

# Review of Women's Studies

# 4

**Palestinian Refugee Women's Stories of Home and Homelessness:  
Towards A New Research Agenda**

*Rosemary Sayigh*

**Profile of Single Women in Palestine**

*Hanan Halabi*

**Palestinian Single Women: Agency, Choice, Responsibility**

*Penny Johnson*

**Communities and Identities in Situ**

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**The Role of Non Governmental Organizations in Supporting Palestinian  
Women in Elections**

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**Point of Debate: The Human Rights Watch Report and Violence against  
Palestinian Women and Girls**

*Penny Johnson*

**Re-Thinking Arab and Palestinian Families: New Research Agendas  
and Policy Directions**

*Chivvis Moore*

# **Review of Women's Studies**

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# Introduction

This is the fourth issue of the annual *Review of Women's Studies*, published by the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University. This issue features a rich selection recent research and writing by the Institute's faculty and graduate students, as well as contributions from other scholars in Palestine and abroad that advance understanding of gender issues in Palestinian society. The editors are pleased to welcome Dr. Rosemary Sayigh (Beirut, Lebanon) as a contributor to this issue of the Review with a thought-provoking article in our English section that considers the stories of "home" told by Palestinian women in refugee camps in Lebanon; Sayigh urges a re-conceptualization of home as a domain of history and nation-making. Her call for an engaged and participatory methodology – as well as a collective research project – reflects long-standing concerns of the Institute and is very welcome. Also in the English section, Lisa Taraki introduces one of the Institute's collective projects – Three Communities in Wartime—in her consideration of community, identity and place in the three Ramallah-area communities under study.

A continued engagement with the achievements, problems and prospects of the Palestinian women's movement is reflected in articles in the Arabic section by Eileen Kuttab and Nida Abu Awwad and Janan Abdu Makhoul. The latter sheds light on feminist initiatives inside the Green Line. Hadeel Rizk-Qazzaz presents a fascinating analysis in the English section of training programs by women's NGOs for women candidates to local and parliamentary elections in Palestine.

In a project for the Institute, Hanan Halabi and Penny Johnson contribute two articles in the English section on unmarried women in Palestine, a hitherto neglected subject. Halabi uses new statistics from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics to profile unmarried women and Johnson uses interviews to examine the operation of choice, agency and responsibilities in the lives of unmarried women. :

The range of themes addressed by Institute graduate students in their theses and seminar papers is well-represented in the Arabic section, from power and authority within Palestinian families (Ayman Abd el Majeed) to women and inheritance (Aiyad Aiyash) to Palestinian women's legal discourse (Maha Mustakim Nassar) to the implementation of the health law (Suhaila Qara'een) to an analysis of Arab states' reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (Yusra Muhammed)

A new feature in the English section, Point of Debate, invites discussion on a major human rights report on violence against Palestinian women and girls, while a report of a recent Institute workshop for the Arab Families Working Group provides an account of lively interventions and discussion on re-thinking Arab families.

The editors and the Institute as a whole would like to add their voices to the widespread protest in Palestinian society over an edict from the Ministry of Education banning an important book on Palestinian folklore from school libraries. *Speak Bird, Speak Again*, co-authored by our colleague at Birzeit University Dr. Sharif Kanaana and Dr. Ibrahim Muhawwi, is an indispensable resource for students to understand their heritage and identity as Palestinians. Its folktales are the stories told by Palestinian women for generations – literally the voices of our grandmothers – and these voices must not be silenced.

**The Editors**

**Ramallah, March 2007**

# ARTICLES





# **Palestinian refugee women's stories of home and homelessness:**

## **Towards A New Research Agenda**

Rosemary Sayigh

The Institute of Women's Studies was pleased to host Dr. Rosemary Sayigh as a visiting fellow in the spring of 2006. Sayigh's pioneering work on the histories and experiences of Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon, and particularly her use of oral narratives to recover the histories of Palestinian women, had long been inspiring and guiding for the Institute's researchers, as well as many others in Palestine and elsewhere. Sayigh taught a graduate seminar in gender and oral history during her residence at the Institute. At the end of her stay, she presented an ambitious "research proposal" centered on camp refugee women's stories of "home." The proposal was of great interest both for its participatory, engaged methodology and for its re-conceptualization of the domestic terrain as a domain of history and of the re-making of Palestine. Sayigh kindly re-worked her presentation for inclusion in the Review; she and the editors welcome readers' responses.

## Introduction

In 2005 a small group of Palestinian activists in Beirut met to plan a photo book about refugee housing in Bourj al-Barajneh camp (in the suburbs of Beirut). Our idea was to photograph homes through the eyes of women-occupants, to focus on the views and aspects of homes that women wanted to draw attention to, and at the same time to record their stories about this and other homes they had maintained. In this way we would achieve a visual and audio record of refugee homes in one camp in Lebanon from the perspective of women. The project was discussed with the Palestinian Women's Humanitarian Organisation (PWHO), a local NGO that carries out house repairs in Bourj al-Barajneh for people who cannot afford them.

This project did not get beyond discussion meetings, but an artist among us took up the idea in a different way, by using 'home' as a topic for weekly sessions of a club for people over 60 (run by the PWHO). Those who attend the over-60s club are mainly women, and Amy Trabka – the artist – presented them with the idea of a 'treasure box' that each would construct as a legacy to pass on to their daughters, filled with visual representations of things connected to home. Each week different materials were used, and different parts of the home evoked. At the end of the year, an exhibition was produced, including a few voice recordings, all of which have been archived. An American-Palestinian artist who attended some of the sessions -- Doris Bittar – made visits to individual homes. She asked women to point out to her objects and parts of the home that were particularly dear to them, photographed and elaborated them through framing so that they became works of art.<sup>1</sup> I was interested in Doris's stories of women – usually widows – who had put energy and creativity into re-modelling and decorating their homes. Pride in their work in aestheticizing the home, and their attachment to particular objects within or outside the home, suggested expanding accepted Western feminist notions of 'domestic labour' by exploring it in an Arab milieu through women's recollections.

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<sup>1</sup> More of these works can be seen at [www.dorisbittar.com](http://www.dorisbittar.com)



Khadija and her roof garden, Bourj el Barajneh

Photo: Doris Bittar

One can imagine several values – theoretical, ideological, political -- that would accumulate through such a research strategy. Simplified notions of ‘imprisoned’ Arab Muslim women versus ‘liberated’ Western women could be explored, subverted, and refined through ‘thick’ descriptions, woman-authored, of how women living in Palestinian refugee camps experienced and negotiated their domestic role, with what degrees of pride, negation or modification. At the level of ideology, this would both challenge Orientalist constructions of Arab/Muslim women as essentially ‘different’ from Western women, particularly as prisoners of a ‘domestic sphere’ narrowly conceived as separate from, and inferior to, the ‘public sphere,’<sup>2</sup> and still at the ideological level, but directed towards Palestinian feminist scholars, such research potentially lifts Palestinian refugee

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<sup>2</sup> This image has accompanied Western penetration of Arab, Muslim and other world regions, creating an imaginary liberationist mission that embraced missionaries and educators as well as soldiers and administrators. See McClintock, Mufti and Shohat 1997.

women's lives out of the ideological 'box' of West/East 'difference' and re-sets them in a context of affiliation with 'women of colour' who, whether in countries of the South or as immigrants in the developed West, are consolidating around a refusal to choose between 'feminism' and 'nationalism'<sup>3</sup>. Given the way that many Western feminists construct the Arab/Muslim 'home' as always and similarly oppressive to women, the recording with different generations of Palestinian refugee women would have the value of historicizing the 'home' and gender relations within it, and highlighting change (or resistance to change) in response to Israeli occupation policies. What follows is an attempt to re-set this germ of a research idea into a broader political and methodological framework.

Refugees make up around 70 % of the Palestinian population worldwide, of whom an overall 30% inhabit camps in which material conditions have improved little, if at all, over the fifty eight years since their establishment.<sup>4</sup> By now a fourth generation is being born into a life situation characterised by poor habitat, a degraded environment, and the stigma of abnormality. That women bear a heavier share of the hardships inherent in camp life is confirmed by numerous studies.<sup>5</sup> We could expect that the historical experience of the camp refugee sector would be a central element in Palestinian history-writing. Yet this is not so. Palestinian class structure and culture is such that non-elite voices are not readily written into the national record. Historical context also shapes the way the 'refugee issue' is played out in internal Palestinian politics, with specific groups raising or suppressing it at particular times for particular political purposes. Though the period since the Oslo Accords has seen a stronger affirmation of the refugee issue, for example by the Right of Return movement, this has not so far been expressed in a cultural interest in the refugee experience on the part

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<sup>3</sup> See Hatem 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Only registered refugees living in areas served by UNRWA are included here. The percentage of refugees living in camps varies between host countries. It is at its highest in Lebanon (53%).

