace Coalition, and the Israeli Women’s Peace Net (RESHET) burst onto the Israeli political scene, initiating numerous demonstrations, petition and letter-writing campaigns, solidarity visits to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and a series of local and international peace conferences (Sharoni, 1995). These grassroots initiatives were designed to influence public opinion in Israel and to put pressure on its political leaders to engage in peace negotiations.

At the same time, women did not wait for their elected representatives to embark on the path of peace. Long before the Madrid and Oslo processes were underway, Palestinian and Israeli women engaged in a series of international peace conferences. The first such conference was held in Brussels in May 1989 under the title, “Give Peace a Chance: Women Speak Out.” About 50 women – Palestinian women from the Occupied Territories, Israeli-Jewish women, and official representatives of the Palestinian

Liberation Organization (PLO) – met for the first time in such a format to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the prospects for its resolution. These events were designed to provide women participants with a hands-on experience in negotiation and with the impetus to continue the efforts by mobilizing support for peacebuilding within their own communities. Indeed, following the conference, in December 1989, representatives of the Palestinian Women’s Working Committees and the Israeli Women’s Peace Coalition coordinated a women’s day for peace in Jerusalem, which culminated in a march of 6,000 women from West to East Jerusalem under the banner “Women Go For Peace.”

Despite the momentum and the impressive progress made at these early peace conferences, when the media took notice, their coverage treated these significant political interventions as human-interest stories at best. Women were not treated as serious and credible political actors, capable of brokering a long and lasting solution to the conflict. Following the Madrid conference (1991) and in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords (1993), Palestinian and Israeli women, like their counterparts in other conflict zones, called into question the absence of women from the official mediation and negotiation processes. As a result, the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid Peace Conference included three women: Hanan Mikhail Ashrawi, Zahira Kamal and Suad Ameri. All three women “earned” their place in the Palestinian delegation because of their involvement at the grassroots level and their earlier participation in women’s peace initiatives. Ironically, because all three women were residents of East Jerusalem, Israel vetoed their presence at the official negotiation table. This problematic veto, which applied to both Palestinian women and men, went largely unnoticed. Her exclusion from the negotiations table notwithstanding, Hanan Ashrawi was appointed spokesperson of the Palestinian delegation and became an overnight media celebrity.

Instead of highlighting the success of grassroots Palestinian women’s initiatives, which resulted in three seats at the negotiation table, the Western media treated Dr. Ashrawi as an exception, focusing on her intelligence, eloquence, and Western dress and education. At the same time, Ashrawi spoke in a different voice, introducing an implicitly feminist perspective to peacemaking and peacebuilding. It is highly possible that the Syrian and Israeli delegations appointed women as their spokespersons in response to Ashrawi’s popularity and success in capturing media attention and presenting the Palestinian case to the international community.

One of the most significant turning points during this period involved the emergence of local political discourses, making explicit the links between issues that had been narrowly defined and marginalized as “women’s issues” and the politics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For example, the new political discourses made explicit the connections between violence against women and the violence of the conflict, and between the treatment of women as a subordinate group and the treatment of Palestinians under occupation (Sharoni, 1995).

The articulation of new political discourses provided women who were not members of existing political parties with a political standpoint and platform. For women who were already politically aware and involved, the newly articulated links between gender issues and the politics of the conflict infused their activism with both a vision and creative strategies.

## **Gendering the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict**

Because of prevailing gender stereotypes, it has often been assumed that women have a different perspective on questions of war and peace, and therefore can make unique contributions to peacemaking and to conflict resolution. Accordingly, feminist scholars and activists worldwide applauded when women on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide took to the streets in the late 1980s, pressing for a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although initially there were Israeli-Jewish women who argued that their quest for peace originated from their sex categorization, this claim, which is often labeled by critics as essentialist, was not unanimously endorsed by feminists. Nevertheless, the first Intifada prompted Israeli-Jewish feminists to learn about the impact of the occupation on Palestinians and to compare their experiences of discrimination as women to those of other disenfranchised groups. The emergence of a gendered analysis of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, informed by a feminist examination of power, privilege and structured inequalities, was hailed as holding the potential to rework radically the landscape of peace-building and conflict transformation in the region.