<sup>5</sup> See Sayigh and Peteet 1986; Peteet 1991; Rosenfeld 2004.

of national institutions.<sup>6</sup> Or to put it more accurately, for most currents of the national movement, the refugees of the camps have remained a mute symbol of injustice rather than a potential force to speak and act on their own behalf. Indeed, as earlier with the peasant class and women, the mutedness of the refugees as bearers of a specific history is an essential part of their role as national signifiers, and as symbols in national discourse.

If this process of ‘symbolization’ and ‘muting’ is true of the refugee sector in general, it is even truer of women refugees, where class and gender combine to silence women, and exclude their voices from the historical record. Rema Hammami’s examination of the commemoration of the 50th year after the Nakba indicate the extent to which women and refugees are conventionally overlooked in records of national history (Hammami 2005). In “a veritable deluge” of testimonials published in *Al-Ayyam*, a Palestinian daily newspaper published in Ramallah, over more than a year, only seven were by women; and women were entirely missing from the list of intellectuals invited by *Al-Ayyam* to give political analyses of the Nakba.<sup>7</sup> Hammami also notes that few interviews were recorded with men of rural origin, and there seems to have been no systematic attempt to ‘cover’ the camp refugee sector. This means that refugee spokeswomen must emerge and insist on recording their collective experience. If they leave others to speak for them, an experience with explanatory power for understanding the physical and cultural survival of the Palestinian people will be lost.

Why is it important for refugee women to take their own part in the recording Palestinian history? From many possible reasons, I will select three that have theoretical and political implications: i) the few

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<sup>6</sup> There are some NGO exceptions such as Shaml, PACE and BADIL. Adel Yahya at PACE has published an oral history of Jalazone camp and plans to do the same for other camps. Individual researchers like Barbara Brill and Ghada Ageel in Gaza, and Stephanie Latte Abdallah in Jordan, have also been recording with refugee women: see *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2006; Abdallah 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Though a few prominent women intellectuals published their Nakba recollections, they did so independently. Hammami notes that the women chosen by *Al Ayyam* to testify appeared to represent specific places, such as Jaffa and Deir Yassin, rather than refugee or women’s experiences of the Nakba.

recordings that have been done with women refugees suggest that they were the main sustainers of families and 'homes' in the years between expulsion and the establishment of UNRWA, when national institutions were shattered and refugee destitution was at its harshest;<sup>8</sup> ii) refugee women are sharp observers of the level where oppression and national movement politics impinge upon local communities and families, an interactive field that the notion of separation between the political and the domestic obscures; iii) if refugee women do not actively intervene, they will be left out of the record, or only included if they were 'outstanding', for example as militants. Such selectivity deprives us and them of the recorded experiences of 'ordinary' women.

My experience of recording with women and men about displacement (*tahjir*) points to women's greater capacity to observe and articulate the multiple effects of the Nakba. Whereas men tended to offer a conventional political analysis of its causes, referring to 'plots' and Arab betrayal, women described separation from family; the effects of loss of 'home'; the absence of men; the hardships of movement across national borders; the struggle to bring up children in poverty. How did they manage to carry this burden, through what resources and stratagems? And how did their work -- in its broadest sense -- contribute to the re-emergence of representative Palestinian institutions, the PLO and Resistance movement? We know how national histories leave out the 'domestic domain' as uninteresting and unimportant, because most historians do not know how to deal with it, and because they take its role in social reproduction for granted. The ideology of separation between the political and the social, with the political as essentially the domain of men and the social that of women, is part of most nationalisms; and Palestinian nationalism is no exception (Layyoun 1992; Massad 1995; Jad 2004). The idea of the 'political' as a kind of men's club, into which only a few exceptional women are allowed, needs to be subverted. One avenue is certainly for women to enter political and professional life,

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<sup>8</sup> There are still very few studies of the early period after the Nakba. As exception see Maghaames, Khalidi and Nasser 2005, which focuses on women's role in sustaining expelled families.

but there are class structural reasons why this is not a complete answer. Another way is to change understandings of and attitudes towards the domestic domain, the 'home', through historicizing it.

The issue of the democratization of Palestinian society through wider class and sectoral representation is further justification for the recording of refugee women's voices. I would argue that the General Union of Palestinian Women has historically viewed women of the camps as a 'mass' to be mobilized rather than as potential agents to be incorporated into all levels of the apparatus of the Union; and that if some have risen to prominence this is the exception rather than the rule. Few would dispute that the GUPW, like all other PLO institutions, implements policies of the national political leadership to its members rather than representing its members to the national movement leadership. Subordinated through class and through gender, women of the camps would have a stronger voice within the GUPW and the national political arena if they were to link themselves autonomously across UNRWA fields to identify and articulate common concerns. What form such linking should eventually take is not within the scope of this proposal. I limit it to the suggestion that the democratization of Palestinian society would be advanced by the formation of a 'lobby' to represent camp refugee women; and that if an offshoot of a research project to record refugee women's experience is to strengthen communication between women in different camps and regions, this would be politically legitimate and socially progressive.

Studies of the camps until now have focused predominantly on the transmission of national history and -- where gender is a concern -- with women's participation in the national movement. Little attention has been given to the reproduction of domestic culture or the 'domestic domain' (Latif 2004). Yet scholars acknowledge that camp homes and communities have historically formed a basis of Palestinian resistance and identity transmission. This awkward hiatus between the attribution of nationalism to camp homes and the absence of understanding of how this nationalism has been produced, what part in its production women have undertaken, and how reproduction of individual families



is articulated to (or disarticulated from) the national movement, could be partially filled by women's stories of home. The transmission of a Palestinian identity is not the only point of interest here; the creation of new 'home' communities in exile, the connections between individual families and camps, the symbolic and agential roles of women in sustaining connections, as well as change in these roles over time, form a field of women's social activity that could be better understood by stories about 'home'. Like housewives in Bourj Hammoud (Lebanon) interviewed by Joseph, Palestinian refugee women are involved in social networking that reproduces local camp communities as well as ties of kinship, friendship, and political patronage.<sup>9</sup> This work of connection that women undertake as customary part of their 'housewife' role -- but which extends outside the home -- carries with it a specifically refugee form of national culture and identity that is little understood.

In national discourse, camps are simultaneously celebrated as areas of 'Palestinianism' and mourned as milieux of deprivation and targets of Israeli attack. This has been particularly the case since Israel's re-occupation of the West Bank and attacks on Gaza, a period marked by heightened destruction of homes and arrest campaigns within camps. But in addition to the obvious insecurity of homes in camps, we need to notice the role of habitat as a stigma that marks out camp refugees as 'abnormal', visible and concrete evidence of their inhabitants as 'out of place and out of time' (Zetter 1991). Recordings I have done with refugees in Lebanon bring up complex feelings about camps as 'not home'/'home', feelings of both aversion and attachment. Camps have been experienced at different times as prisons, garbage dumps, a substitute for Palestine, a home while waiting for the real home, and as metonym for an optionless future. Here again, women with their gender-specific roles in the reproduction of family and community, can speak to us and to each other of their sense of these contradictions, and from what resources they create homes where a home in its customary sense cannot exist.

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<sup>9</sup> Suad Joseph, in her study of women's visiting patterns in a low-income and ethnically 'mixed' Beirut neighbourhood, just before the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, discovered that women's visiting crossed sectarian and ethnic boundaries as much as they reinforced ties of kinship and sect (Joseph:1983).

In recordings carried out in camps in Lebanon and the West Bank, I have found that 'home' is a theme that evokes many other related topics -- parents, siblings, relations with neighbours, the scattering of kin networks over space, Israeli attacks and arrests, the effects on family relations of poor habitat and space constraints, the effects of unemployment and work migration, among others. Within survey methodologies, the absence of comparable data across a research sample would be a problem, as the absence of historical 'facts' in autonomous narratives would be for some oral historians. But the tradition of testimonial literature welcomes the diversity of data obtained through free association aroused by a single term such as 'home'. Annelies Moors uses the term 'topical life history' for a method that combines interest in a particular topic or theme (such as 'home') with an interest in the life story as nexus between the individual and the various collectivities of which she/he forms a part (Moors 1995: 8).