Informed by implicit feminist principles, women peace activists in Israel articulated important connections: (1) between different systems of domination and structured inequalities; (2) between practices of violence used against Palestinians and the unprecedented rise in violence against women in Israel; and (3) between the struggles of Palestinians for liberation and self-determination and those of women throughout the world including Israel (Sharoni, 1995). For Palestinian women, the realization that full participation in the national struggle does not necessarily guarantee an improvement in women's rights and social conditions triggered critical debates within Palestinian society. This disillusionment sparked a strong sense of commitment to the struggle for gender equality and women's rights, and opened a new chapter in the history of the Palestinian women's movement. As a result of critical deliberations, the women's committees established the Higher Women's Council (in 1989) and resolved to work closely together. Another important development in the mobilization of Palestinian women during this period involved the establishment of new women's centers throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Jad, 2010).

Determined to devote more attention to the particular problems and concerns that affected their lives as women, Palestinian women initiated numerous forums, research projects, and publications designed to explore strategies for addressing women's issues within the Palestinian context. These initiatives were based on the premise that all issues are women's issues, and that Palestinian women's issues are shaped by the social and political fabric of a society living under Israeli military occupation. A case in point is a 1990 conference held under the banner, "The Intifada and some Women's Social Issues." Featuring prominent Palestinian women and men, the conference was designed to send an explicit message to both the national leadership and to the society at large: that the lives and struggles of Palestinian women deserve public attention.

The anticipated response of the Israeli and Palestinian leadership and societies to the newly articulated connections between women and gender issues and the political conflict that has shaped them, was superseded by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and by the subsequent deployment of American and international troops in the Gulf.

When the U.S. bombing of Iraq started and Iraqi SCUD missiles were fired at Israel, the women's peace movement in Israel remained silent. This surprising stance reflects the institutionalized tendency of Israeli Jews to forget their differences when confronted with a threat or an attack as well as the confusion women experienced as the mainstream peace movement in Israel expressed its support for the war (Sharoni, 1995).

Following the crisis of war, the Israeli women's movement had to face the crisis of peace that resulted from the Oslo Accords (1993). As the rest of Israeli society, the Israeli women's peace movement was deeply divided about both the content and the implementation of the accords. While some were convinced that Oslo was an important step towards a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians, others argued that, far from representing a move towards a just and lasting peace, the accords perpetuated Israeli domination of Palestinians. Because of these divisions, the women's peace movement, unable to reach consensus, began to flounder. Such groups as Women in Black and the Women for Peace Coalition, once the most visible segments of the Israeli peace movement, were unable to transcend these divisions and halted their work.

A few years later, two new groups burst onto the scene, filling the vacuum of women's peace organizing. Women with no previous involvement in the women's peace movement or in official Israeli politics founded the groups Women and Mothers for Peace and Four Mothers. These groups, which did not identify as feminist, have received prominent coverage in both Israeli and international media and a relatively warm reception from the Israeli public, including many elected officials. Led primarily by mothers of sons who served in Lebanon, these groups successfully mobilized the discourse of motherhood to challenge Israeli government policies. These groups played a key role in shifting the national consensus in Israel about its occupation of southern Lebanon. They were the most visible representatives of the public campaign that eventually resulted in the Israeli military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 (Sharoni, 2002).

While aware that the Israeli public is more receptive to women advocating peace under the banner of motherhood, rather than feminism, Israeli women peace activists continued to explore creative avenues to address the gendered dimensions of conflict and peacemaking. As a result, many women activists in Israel have gradually come to realize, even if they do not always publicly acknowledge, that conflict transformation must include gender equality and that the broad array of problems often defined as "women's issues" cannot be treated in isolation from structures of militarization, inequality and oppression that are reinforced by Israel's military occupation of Palestinians. Furthermore, some women also understand the importance of concrete action directed at their own society and especially the mechanism associated with Israel's military occupation. New Profile and Machsom Watch are two examples of women's initiatives that emerged during the second Intifada and represent this transformation.

New Profile, a group that describes itself as feminist and anti-militaristic, has gone beyond challenging the Israeli national consensus on questions of war and peace. They challenge the social and political culture and educational system, within which Israeli-Jewish men are socialized and work, to convince their own sons and others to refuse on moral grounds to serve in the Occupied Territories. Despite attempts by the Israeli public and mainstream media to portray New Profile as extreme, their anti-militaristic stance has struck a chord in Israeli society as it destabilizes existing conceptions of masculinity and femininity. In so doing, New Profile has triggered unprecedented public discussions about the interplay of gender and politics, suggesting

that a true commitment to peace must be rooted in antimilitarism and outlining a strategy to move in that direction (Sharoni, 2002). The other women's peace group founded after the second Intifada is Machsom Watch (*machsom* is checkpoint in Hebrew). Machsom Watch was founded in January 2001 in response to repeated reports in the press about human rights abuses of Palestinians crossing army checkpoints. Mostly middle-aged and college-educated, women divided into small groups and positioned themselves as observers at key checkpoints in the West Bank. They have documented human rights violations, which the organization has periodically disseminated to the press. In addition, when necessary, the women of Machsom Watch have confronted Israeli soldiers, using their moral authority as mothers and as grandmothers, to question inhumane practices and behaviors (Halperin, 2007).

On the Palestinian side, building upon an early understanding that the struggles for national liberation and gender equality are intertwined, women who previously worked separately alongside a particular political faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) formed coalitions designed to address the impact of the occupation on Palestinian women and men (Jad, 1990, 2010; Kavar, 1996; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009).

For Israeli-Jewish women, the emergence of a multitude of women's peace groups provided new opportunities to step out of their prescribed roles as wives, mothers and keepers of the homefront and to take positions on what was the most crucial matter in Israeli politics: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Sharoni, 1995; Yishai, 1996). Palestinian women, on the other hand, have had a long tradition of involvement in politics, even if they did not always explicitly articulate gender issues within the national liberation movement. Long before the outbreak of the 1987 Intifada, Palestinian women nationalists challenged sexism and patriarchal views within the national liberation movement, insisting to be treated as equals and working to shape a vision of a future Palestinian state based on equality and justice for all (Jad, 1990, 2010; Kavar, 1996). Determined to advance a vision of the democratic and pluralist Palestine, women activists worked tirelessly to establish facts on the grounds.

Even before the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, the Palestinian women's movement was determined to safeguard its achievements and to play a central role in a future Palestinian state. To this end, Palestinian women held a series of meetings designed to formulate a political agenda that would take into account the new political reality created by the Oslo Accords. Less than a year later, in 1994, the women published a document known as "The Women's Charter." The Charter, which was endorsed by all the women's committees and presented to Yasir Arafat, was designed to safeguard Palestinian women's legal, social and political rights. The formulation of the Women's Charter reflected a transition from a spirit of revolution to one of state-building (Kavar 1996).

However, for some, the transition to state-building was not only unexpected but also filled with contradictions and challenges. Reflecting the divisions among Palestinians regarding the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian women's movement was also split with regard to the so-called peace agreement. The women's committees affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and with Nayef Hawatmeh's faction of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) voiced open opposition to the Oslo process, which they viewed as unjust. As a result, these groups lost both their financial support and much of the influence they had in Palestinian society. This fact is significant as, historically, the women's committees

affiliated with PFLP and DFLP held more progressive positions on women and gender issues than other segments of the Palestinian national movement. The erosion of their influence, coupled with the gradual rise of the Islamist movement during the first Intifada and especially in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, represented a setback for Palestinian women and men who have worked toward a vision of an independent, pluralistic Palestine with gender equality enshrined in both its founding documents and social institutions.