**Points for debate:  
problematic aspects of 'home' and 'history'**

While evoking 'home' as theme for women's stories may be justified because of the way it 'works' to generate diverse memories, one could object to its use on the grounds of conservatism, in that it seems to take for granted, and therefore implicitly strengthens, the quasi-identification of 'woman' with 'home' that is present in Palestinian popular culture as well as in orientalist writing about Arab women. In a period when Palestinian women can point with pride to their growing presence in the 'public domain', whether through militancy, institution-building, or intellectual and cultural work, is it retrograde to reiterate the framework of 'home', even if we thereby illuminate the national, cultural and social value of what women do there? Would use of the term 'home' in a study in the camps reinforce the gender imbalance in the division of domestic labour, with women who want to work outside the home still held responsible for house- and child-care? Even if we discovered that the term 'housewife' embraces a wide range of 'public' activities, would this

contribute towards change in gender ideology, or merely consolidate it by giving an argument to conservative forces who want to keep women out of politics?

A related question arises in relation to 'history': this research proposal assumes that women's stories of homes – past and present -- would have value as part of Palestinian national, refugee and women's histories. What are the roots of such an assumption? The Zionist drive to deny and erase Palestinian history has generated a nationalist counter-drive to assert, research, record, and display this history, in texts, photos, journals, exhibitions and museums. In spite of initial resistances, national research centers and NGOs are increasingly using oral history to fill out the gaps, and have established networks to link researchers and data bases, introduce digitalization, attempt to standardize and generally improve practices of collection. Yet the assumption of the value of 'history-in-itself' as part of national struggle needs to be examined, especially when carried out among people living in a permanent state of poverty and insecurity. Is a preoccupation with national history truly in touch with the situation and concerns of the research population, or is it suppressing other, more urgent needs and concerns? Diana Allan raises such questions in a paper about researching memories of the Nakba in Shateela camp (Lebanon). Does the nationalist concern for history and the past ignore the refugee needs for hope and "a sense of dignity, self-respect and individual possibility"? Do requests for stories of the past "put the burden of remembrance on those with the last resources to realize it...[and] conceal the fact that this longing for nation may now be coming more from elite echelons of the Palestinian diaspora, than from the base"? (Allan 2005). Feminist scholars should, more than others, work against the 'subject'/'object' division embedded in research.

These are serious questions that any nationalistically-oriented project must confront. As oral history becomes increasingly popular, there are reports that speakers are being over-exposed to requests to speak. Research in camps brings into relief two awkward hiatuses: between the different positionalities of researcher and researched; and – more seriously – between the aims of research and the frozen situation of

camp people. They are warning signs that camp dwellers see research as impotent to bring about any change in their situation. People may express this feeling openly, as Um Nazem did when she responded to my request for her life story by saying: “A long and wide life we have spent in telling our reality and we gained nothing from it” (Um Nazem March 18, 1992). Colleagues report similar reactions from refugees in the West Bank, leading either to a refusal to speak, or to routine recitations. Only participation of the research community in planning and execution could alter this mood, by investing research with local as well as national value, and offering an opportunity for self-direction. The establishment of a network between refugee women across the diaspora might figure as core element to ‘subjectivize’ the project from the perspective of potential speakers.

## **Justifications**

In answer to criticism of an inherent domestication of women implicated in words like ‘home’ (or ‘beit’ or ‘dar’), feminists could respond that part of their struggle is to expand the meaning of ‘home’ so that its restrictive, conservative associations are subverted. Women’s narratives around ‘homes’ would illuminate women’s activism in sustaining homes in the face of colonialist aggression; show how other levels of ‘home’ – the nation and local community – are sustained by women’s work; and subvert the boundaries between the domestic and the political. Their testimonials would build concrete knowledge of the articulations between these different societal levels, and offer tools to campaigns for wider recognition of and status for ‘ordinary’ women. By expanding the idea of ‘home’ from its minimal conception as concrete individual household to an imaginary space of community- and nation-building, its restrictiveness vis-à-vis women would lose ideological power. National discourse in Lebanon in the 1970s praised women as ‘mothers of a new generation’ and as ‘military wombs’, dangerous metaphors that highlight biological reproduction; their use points to the fascist tendencies inherent in nationalisms that do not purge themselves of patriarchy. Reduction

of the 'home' to a space of sexuality and child-production is part of an ideological apparatus that constrains and subordinates women. One strategy of counteraction is to expand notions of the home to embrace its role in the production of identities, localities, social relations, cultures, and ultimately the nation in all its diversity. The remoteness of a national homeland where normality can be realised remains painful for all Palestinians. Refugee homes are full of the memorabilia of missing members – dead, in prison, in the best cases studying or working abroad. How will all these situational features be expressed in women's stories of homes, and of themselves within the home?

While the nationalist assumption that the recovery of history is equally important to all sectors of the Palestinian people needs to be critically examined, we should not ignore evidence that for many women recording their experiences in national or social movements has been positive. Among the women whose life stories I recorded in Shateela camp (1989-1991) there were some who participated enthusiastically, even though I was a single researcher without any national organizational backing. In another context, an encouraging example is Telangana women's life stories recorded by the Stree Shakti Sanghatana collective in Hyderabad (India); through these recordings, women members reviewed their gendered experience in a Marxist revolutionary movement (Stree Shakti Sanghatani 1989). Another model is the book produced when Margaret Randall cooperated with the Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMPRONAC) to record testimonials for *Sandino's Daughters*, a vivid oral and visual record of Nicaraguan women's role in the struggle against Somoza (Randall 1981). As Arab American women struggle to establish their own space in which to theorize, recount their experiences of silencing or misrecognition, defend their 'homelands' and communities, they break the mould of an 'international feminism' dominated by white women, and establish new circuits of identification and exchange with 'women of colour', and 'women of the South'.<sup>10</sup> One of the theoretical points at issue between 'first wave' (white) feminists and later (mainly

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<sup>10</sup> See the special issue on 'Gender, Nation and Belonging', MIT-EJMES Volume, 5, Spring 2005.

black American) feminists critics<sup>11</sup> has been precisely around meanings of ‘home’ for women, and the validity of the ‘public/domestic’ dichotomy.<sup>12</sup> ‘Home’ has been re-viewed by these scholars as a base of resistance to racist, national, ethnic and class repression. This does not mean that women are not oppressed within resistance, but it does entail a closer, more ‘subjectivized’ regard for the interplay between oppression, ideology, women’s actions, and time.<sup>13</sup>

A growing literature suggests that recorded histories of women are forming part of a circuit of Southern feminisms that is de-centering and complexifying feminist theory. Palestinian refugee women’s stories would contribute to this counter-hegemonic literature as much as to national history. Whatever aims individual participants might have for speaking – whether exchanging experiences with other Palestinian women, or telling the world about the Palestinian cause, or leaving a record for children and grandchildren, or fulfilling the political and cultural obligation of bearing witness – should be incorporated into the research as rationale.

## Methodology

Participation of the research collectivity in aims, design and ultimate uses of a research project is important when the collectivity in question is a marginal one, because it offers some guarantee of relevance to those who participate. Some of the pitfalls associated with testimonial literature could also be avoided, for example pressures induced by class or cultural asymmetry; linguistic misunderstandings; misinterpretation due to distance from the research milieu. Another problem with ‘raw’ oral data is that it lends itself to being ‘lifted’ and placed in a context

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<sup>11</sup> These feminists speak from a variety of racial, ethnic, or national positions, whether ‘black’, ‘women of colour’, ‘Third World’, ‘Latina’, etc.

<sup>12</sup> See Johnson-Odim 1991; Bhattacharjee 1997; Shami 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Latte Abdallah emphasizes generational difference in contestation of family among Palestinian refugee women in camps in Jordan (Abdallah 2006).

that changes its meaning, often deforming it. This becomes less of a hazard when research strategy 'plants' a research idea in a specific social milieu or category, in this case, camp refugee women, with the aim of initiating a project combining research with networking and institution-building. Such an aim is no longer restricted to acquiring data, as in survey research, nor of publishing a book, as in testimonial research, but enters a new territory of open-ended, participatory action-research with diverse potential end products.

A participant research strategy precludes laying down in detail exactly what methods will be used. There has to be a proposal or plan, to avoid an appearance of chaos, and of losing too much time over initial discussions. But the initiators also have to show readiness to change the plan in response to arguments emerging from the research collectivity. A first step would have to be to search for active women's groups in camps with whom to cooperate. A choice would have to be made between a centralised project, with all camp women's groups adopting similar aims and methods; or for each set of camp participants to choose their own aims and methods. Since the building of a cross-borders refugee women's network is one of the side-aims of this project, the initiators would need to have a clear policy towards issues of freedom and control. It would also be important to avoid any one faction gaining control of the project through its active women members. The Women's Centres that already exist in camps in Gaza and the West Bank might be the readiest available partners. In other fields, the initiators might cooperate with the GUPW on an explicit basis of independence. NGOs based in the camps are another potential source of partnership.

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# **Profile of Single Women in Palestine**

Hanan Halabi

Dr. Hanan Halabi, a faculty member at Birzeit University's Institute of Community and Public Health, contributed this statistical profile of unmarried Palestinian women to the Institute of Women's Studies research project on this neglected topic (see also Johnson in this volume). Analyzing data from three demographic and health surveys conducted by the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics in 1996, 2000 and 2004 (as well as other sources), Halabi identifies gaps in the universality of marriage between Palestinian women and men in the West Bank and Gaza, with about one out of ten women aged 35-44 not married compared to an almost universal pattern of marriage among men in the same age group. Halabi also draws our attention to some of the characteristics of never-married women in their diverse circumstances, finding unmarried women, for example, clustered at the two poles of education – both the least and the most educated – and with higher labor market participation than their married counterparts. Halabi also constructed a standard of living index, which finds unmarried women at a disadvantage. She also raises significant questions for further investigation, whether on changing marriage patterns or assessing the health and well-being of single women in different settings.

## Introduction

To varying degrees and at different paces over the past three to four decades, countries of the Arab region have been experiencing a trend of delayed first marriages as well as an increase in non-marriage for women (i.e. a decrease in the universality of marriage) (DeJong and El-Khoury 2006). Based on data on the timing and universality of marriages, Osman and Rashad placed Arab countries at three different stages of transition in nuptiality patterns (2003). For example, Egypt, Yemen, and Oman were placed in the first stage of early and universal marriages, while Syria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Tunisia were classified as having marriages that are delayed but universal. In the third stage, which is that of delayed and non-universal marriages, were countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Kuwait. It has been noted that the Palestinian situation appears to be a rather unique one, characterized by early yet relatively non-universal marriages (Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi 2005).

Osman and Rashad also noted that the clustering of different countries within each stage could not be clearly explained by female literacy levels alone or even by similarities in culture and social structures (2003). They proposed that other factors must be involved in the changes in nuptiality patterns and that “the nature of these forces and their effect are not necessarily similar across all Arab societies (p.26).” This certainly raises the question of the magnitude and nature of the effect of conflict (whether the major wars or the more recent popular uprisings) in shaping the Palestinian marriage patterns over time. The effect of the first Palestinian Uprising (Intifada) on lowering the age at marriage has been studied previously (Khawaja 2000), and it is certain that the current situation in Palestine, characterized by sustained conflict and by the erection of the Separation Wall, will have farther-reaching social implications.

This paper examines the changes and consistencies in marriage patterns of Palestinian women and takes a closer look at the profile of never-married women, a particularly interesting group given societal emphasis on marriage and the significance of the role of motherhood in the lives

of Arab and Palestinian women. It is important to clarify that the focus of this profile is not on the reasons why women marry or rather do not marry (although the data on the availability of men provide some hints in that direction). Instead, the focus is on what nationally representative Palestinian surveys inform us about the characteristics of a previously neglected category in Palestinian society, namely never-married women.

## **Methodology**

The profile is based primarily on data from the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2004, the Health Survey 2000, and the Health Survey 1996 conducted by the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), and it draws on other published tables and reports from PCBS, including data from the 1997 national population Census. The DHS target population is all Palestinian households residing in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), with a focus on ever-married women aged 15-49 years and on children under 5 years old. Demographic and health surveys focus on maternal and child health indicators and cover women's reproductive history, pregnancy and breastfeeding, family planning, fertility preferences, tetanus toxoid coverage, knowledge of HIV/AIDS, and child immunization practices. In addition, data are also collected on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of households in the sample, with a detailed roster of household members. A stratified two-stage random sampling design is used, and the response rates are generally very high. In the 2000 and 2004 surveys for example, 5729 and 4972 eligible women were interviewed at 99% and 98% response rates, respectively. The survey instruments, target population, sampling strategy, and fieldwork methodology are standardized, allowing for comparisons survey indicators over time. Details of the methodology and data collection instruments are published by PCBS (PCBS 2001 and PCBS 2006).

Analyses of the characteristics of never-married women were based on data from the Household Members Data section of the Household Questionnaire. This section contains information on every member

of the household, as reported by the survey respondent (usually, the female head of household). In addition to questions on each household member's age, sex, and marital status, there are also questions on his/her relation to head of household, refugee and returnee status, presence of chronic diseases and/or disabilities, educational level and attainment, relation to labor force, health insurance coverage, and smoking status.

In order to describe the standard of living of never-married women, a weighted standard of living index was constructed using factor analysis including twelve variables from the Demographic and Health Survey 2004. Those variables, which represented selected household amenities in addition to the crowding ratio, were obtained from the Dwelling and Household Data section of the Household Questionnaire.

The response rates to the three surveys are very high (>90%), and the data are considered of good quality, due to standardized training of fieldworkers and to other quality control measures in data collection and management. For some variables, there were slight differences, especially in the response categories, over the three surveys. Whenever necessary, response categories were recoded to ensure comparability of the variables over the years. For our purposes, there was greater comparability between the variables of the 2000 and 2004 surveys than with the 1996 survey.

A note must be made of the limitations of the data on single women in Palestine and perhaps elsewhere as well. There has only been one Census in 1997, which provides detailed district-specific data; the next census is scheduled for implementation in 2007. Thus, the possibility of looking into certain variables at the district level, and within district, at the level of locality type (urban/rural/camp), is quite limited due to the relatively small numbers of unmarried women. Demographic and Health surveys, though conducted regularly every four years, are primarily geared towards ever-married women and their children, and particularly married women of child-bearing age as the main topics of the survey are reproductive and child health. As such, there are not many issues included in those surveys that relate specifically to the

lives of single women. However, it must be noted that the DHS 2004 contained for the first time, a section on health (self-rated health, health care seeking behaviors, and health behaviors) that included all women regardless of their marital status or age. This section was used in the analysis below.

Finally, the statistical presentation is divided into three sections. The first section examines the patterns of marriage (and non-marriage) in Palestine over the years, and in some cases by region as well. In the second section, the education levels, employment status, and standard of living of never-married women are compared with those of their currently married counterparts, and in the final section, we will make use of the section in DHS 2004 which looks at the reported health behaviors and care seeking behaviors of all women, to see if there are any distinct features in the group of never-married women.

## **Section 1: Patterns of Marriage**

In terms of timing, marriage in Palestine occurs at an early age relative to most Arab countries, although in several high-fertility Arab countries, such as Yemen and Mauritania, age at marriage remains quite low (Chkeir 2004). According to the Demographic and Health Survey 2004, 13.5% of Palestinian females aged 15 - 19 years were already married, compared to 6% in Jordan (2002), 10% in Egypt (2003), and 17% in Yemen (2003).

However, a look at the data from the three surveys shows that the proportion married at the young age groups (15 - 19 years) has been declining in Palestine, indicating some decline in early marriage (Table 1). In fact, in 2004 the median age at marriage for females rose to 19.0 years for both the West Bank and Gaza from 18.0 years in 1997 (PCBS 2006). It will be interesting to see if the 2007 census, with its inclusive data collection, confirms this trend.



**Table 1.** Proportion of ever-married women by selected 5-year age-groups and year of survey \*

	1996	2000	2004
15 - 19	24.0	17.8	13.5
20 - 24	63.9	59.0	59.0
25 - 29	79.9	79.8	78.4

\* **Source of Data: Palestinian DHS Surveys for those years;** figures for 1996 are based on published tables from PCBS; figures from 2000 and 2004 are based on calculations from the raw data

Breaking down these figures by region, it is apparent that the decline in the proportions married at the younger ages is more dramatic in the Gaza Strip compared to the West Bank, especially between the 1996 and 2000 surveys. However, on the whole, the marriage pattern in Gaza is characterized by earlier and more universal marriages compared to the West Bank.