At the same time, while funding for some grassroots projects associated with the opposition stopped, women's research institutions based in both academic and non-academic settings took advantage of the relative space created by the signing of the Oslo Accords. They launched various projects designed to examine the impact of this political development on the women's movement and on the economic, social and political conditions of women in Palestine (Hammami, 2001; Taraki, 2006).

The Al-Aqsa Intifada, which erupted in September 2001, was ignited by the failure of the Oslo agreements and other negotiated agreements that failed to usher in a plan that would end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Known as the second Intifada, it underscored the same message that anti-occupation activists in Israel and Palestine put forth during the first Intifada: that an end to the illegal Israeli occupation is a necessary condition for a just and lasting peace in the region. However, unlike the bottom-up popular character of the first uprising, the Al-Aqsa Intifada has resembled more a guerilla war. Because of its militarized aspect and the risks associated with armed struggle, fewer Palestinian women have assumed leadership positions in this uprising. The same is true for the participation of women at the grassroots level because the key avenues of organized resistance did not involve widespread community participation.

The mainstream global media were quick to represent the escalation in violence in the region, focusing attention on such desperate acts of violence as suicide bombings carried out by Palestinians. There was little to no analysis of the fact that Palestinians who condone the use of armed struggle do so because of their deep disappointment with the failure of both Israeli society and the international community to grasp the message of the first Intifada, which was mostly nonviolent in both principle and practice. Also missing from the dominant media representations of the second Intifada was analysis of the systemic repression stemming from the Israeli military occupation, including home demolishing, checkpoints, targeted killings and an economic crisis.

Feminist researchers and scholars in Palestine have made significant contributions to the understanding of this phase of the conflict and the gender implications of systemic repression. These studies have examined critically such issues as the impact of checkpoints on women's mobility, work patterns and support systems, as well as the impact of the ongoing political and economic crisis on family structures and on violence against women (Taraki, 2006; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009). This impressive body of literature also includes analysis of the erosion of space for women's autonomous political organizing after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (Abdulhadi, 1998; Hasso, 2005; Jad, 2010). Another topic of feminist analysis involved the contradictions and problems associated with the proliferation of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Palestine. Some of the issues examined involved the use of funding to impose an agenda that may not be of a priority to Palestinian women as well as the de-legitimization



of particular gender-equality initiatives because they are associated with outside funding (Hamammi, 2002; Jad, 2010).

The impressive body of literature authored by Palestinian feminists about Palestinian women and contemporary gender issues within Palestinian society constitutes an important contribution to peacebuilding and conflict transformation. They offer sound research and analyses that must be considered by scholars in the field and ought to be taken into account by all political actors crafting the next peace agreement.

### **Women's alliances and the politics of difference**

The literature on women in conflict zones, in general, and on women in Palestine and Israel, in particular, has been dominated by a focus on women's ability to transcend their differences and build alliances, as well as on joint peace initiatives. Notwithstanding the importance of women finding ways to work together, especially amidst political conflict, it is important to pay close attention to the challenges facing such alliances. In fact, the effort of the mainstream Israeli-Jewish women's movement to articulate a unique feminist perspective in general and a coherent vision for peace in Israel and Palestine has come at the expense of addressing differences among women.

Like their counterparts in North American and other settler-colonial societies, the women who led both the feminist movement and the women's peace movement in Israel were by and large upper middle class, college educated, Jewish women who can trace their cultural and ethnic origins to Europe and North America. Largely unaware that their interpretations of feminism, gender equality and, to a large extent, peace reflect their own social locations, many Israeli-Jewish feminists responded defensively to criticism from women who trace their ancestry to Arab countries (also known as Mizrahi women), lesbians and Palestinian women, both from within 1948 borders and from Palestine (Abdu, 2007; Dahan-Kalev, 2001; Frankfurt-Nachmias & Shadmi, 2005; Kanneh & Nusair, 2010). By focusing primarily on their oppression as women and by giving the appearance that their experiences and perspectives have universal currency, Israeli-Jewish women seemed to struggle with the paradigm of difference. Many women lacked both the skills and the motivation to engage in conversations across significant differences, to take responsibility for being part of the occupiers' culture, and to sustain alliances that are not based merely on similarities and the illusion of symmetry in power relations.

Indeed, as Israeli-Jewish women and the international sponsors who supported their initiatives began to articulate connections between the issues facing them as women and the conflict that has shaped their lives, little or no attention was devoted to the fundamental disparities, reflecting the different experiences of Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women as members of occupied and occupier collectivities respectively. This crucial turning point in the history of Israeli women's mobilization for justice and peace was influenced by a clear bias in the global women's movement, as in early feminist literature on women and peace, against women's struggles for gender equality within a national liberation movement. National liberation movements often have been portrayed as the least hospitable places for women (Yuval-Davis 1997; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989)

Conventional feminist critiques of nationalism tend to overlook the fact that women in national liberation movements - compared to women in the military or in state

politics - seem to have had more space to raise questions about gender inequalities (Sharoni 2002). The common argument is that national liberation movements use women in the course of the struggle but tend to overlook their contribution to the revolution and embrace conventional conceptions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations once the struggle is over. This argument overlooks women's agency and their ability strategically to use their involvement in the national struggle to safeguard their gains during and after the revolution (Jayawardena 1986, West 1997, Ibanez 2001).

Inspired by the prevalent Western critique of nationalism described above, women peace activists in Israel, who developed a critique of and began to distance themselves from Zionism and militarization, expected their Palestinian counterparts to do the same. Unaware of debates within Palestinian society, many Israeli-Jewish women failed to understand both the vision and strategies of Palestinian women who were engaged in articulating a gender-sensitive analysis of repression and resistance.

Indeed, joint initiatives including Palestinian and Israeli women emerged in early 1988 and continued until the outbreak of the first Iraq War in 1990, and they continued on a smaller scope and with limited success through the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Jewish and Palestinian Women's alliances, which flourished in the first few years of the first Intifada, were embraced uncritically by many Western feminists and the initiatives' sponsors who often provided the funding for these projects. Little attention was given to structured inequalities and questions of power and privilege that have shaped the fundamental differences between Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women in both the expectations and political agendas.

The Jerusalem Link often has been described as the main prototype for cross-community reconciliation in Israel and Palestine. However, critical examination of the project's history and current state underscores both the potential and limitation of contemporary women's alliances in the Palestinian-Israeli context. In 1989, a meeting was convened in Brussels between prominent Israeli and Palestinian women peace activists. The meeting initiated an ongoing dialogue that resulted in the establishment of The Jerusalem Link in 1994. The Jerusalem Link is composed of two women's organizations—Bat Shalom (“Daughter of Peace” in Hebrew) on the Israeli side and Marcaz al-Quds la l-Nissah (“Jerusalem Center for Women” in Arabic), on the Palestinian side. The two organizations share a set of political principles, designed to serve as the foundation for a cooperative model of co-existence between the Palestinian and Jewish collectivities. The framework of the Link is spelled-out in details on its webpage: “Each organization is autonomous and takes its own national constituency as its primary responsibility—but together we promote a joint vision of a just peace, democracy, human rights, and women's leadership. Mandated to advocate for peace and justice between Israel and Palestine, we believe a viable solution of the conflict between our two peoples must be based on recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and an independent state alongside the state of Israel, Jerusalem as the capital of both states, and a final settlement of all relevant issues based on international law” (Daniele 2011).