**Table 2.** Proportion of ever-married women by selected 5-year age groups, year of survey, and region

	1996		2000		2004	
	WB	GS	WB	GS	WB	GS
15 - 19	21.1	30.2	17.7	18.0	12.5	15.0
20 - 24	60.0	72.4	58.3	60.2	55.9	64.2
25 - 29	77.0	85.8	77.6	84.3	76.2	82.1

Thus in summary, although marriage in Palestine remains early relative to several Arab countries, it is becoming more delayed over time. The changes in Gaza appear to be more dramatic than in the West Bank.

In addition to timing, universality is an important aspect of describing marriage patterns in a population. Universality refers to the overall proportion of women who marry. According to the surveys, approximately two-thirds of Palestinian women in the reproductive age have ever-married (66.2% in 1996, 64.5% in 2000 and 63.6% in 2004).

A useful way of looking at the universality of marriage in a population is to look at the proportions never married in the older age groups (such as late thirties or early forties). At these ages, singlehood is likely to be permanent, as there is little chance that a woman in most Arab societies will experience a first marriage thereafter.

**Table 3.** Proportion of never- married women by selected 5-year age groups and year of survey (permanent singlehood)\*

	1996*	2000	2004
<b>30 - 34</b>	16.7	12.7	13.2
<b>35 - 39</b>	12.1	12.6	11.9
<b>40 - 44</b>	9.2	9.8	9.3

\* figures for 1996 are based on published tables from PCBS; figures from 2000 and 2004 are based on calculations from the raw data

In terms of regional differences, the proportion of never-married women in their thirties and early forties is higher in the West Bank than in Gaza. The large difference observed in the 40-44 years age group may be due, at least in part, to the small number of women available in that age group in the sample.

**Table 4.** Proportion of never- married women by selected 5-year age groups, region and year of survey (permanent singlehood)\*

	2000		2004	
	WB	GS	WB	GS
<b>30 - 34</b>	14.8	8.5	16.1	9.3
<b>35 - 39</b>	16.1	8.5	13.2	8.7
<b>40 - 44</b>	12.3	6.4	11.7	3.5

\* figures for 1996 are based on published tables from PCBS; figures from 2000 and 2004 are based on calculations from the raw data

Thus, approximately one out of 10 women in their early forties has never married. These figures are much higher than Arab countries that share with Palestine the phenomenon of early marriage, such as Egypt, Yemen

and Oman, and they are more comparable with countries with delayed first marriages, such as Jordan and Kuwait (Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi 2005).

In summary, marriage in Palestine is less universal compared to that of many Arab countries, but there have not been dramatic changes in universality over the years of the survey. It should be noted however, that the time interval between the surveys is not very long.

### **Variations in Marriage Patterns**

There appear to be variations in marriage patterns by region, district, and by religion. Marriage in Gaza is both earlier and more universal than marriage in the West Bank. However, within the West Bank, the northern districts appear to have higher proportions of unmarried women in their late thirties (i.e. permanently single). It should be noted that, due to the small number of never-married women in those age groups in the samples of the health surveys, district-level figures would not be meaningful. Therefore, Census data were used to compare variations in marriage patterns by district. It will be very interesting to what, if any, changes appear in the upcoming 2007 Census, especially as the data may reflect the possible effect of closures and mobility restrictions on marriage markets.

In the northern district of Jenin, approximately one fifth of women had not married by the end of their thirties, according to data from the 1997 Census. The proximity of these districts to Israel and the possibility of marrying Palestinian women from inside the green line might be one explanation for the levels of singlehood there. Along the same lines, it has been suggested that the relatively high proportions of singlehood among Palestinian women could be due to marriages of Palestinian men to Jordanian women and bringing them to settle in the West Bank, thus competing with Palestinian women from the West Bank for the pool of eligible men (Rashad, Osman and Roudi Fahimi, 2005). Following the north, the central districts of Ramallah and Jerusalem have the highest

levels of permanent singlehood. Ramallah is known to be a commercial and social hub for the West Bank, and it is less traditional and less conservative than the northern or southern districts. It also has a higher proportion of Christians than other districts in the West Bank. In the case of Jerusalem, the restrictions and complexities of issuing residence permits to non-Jerusalemites who marry Jerusalemites may be a factor in shaping and limiting the marriage market.

**Table 5.** Proportions never married by district

	% Never-married 30-34	% Never-married 35-39
<b>Ramallah</b>	21.2	15.7
<b>Jerusalem</b>	21.2	13.0
<b>Bethlehem</b>	14.7	8.0
<b>Hebron</b>	10.3	8.0
<b>Jenin</b>	24.7	21.1
<b>Tulkarem/Qalqiliya</b>	20.1	16.7
<b>Nablus</b>	22.2	15.0
<b>North Gaza</b>	11.4	8.7
<b>South and Central Gaza</b>	11.9	8.8

Source: PCBS *Marital Characteristics in the Palestinian Territory*, Table 2. (May 2000) using 1997 Census data.

In addition to the variation by district, there is also a variation in the distribution of unmarried women by religion. Only the 1997 Census has information on religion, and the data indicate a higher level of singlehood among Christian women compared to their Muslim counterparts at every age group. The gap between Christian and Muslim women is largest in the birth cohorts of the thirties and forties. In the 60-64 age group, almost one in five Christian women never married compared to only 4% of Muslim women of the same age. This age group would have been at a marriageable age around and after the 1948 war. The effect of conflict on marriage has been noted before in the Palestinian context. Khawaja (2000) noted that the age of marriage among Palestinian women fell during the first Uprising (Intifada). However, in the case of the 1948

war, out-migration to the West, especially among Christians, might have skewed marriage patterns towards non-marriage.

**Table 6.** Never-married women by age group and religion

	<b>% Never-married Muslim</b>	<b>% Never-married Christian</b>
<b>25 - 29</b>	16.6	27.3
<b>30 - 34</b>	12.9	19.0
<b>35 - 39</b>	10.5	16.1
<b>40 - 44</b>	8.3	15.1
<b>45 - 49</b>	8.2	16.7
<b>50 - 54</b>	7.2	19.3
<b>55 - 59</b>	5.3	19.3
<b>60 - 64</b>	3.9	20.5

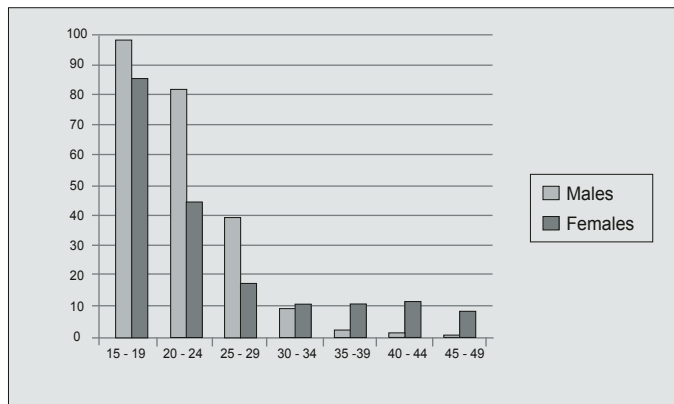
Source: PSBC *Marital Characteristics in the Palestinian Territory*, Table 2. (May 2000) using 1997 census data.

Finally, in the DHS 2004, there were no statistically significant differences in the proportion of single women in their thirties and early forties by type of locality (rural/urban/camp), although the small numbers should be viewed with caution

## A Look at the Men

Although the primary purpose of this paper is not to investigate the reasons for singlehood, it is still useful to examine the pattern of marriage among men.

**Figure 1:** Percentage Distribution of Never-married persons in Palestine aged 15-49 by age and sex



Source: PCBS Youth Survey 2004 (2003 data)

After age 30 years, there are more unmarried females than males, and the gap increases with age. By age 45-49 years, there are almost no males that have never-married. This could be due to a number of reasons, including the spousal age-gap, out-migration of males, and the possibility of cross-border marriages described earlier. The patterns is consistent in both regions, although the gap in singlehood levels at the older age groups is larger in the West Bank than in Gaza.

Similar findings on the dearth of never-married men in the older ages were also reported from the 1995 Demographic Survey of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Stokke 2001).