Funded mostly by European donors and showcased as a model for women's peace activism and feminist conflict resolution, The Link has received extensive scholarly and media attention (Cockburn, 2007; Powers, 2006; Richter-Devroe, 2009). A recent evaluation report commissioned by Norwegian Church Aid, examined various joint

peacebuilding projects implemented by The Jerusalem Link before the year 2000 and restarted after the year 2005. The report also evaluates the organization's activities in response to certain emergency situations and human rights violations. Raising some critical questions about the work on this unique enterprise and underscoring its limited impact on the Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish communities, the evaluators concluded that projects and initiatives within the current political context in Palestine and Israel require more careful planning and better preparation of the groups invited to join them (Hilal & Touma, 2008). Others have argued that such preparation must involve close attention to such key issues framing the conflict as refugees and Jerusalem as well as to the significantly divergent needs and expectations that Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian women carry with them to joint initiatives (Abdo & Lentin, 2002; Byrne, 2009).

The participation of many Israeli-Jewish women in such encounters was encouraged primarily by liberal positions on both the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and feminism. The majority of women at the time believed that through dialogue they could find ways to transcend cultural, historical and political differences. Empowered by the inroads they made into the Israeli political scene through protest, liberal feminists embraced uncritically the promise of global sisterhood, which they thought would peacefully transform the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian women, in contrast, had very different expectations from such encounters. Their participation in them was inspired by feminist convictions shaped in the context of a national liberation struggle and intense grassroots activism. Because their ultimate goal was to bring about an end to the Israeli occupation, Palestinian women viewed their meetings and strategic alliances with Jewish women as an important vehicle for influencing public opinion in Israel in that direction. In other words, Palestinian women did not perceive such encounters as means for overcoming differences and establishing personal relationships or professional collaborations with their Jewish counterparts, but rather as a tool of social transformation and political change.

Ironically, such contested political issues as the right-of-return for Palestinian refugees or the status of Jerusalem, which have been identified by scholars and politicians alike as key to a just and lasting resolution of the conflict, seldom had a prominent place on the agenda of cross-community encounters or joint-initiatives. The significant differences in needs and expectations between Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women, as well as among the collectivities themselves, were often overlooked in both the planning and implementation stages. As a result, cross-community encounters often reflected a tendency on the part of Israeli-Jewish participants to focus on their shared experiences as women and to downplay or overlook differences altogether. Third party organizers and mediators tended to acquiesce to Jewish participants who were generally unwilling to account for their power and privilege vis-à-vis Palestinian women. As a result, Jewish women were allowed to dictate the terms of collaboration and to frame the boundaries of the discourse. With time, Palestinian women who participated in these encounters in the region and abroad grew impatient with the patronizing approach of their Israeli counterparts. Despite their ongoing, even if reluctant, participation in many cross-community conflict-resolution and peacemaking initiatives, Palestinian women have consistently expressed their skepticism regarding both the nature and objectives of such initiatives (Daniele, 2011; Richter-Devore, 2009).

The ongoing enthusiastic support of outside donors and sponsors notwithstanding, alliances and joint ventures between Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women remained fragile, suffering major setbacks since their inception, especially during such crisis periods as the first Gulf War (1990), the second Intifada (2000), and the Israeli attacks on Gaza (2008-09) to name just a few. With the exception of the early years of the first Intifada, encounters between women in Israel and Palestinian women from the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been few and far between. In fact, even at the height of the first Intifada, such encounters were always fraught with trouble and contradictions.

At the same time, and aware of the numerous challenges facing them, women peace activists residing in Israel, both Jewish and Palestinian, understood the urgency to take action. Moreover, seasoned feminist activists who had played leading roles in the anti-occupation movement since the first Intifada were determined to infuse the new political realities with feminist perspectives, new strategies of struggle, and bold initiatives.

### **Feminism and the Politics of Solidarity**

In November 2000, a month after the breaking of the second Intifada, a group of leading feminist peace activists met to discuss possible responses to the crisis. Outraged by the escalation of violence stemming from Israeli occupation and the Israeli government's propaganda that blamed the escalation on the resurgence of Palestinian resistance, they agreed to establish an organizing platform for feminist peace and human rights organizations. They established the Coalition of Women for a Just Peace, which later was shortened to the Coalition of Women for Peace (CWP). The sense of emergency and urgency that triggered the establishment of the Coalition has continued to inspire its dynamism and prolific activities.

Its leaders have overcome many of the key obstacles of previous Jewish-led women's peace initiatives in Israel, including making explicit the structured power asymmetry between Palestinians and Israelis and an inability to confront differences and conflicts within organizations. According to the Coalition's website, "CWP rejects the existing power relations between Israelis and Palestinians, which are exploited by the Israeli government to impose long term inequality and exploitation on the Palestinian people" (<http://www.coalitionofwomen.org/>). Along the same lines, the website makes clear that: "as a feminist movement, the Coalition has never settled for looking 'outwards', towards inequality in the public sphere or among nations. CWP insists on working on power relations within the organization itself. As difficult as it may be, we insist on bringing to the surface complex issues of working together as Jewish and Palestinian women, migrant women, economically and culturally oppressed groups, as well as straight, lesbian, bisexual women and transgender people" (<http://www.coalitionofwomen.org/>).

The new organization brought together nine feminist organizations including such veteran groups as Women in Black, Movement of Democratic Women in Israel (TANDI), the Israeli branch of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Women for Coexistence (Neled), and Noga Feminist Journal. In addition, the coalition reached out to such newer groups as Women and Mothers for Peace, New Profile, and Machsom Watch. Independent women not involved in existing organizations later joined the Coalition.

Determined to attract hundreds of women interested in developing original feminist responses to the conflict, CWP founders and members have used feminist sensibilities as they expanded the organization. From its inception, CWP was conceived as a non-hierarchical organization, run by an assembly that meets once a month and is open to every woman who wishes to become active. The assembly discusses the activities and projects and makes decisions by consensus. In addition, the coalition runs steering and ad-hoc committees that make decisions regarding administrative issues and execute the decisions of the assembly. CWP's unique structure and the rich experience of its founders positioned it at the forefront of peace work in Israel and ready to respond to the Palestinian Call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) that was issued in July 2005.

The historic call that was issued by a broad coalition of Palestinian trade unions, political parties, community networks and non-governmental organizations, many of them led by women, was inspired by the success of the South African anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s. The call was based on the understanding that the Palestinian struggle for human rights, equality, and the enforcement of international law needed international support, and that civil society organizations have an important role to play in such a campaign (Bennis, 2010). CWP was ready for the challenge and was one of the first Israeli organizations to respond.

In 2007, CWP initiated a unique research project under the title of "Who Profits from the Occupation?" Starting from the premise that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights is fueled by corporate interests alongside various political, religious and national interests, the project works to expose companies and corporations that profit from the occupation. In so doing, CWP states that it "hope[s] to promote a change in public opinions and corporate policies, leading to an end to the occupation. Although "Who Profits?" is not identified as a feminist project, its essence and execution are examples of creative feminist conflict transformation. Grounded in such feminist principles and strategies as action-research, consciousness raising, exposing injustice and demanding accountability, the project's global visibility has also helped to promote the existence and work of the Coalition of Women for Peace. The establishment of the Coalition and the initiation of a project like "Who Profits?" underscore the brilliance, resilience, and creativity of women peace activists in Israel and Palestine.

For Palestinian activists as well, the BDS movement created space for new modes of organizing, diverse coalitions, and campaigns, including some featuring constituencies and messages that have been previously relegated to the margins of the political scene in the region. A case in point is the vibrant organization of gay and lesbian Palestinians who live in the Palestinian Occupied Territory and within Israel. Palestinian Queers for BDS (PQBDS) was launched in response to the Palestinian civil society call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. In June 2010, PQBDS issued a call to queer activists around the world, explicitly articulating connections between their oppression as members of the GLBTQ community and as Palestinians. The statement read:

"As Palestinian Queers, we see the Queer movements as political in their nature; and ones that analyze the intersections between different struggles, evaluate relations of power and try to challenge them. We firmly believe that

fighting for the rights of oppressed and marginalized queer minorities cannot be separated from fighting against all forms of oppression around the world” (<http://www.pqbds.com>).