**Table 7:** Percentage Distribution of Never-married persons aged 15-49 by sex and region

% Never-Married				
	West Bank		Gaza Strip	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
<b>15 - 19</b>	99.0	86.6	99.2	84.8
<b>20 - 24</b>	85.2	46.8	77.4	41.9
<b>25 - 29</b>	43.1	19.2	33.8	17.1
<b>30 - 34</b>	12.1	12.5	7.3	9.9
<b>35 - 39</b>	4.2	13.5	0.7	6.9
<b>40 - 44</b>	1.7	14.7	0.9	7.3
<b>45 - 49</b>	0.7	11.2	1.9	4.3

Source: PCBS Youth Survey 2004 (2003 data)

## Section II: Profile of Single Women (30+)

In this section, never-married women are compared with currently married women rather than with ever-married women. The distinction may not be very significant in terms of its statistical implications, but the rationale is that divorced and widowed women (who with currently married women constitute the group of ever-married women) are a vulnerable group unto themselves in Palestinian society.

Never-married women are concentrated at the poles of education (primary or less or above secondary) compared to their married counterparts. According to the DHS 2004, almost one half (48.9%) of never-married women over 30 years of age have primary education or lower, and 22.9% have above secondary education. In contrast, only 10.7% of married women of the same age have above secondary education.

**Table 8.** Education in never-married vs. currently married women 30 years and over

	<b>Never-married % (N)</b>	<b>Currently married % (N)</b>
<b>30 - 34*</b>		
<b>Primary or lower</b>	38.0 (49)	30.7 (254)
<b>Above Secondary</b>	27.9 (36)	14.4 (119)
<b>35 - 39</b>		
<b>Primary or lower</b>	42.0 (42)	35.9 (253)
<b>Above Secondary</b>	21.0 (21)	14.0 (99)
<b>40 - 44*</b>		
<b>Primary or lower</b>	52.9 (37)	45.4 (295)
<b>Above Secondary</b>	21.4 (15)	11.8 (77)
<b>45 - 49*</b>		
<b>Primary or lower</b>	48.8 (20)	54.8 (227)
<b>Above Secondary</b>	31.7 (13)	9.7 (40)

\* Statistically significant differences; Based on DHS 2004

It is quite interesting that in the last three age groups the gap at post-secondary widens with age, suggesting perhaps that educated women had more difficulty marrying in the past. This fits with data in Palestine and elsewhere that shows many more contemporary marriages where the educational gap is in favor of women (or equal).

Although the numbers are quite small in the DHS 2004, it is obvious that education and employment are related, with the level of employment increasing as the level of education increases. Never-married 30+ women are more likely to be employed or to have ever-worked compared to their currently married counterparts, and this is true at all levels of education.



**Table 9.** Education and relation to labor force in never-married and currently married women 30+ years

	Ever-worked % (n)	
	Never-married	Currently-married
< Secondary education	23.5 (79)	4.8 (152)
Secondary education and above	84.0 (84)	54.8 (207)

Additionally, currently married women are more likely to be unpaid family members than their never-married counterparts. Both the employment and educational status of a significant proportion of unmarried women in Palestine indicate that stereotypes that single women are dependent or unproductive must be questioned. At the same time, the situation of unmarried women in difficult circumstances needs to be addressed.

**Table 10.** Employment Status by age group and marital status (for employed and unemployed ever-worked Palestinian Population)

	Never-Married Women				Currently Married Women			
	% Employer	% Self-employed	% Wage employee	% Unpaid family member	% Employer	% Self-employed	% Wage employee	% Unpaid family member
15 - 19	0.45	2.2	78.3	15.4	0.71	7.9	52.9	35.0
20 - 24	0.21	2.0	93.1	3.3	0.70	3.8	85.0	9.1
25 - 44	1.1	4.1	90.5	3.2	1.9	5.7	84.8	6.8
45 - 64	2.5	12.1	79.3	4.3	2.1	11.0	71.2	15.5
65+	5.3	21.2	51.6	6.0	4.9	30.5	21.0	40.4

Based on Census 1997; Numbers in 65+ category are very small, so the percentages should be viewed with caution.

Never-married women who are 30 years and older live in households that are slightly smaller than their married counterparts: total number of household members 5.3 vs.6.9 ( $p < 0.001$ ), and they tend to live with parents or siblings (DHS 2004). These living arrangements suggest a pattern where unmarried women have the responsibility of caring for elderly parents, or live with married siblings as part of their extended family. A very small proportion of unmarried women live on their own.

Almost one half of the never-married women were found to be living in households with the lowest standard of living, compared to a third of currently married women. The differences are statistically significant.

**Table 11.** Distribution of 30+ Single vs. Married women in STL categories (from DHS 2004)

	Never-Married % (N)	Currently Married % (N)
<b>Lowest STL category</b>	48.5 (118)	33.2 (1169)
<b>Middle STL category</b>	27.0 (118)	30.4 (1073)
<b>Highest STL category</b>	24.5 (107)	36.4 (1283)

In general, it was found that the level of education and employment status correlate well with STL index constructed here (i.e. the more highly educated and the employed are in the higher STL categories). Thus, it was expected that never-married women would be found in the higher STL categories. However, single women were more likely to be found in lower STL households than their married counterparts, even when looking within each level of education separately. It should also be remembered that the STL index is based on household amenities and crowding ratio, which in turn could be more of a reflection on the family's situation than of the personal qualifications of the single woman (i.e. her education and employment), which in fact maybe the family strategy to get out of poverty.

### **Section III: Health and healthcare-seeking behaviors in never-married women 30 years and over compared to their married counterparts.**

As mentioned earlier, the 2004 DHS contained for the first time a set of questions on general health and health-seeking behaviors that included all women, and not only ever-married women. Again, the comparisons made in this section are between unmarried women aged 30 years and older with their currently married counterparts.

**Table 12.** Health perceptions of never-married and currently married women over 30 years

	<b>Never-Married % (N)</b>	<b>Currently- Married % (N)</b>
<b>Self-rate their overall health as excellent or very good</b>	68.1 (214)	54.0 (1514)
<b>Believe that their height and weight are matched</b>	62.4 (196)	50.4 (1411)
<b>Believe that they are a little or very over-weight</b>	28.3 (89)	42.7 (1196)
<b>Report that they are anemic*</b>	5.7 (18)	11.6 (324)
<b>Report having a pap smear at least once every 3 years</b>	5.4 (17)	29.4 (822)
<b>Report not conducting a self breast exam</b>	82.7 (259)	66.3 (1855)

\* most married and never-married women reported that they were diagnosed by a doctor

In terms of health perceptions, never-married women seem to have more positive perceptions of their own health compared to currently married women. This is despite the well-known fact that health services are generally directed towards currently married women, especially in relation to reproductive events. Never-married women have a more positive impression of their overall health and their body weight, and they are less likely to report being anemic. Perhaps this is not surprising, in light of the prevalent pattern of frequent and closely spaced pregnancies; a pattern that is not conducive for losing the pregnancy weight or for rebuilding the body's iron stores.

However, in terms of health-seeking behaviors, never-married women are at a disadvantage when it comes to important screening tests, such as screening for breast cancer and conducting pap smears to screen for cervical cancer. The latter is entirely predictable, as it is very unlikely

for unmarried Palestinian women to seek care for gynecological issues, especially if an internal examination is involved. In fact, the bias in health services provision in favor of married women has been documented in other Arab countries as well (DeJong and El-Khoury 2006).

Currently married women were more likely to report having experienced an illness in the two weeks immediately preceding the survey (35.0% compared to 24.0% never-married women). However, there were no significant differences in the type of illness reported (acute somatic vs. psychological) or in the patterns of seeking treatment for that illness. For usual medical care, both groups of women reported going most frequently to a private physician, followed by a governmental or non-governmental facility. Never-married women were more likely to report going to no one for care (8.0% compared to 4.5% among married women).

Never-married women are more likely not to have health insurance (especially in the West Bank) or to be covered by social welfare insurance. Currently married women have access to governmental insurance through husbands that work in the public sector,

**Table 13.** Health insurance in the 30+ age group of never-married vs. currently married women:

	<b>Never-Married % (N)</b>	<b>Currently-Married % (N)</b>
<b>Have Governmental Health insurance</b>	42.3 (185)	56.0 (1975)*
<b>Have UNRWA insurance</b>	27.2 (119)	31.8 (1122)
<b>Have social welfare insurance</b>	7.3 (32)	2.8 (99)*
<b>Have NO insurance</b>	30.2 (132)	20.6 (728)*

\*  $p < 0.01$ ; the differences between never-married and married women in having governmental or no insurance are in the West Bank only; the difference in the social welfare category exists for both regions

## Conclusion

The social and cultural centrality of the marriage institution in Palestinian society and in other Arab societies cannot be overstated. Traditionally in Palestine, marriage occurred at a young age for women, and for decades the age at marriage remained stable, although it is now showing evidence of a slight rise. At the same time and despite its prevalence, marriage in Palestine is not as universal as might be expected, especially in comparison to other Arab countries with similar or even higher ages at first marriage. It appears from this report that there have not been dramatic shifts in the universality of marriage in recent years.

This profile intended to use the data from health surveys conducted regularly over a period of eight years, as well as other published statistical data to take a closer look at single women, especially those whose singlehood appears permanent. Such as group of never-married women poses a social and cultural challenge to their society. These women are seen to have somehow “deviated” from what was once considered an inevitable role. There is a dearth of information about their lives, living conditions, and characteristics. The information we get from surveys suggests that there is no significant differences in their residence locality, but they are more likely to have secondary education and above and to be employed (and not working for a family member). However, they fare worse in the standard of living classification based on household amenities. The extent of their independence and control over resources cannot be known from these standard surveys, but the issue would be a very important one to study. Qualitative, in-depth studies are needed to show the social roles that these women find, the extent to which they are able to control their lives, and the meaning and experience of singlehood. One thing is obvious, though it cannot be captured from the limited numbers in the surveys: single women are not the same, and the experience of singlehood in one location and for one group of women may not be the same for women in other locations and living in different circumstances.

The voices of single women must be heard and their concerns and issues must be known, regardless of whether their numbers or proportions in society are increasing or not. For example, while never-married women rate their health more positively than married women, we know from other work the extent to which health services are inaccessible to single women (for some services more than others and for reasons that are not necessarily financial, but rather having to do with the sex of the provider, the social acceptability of seeking certain services). So, it is important to see how they see their lives, and what aspects they find fulfilling and empowering.

The phenomena of delayed marriages and decreased universality in marriage are important demographic changes in the Arab region in recent times, and they are not without their social and cultural implications. These changes are giving rise to a group of women in their late twenties and thirties who are unmarried. In a cultural context that still largely emphasizes marriage and motherhood, the living conditions, needs, and aspirations of these women warrant further closer studies of both quantitative and qualitative types.

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# **Palestinian Single Women: Agency, Choice, Responsibility**

Penny Johnson

This article, along with the companion piece by Hanan Halabi in this issue of the Review, is part of an IWS research project on unmarried women in Palestine. Here, Johnson focuses on the lives and contributions of single working women who are highly educated and independent, an important, but by no means universal, category of unmarried women in Palestine. She also presented this paper at the Reproductive Health Working Group, held in Istanbul on 9-11 July 2006.

Special thanks to Andileeb Udwan for conducting, transcribing and sending two important interviews in Gaza despite the severe conditions there in the summer of 2006.



When I emailed Wisam<sup>1</sup>, an unmarried woman in her forties living and working in Ramallah, for an interview for this project, she answered me with the directness that is a strong feature of her character:

The project you are working on sounds very interesting. The problem is that I don't think I have much to contribute to this study. I don't see myself in those terms. I don't think the fact that I am unmarried has any significant advantages or disadvantages over what I chose to do privately or publicly.”

Wisam's words serve as a warning to avoid any temptation to consider unmarried women in Palestine or elsewhere as a unitary category – and undermines the assumption that singlehood is at the center of an unmarried woman's identity or perception of herself. It also implied to me that our interviews should be embedded in a broader life story approach in order to understand the significance or non-significance of being unmarried in the course of life events.

Despite Wisam's first reaction, she agreed to a conversation and we sat in a Ramallah café and talked about her life. Themes of living and managing alone – of an intense absorption in work and facing a series of very difficult work challenges and decisions by herself – were prominent. Being unmarried thus may not be a badge of identity, as Wisam warns. But being an unmarried woman in Palestine where marriage is strongly normative and family life often the only refuge from insecurity, offers specific circumstances, challenges, constraints and even opportunities that deserve exploring. Wisam, for example, describes one of her difficulties simply as learning to eat alone.

After graduating from Birzeit University, Wisam began work with a cooperative factory where women workers, rather unusually, made export-oriented luxury items.

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<sup>1</sup> Names and some other identifying details have been changed to protect privacy except in the case of former Minister for Women's Affairs, Zahera Kamal and Dr. Ilham Abu Ghazaleh, both of whom agreed not to be anonymous.

My job was my whole life, a dream come true, I felt I was making a contribution. I was never interested in traditional jobs. I did the work lovingly, I never felt burdened. It was like a child playing. It wasn't easy, many people were suspicious. I fought with friends and family who thought the project couldn't be justified..... Superficially, there is nothing attractive about this work. But I would explain and my parents supported me. My father was even detained and questioned. They told him "Your daughter makes products that says "Made in the Israeli-occupied West Bank". I was 21, 22. It was very young to be fighting these battles.... Looking back, I had no other choice. I wasn't a person to marry, have children and be a secretary. Or to have a checklist for a secure future and tick it off. I couldn't be any other way."

Wisam's qualities of risk and defiance – as well as her desire to make a contribution and to live differently -- are present in among the other unmarried women I interviewed and began to intrigue me. Also I began to be aware of media discourse across the Arab world where the growing number of single women in Arab world is posed solely as a problem – or even a moral panic of sorts (Ghazi 2006, Shaikh 2006). Headlines on the rise of unmarried women frame it almost as an epidemic that needs public intervention for the health of the society. One headline from the *Khaleej Times*, for example read: "Alarm bells ring as rate of UAE spinsters rises" and called for the "involvement of all segments of the society as well as the authorities to combat this "alarming rate," given as an entirely improbable 73%. (Ibrahim 2004) I thus wanted to capture some of the energy and empowerment that unmarried women give to Palestinian society, both in the present and historically, for example the role unmarried women have had in building educational and charitable institutions.<sup>2</sup> Media and public discourse also point to an unsettling of

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<sup>2</sup> In 1924, Miss Nabiha Nasser founded one of the first rural schools for girls in the village of Birzeit it would later develop into Birzeit College in the 1960s and Birzeit University in the 1970s. In Jerusalem, Hind al Hussein founded and developed Dar El Tifl. See Fleischmann 2003 for examples of unmarried women in pre-1948 Palestinian women's movement.

assumptions about universal marriage and raises question about whether the “cognitive frame of marriage” (Friedl 2003) has started to shift. Using Bourdieu’s useful terms, we could consider that marriage has moved from a “doxa” (unquestioned common sense that doesn’t need explanation or defense) to an “orthodoxy,” (a truth that has been questioned and needs authority and defense). (Bourdieu 1979, 168 - 9)

In this paper, I will be using in-depth interviews conducted with nine unmarried Palestinian women from 35 - 66, seven currently living in Ramallah (although two were raised in Nablus, one in another northern West Bank town, one in Jerusalem, one partly in Jerusalem and Cairo) and two in Gaza to explore questions of agency, choice, and responsibility. Three are Christians and seven Muslim. All are or have been professional or semi-professional working women for much of their adult lives, and all have some form of post-secondary education, although education may have been disrupted and discontinuous. With the exception of one woman, whose university education and paid work was delayed until her forties, all had been working in the labor force for most of their adult life. True to the labor patterns in Palestine for educated women, the women’s occupations were clustered in teaching and public sector/government employment. Occupational profiles, however, do not reflect the whole story. Ilham, now 66 and retired from teaching at Birzeit University, returned to Nablus after graduating from Cairo University in 1965 and, in her words, “refused to be a teacher which was the only job available.” She held out but then worked for a year as a teacher in 1966, resigned in 1967 and was accepted to be a tour guide in Europe where she “wanted to see the world.” Then came the June War; Ilham remained in Nablus. Public sector/government employment for four women is strongly tied to their and their family’s links to the Palestinian resistance. For example, Suha, a returnee to Gaza in 1966 and a long-time militant, worked for five years with the new Palestinian police before becoming an official in the General Union of Palestinian Women.

At the time of the interview, a majority (five) lived alone, including two of the three women under 45, although several had spent a long

proportion of their adult life living with an elderly mother, an unmarried sister or other family members.