Highlighting the proud history of the queer movement worldwide, which has joined numerous global socio-political struggles against manifestations of oppression, imperialism, injustice, and discrimination around the world, PQBDS urged LGBTQI activists around the world “to stand for justice in Palestine through adopting and implementing broad boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until the latter has ended its multi-tiered oppression of the Palestinian people, in line with the 2005 Palestinian civil society call for BDS” (<http://www.pqbds.com>). In addition to the statement, the group launched its “Pinkwashing Israel, an online resource and information hub for activists working on BDS within queer communities to expose and to resist Israeli pinkwashing - the cynical use of gay rights to distract from and normalize Israeli occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid (<http://www.pinkwatchingisrael.com/>). The coalition uses online activism and social media both to educate and mobilize, usually through targeted Calls for Action. For example, early in 2012, PQBDS activists learned that The Equality Forum, an annual LGBTQ conference held in Philadelphia, had identified Israel as its featured nation for 2012, and had invited the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, to deliver the keynote speech. In response, PQBDS released a statement in which it calls for a boycott of the Equality Forum 2012, which it cleverly re-named: The (In)Equality Forum. The coalition coordinated a multi-front public campaign, including letter-writing, the publication of op-ed pieces, and numerous media appearances. The success of these efforts notwithstanding, the strength of PQBDS lies in the strong bonds of solidarity it has forged with queer activists around the world. In Toronto, local activists founded Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA), organizing community events and assembling large contingents in the annual gay pride marches. In Europe, *No Pinkwashing*, a new British group that was formed in 2012, made a splash at the World Pride in London.

Labor unions, human rights activists, and other segments of civil society in Palestine and in Israel, have much to learn from the PQBDS response to the original call for boycott, divestment and sanctions. Their message and modes of organizing reflect a new era in conflict transformation and peace-building in the region and a new framework for approaching the conflict in which gender and sexuality are at the center.

## **Conclusion**

Palestinian and Israeli women have faced numerous challenges as they work to bring about a just and lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, despite the escalation of the political conflict, women on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide have made considerable gains. First and foremost, their active involvement in peace and justice initiatives has had a transformative effect on their own lives. Through their activism, many women have grown more confident and have developed feminist consciousness and an overarching political perspective. As a result, these women now constitute a critical mass that is likely to continue to impact the course of the conflict and shape its aftermath. Second, by exposing the gendered dimensions of the conflict and bringing this analysis into the media and popular culture, women activists have begun to

transform the cultures of their respective collectivities, ensuring that gender and other inequalities and oppressions are not overlooked.

As the case of the Coalition of Women for Peace underscores, to overcome the problems facing women's alliances, there needs to be a dramatic shift in both orientation and framework. This necessitates a move away from a focus on dialogue, based on similarities, to a framework of solidarity, grounded in the critical differences between the two communities of women, that represents occupiers and occupied. This shift in both orientation and strategy inspired the emergence and spread of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS), a movement endorsed by the CWP.

Although many in the women's movement in Israel remain reluctant to move beyond the discourse of dialogue as the basis for reconciliation, the failure of this conventional framework to bring about a just and lasting solution to the conflict may convince them to explore a different approach. The unprecedented mobilization of queer activists in Palestine and the founding of Palestinian Queers for BDS highlight the promise of the global boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign. The success of PQBDS both in Israel and on the global stage, underscores the power of local, regional, and global solidarity to transform the course of the conflict.

Taken together, initiatives like "Who Profits?" and "No Pinkwashing", reflect a new approach to conflict transformation in the region. Rooted in an understanding of multiple and intersecting oppressions as the basis for cross-community and transnational solidarity, they provide a coherent discourse and a more radical platform for action. The BDS movement has provided feminists and other activists in Palestine, Israel, and worldwide with a clear vision and manifold opportunities to mobilize the international community to confront Israeli apartheid and to join the struggle to bring about a just and lasting resolution of the conflict.

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