This group thus reflects the disproportionate number of unmarried women with higher education and professional work, but I would not claim it to be representative. These “modernist” characteristics, however, are of special interest as new social categories of unmarried women emerge in Palestine and the region. On my part, I was interested in the way these women grappled with power and powerlessness in different stages of their lives and how what can only be called “character” – sometimes defiant, often unconventional, remarkably persistent and stubborn – operated in answering structural constraints. Choice and agency, for example, operates directly in the matter of marriage in that all but one woman had multiple marriage proposals. But it also operates in more subtle ways, including how women cast even adverse and intractable circumstances in terms of agency, choice and personal responsibility. “I decided,” said Mariam from Breij refugee camp of her “decision” to stay home and take care of the family after graduating from secondary school and finding she was ineligible for further UNRWA education because her brother was already in a training program “because education does not have a time limit.”

Responsibility takes the familiar pattern of unmarried women taking on the care of elderly parents, younger children and work in the home. For Zahera, educating seven younger siblings after the death of her father involved taking on the power and responsibility of the head of the family, a role she decisively embraced. Abla, living with and taking care of her aging mother for two decades in the absence of sibling or other support, clearly articulates a complicated mixture of insecurity, resentment, love and the fear of loss. However, responsibility not only includes choice in this commitment to family, but takes another turn which is responsibility to society. A common refrain, articulated her by Mariam in Gaza was: “I wanted to be someone, to serve society.” Choice and responsibility are thus interacting poles.

Because I am focusing on women who speak of themselves in terms of choice and empowerment, whatever difficulties they have faced, I feel

obliged to give two counter-examples to remind us that no one, including this sample, represents single women. In the scant scholarly attention to unmarried women in Palestine, Rothenberg, in her ethnography of women in the West Bank village of Artas in the late 1990s interviews two unmarried women who blame their singlehood on possession by a jinn. In a similar time period, Saar's study of unmarried women in Israel finds a Christian and a Muslim woman in Haifa blaming their unmarried state on spells cast by ill-wishers. In both, a denial of agency offers an explanation for an undesirable, almost cursed, state.

And an even more telling example. An elderly woman living without family or any kin in a Ramallah-area village answered the question of a graduate student who was asking women in the village: What do women's rights mean to you? She gave the following poignant answer: "There are no rights when there is no family." Her remark raised very important issues of how rights and entitlements can be embedded in family relations, leaving those excluded from family support in difficult circumstances indeed.

I will highlight some themes that emerge strongly through many of the interviews, which combine structural and subjective elements, and then proceed to a more detailed discussion of responsibility and choice.

### **Education before marriage: "No man is worth a university education"**

It is not surprising that education and the quest for education figures in these narratives but it is striking how dominant it is, particularly for women whose education is at risk. Consider Mariam, now 52, a refugee who has lived all her life in Breij Camp in Gaza who finally obtained a degree from Jerusalem Open University at the age of 44 after at least three failed attempts at higher education, one thwarted by the Israeli occupation who wouldn't allow her to leave the country without surrendering her identity card, one by UNRWA policy which forbade two members of the same family from obtaining UNRWA scholarships,

and one by the Lebanese civil war where she could not take her place at Lebanon's Beirut Arab University because she was refused a visa. Mariam, who received at least twenty marriage proposals, turned them all down to finish her education.

I received no less than twenty offers in the stages of my life since I was in the second basic class and I refused the subject because Mariam wanted to continue her education and to be necessary to society.

### **Fathers supporting daughters**

The role of fathers in supporting their daughters' education is equally prominent. Zahera's father, a teacher of religion and mathematics, was trusted by his community to take not only Zahera, but five other girls, to settle them in various universities in Egypt in the early sixties. Encouraging education was often accompanied by a lack of pressure to marry. Ilham's father told her: "*Ya binti*, there is no man in the world that is worth a university degree."

Hania, then in her late twenties and working in UNRWA's Department of Education, was supported by her father in going to the United Kingdom for a year's training program in the early 1960s. Her parents also did not pressure her to marry:

My parents knew me, they never tried to convince me or to socialize for marriage purposes. They would tell me the pluses or minuses of a suitor – he's from a good family, etc., but not try to convince me – they told each other "If she is unmarried and unhappy, she'll get a divorce and t they couldn't handle that."

Given the evident zeal with which fathers encouraged their daughters, it is interesting to speculate how these "liberal" fathers were influenced by prevailing nationalist and accompanying "modernist" ideas where female education was central to notions of national renewal and the modern family.

However, the drive to educate daughters was not confined by class or even by modernist forms of life. Suha from Mughazi camp in Gaza was encouraged by her illiterate mother to continue her education after the death of her father. Tahani, growing up in a small northern West Bank town in the eighties, noted:

My parents wanted their children to be educated above all else. They didn't have a chance themselves. The North wasn't like Ramallah. Excuse me but I have to say that Christians made a difference. I was surprised when the mother of my friend in Ramallah played the piano.

### **Effects of war and occupation: "I could not think of marriage"**

War and occupation not only remove marriageable men or dislocate and separate family, kin and social groups that form marriage pools, but can also change young women's goals in life, re-direct attention away from marriage and to other forms of responsibility, whether family or national.

Rather unique patterns of marriage and singlehood in Palestine, as Halabi's profile in this volume notes, raise the questions of whether and how the serial conflicts, uncertainties, forced migration and exiles in Palestine have shaped marriage markets and marriageability. At the very least, as one woman in her mid-fifties said in an understated way about the occupation— it was "distracting." Coming back from her university studies in Cairo in 1971, Zahera noted: "No, I was not thinking of marriage. It was the start of occupation and that was on my mind." Several women who came of age slightly before or slightly after the Israeli occupation in 1967 echoed Zahera's words.

Hania, 28 years old at the time of the occupation, an UNRWA teacher, and from a Jerusalem Christian family, was clear that the migration of men of her background circumscribed her marriage choices:

“Many men who were studying weren’t allowed to come back. I could socialize with people, friends, but somehow they weren’t in the league for marriage.”

Abla, however, adds an interesting and contrary twist. Originally from a family of high social standing in Jaffa, she faced new suitors after the 1967 war – well-off men from Haifa came courting in Ramallah.

“ Maybe I should have been flattered but I resented them. They were dull. I didn’t want to marry any of them. I wanted to explore life more.”

### **Political activism: putting emotions on the side**

Political activism, particularly after 1967, could (and did) create new marriage pools but individual activism and that of other family members also brought hardship, emotional turmoil, and increased responsibility:

Mariam spent long years as a militant women activist in the difficult conditions of a Gaza refugee camp under Israeli military occupation and casts her political activism both as a responsibility and as a consolation for lack of other opportunities:

It’s impossible to sit and be silent, I must be active. True the circumstances are on everyone and every group in Palestinian society and there is a lack of opportunities for work and the opportunities for education failed but my consolation was that Mariam would be someone in the society.

For her, political activism consumed personal life and emotions:

“There were many relations with male colleagues in nationalist and community work but we put our emotions on the side.”

Tahani, 35 years old, a university graduate and currently the head of a department in a Palestinian Ministry, comes from a poor family from a small



town in the northern West Bank and grew up during with the resistance and repression dynamics of the 1980s and first intifada. As a child she make flags for martyrs from jacket linings as her family couldn't afford to buy fabric. Her closest relation was with her younger brother who came to live with her in Ramallah when he joined Birzeit University. When he was shot and killed by the Israeli army in a student demonstration, she says:

When my brother went, my whole dream also vanished. I still don't visit anyone and I always see him in my dreams, always a child...When anyone gets close, I move away. In my office, I am like an embryo surrounded by a spider net. No one can get close."

### **Male migration: "My brothers were all outside"**

Male migration of potential marriage partners, as was the case with Hania, might be more obvious cause of singlehood for women, but what was more prominent and mentioned far more often in our narratives was the absence of brothers – with the consequence that daughters were left to cope with war and occupation, family crisis, whether of income loss, old age of parents, or sickness. The absence of brothers also directly affected marriage – Suha, for example, kept deferring marriage until her brother got out of prison, or later, returned from exile.

Ilham's mother died when she was twelve, leaving behind four older sons and four younger daughters. When the June 1967 war started, Ilham, her sisters and friends went to the Jordanian governor of Nablus demanding training. Sent to a school, they were left without any communication and finally had to find their way home.

I was with my sisters and my father was alone in the house; all my brothers were outside the country. We left the school in small groups and decided to go through the Old City, thinking it would be harder for the Israelis to be there. People were very sad and very angry, some were crying.... At home, it was

a night of horror. We were afraid, remembering Deir Yassin. We closed all the shutters. In the morning, we opened our door and saw some houses with white flags. This made us angry, and we started to write down the names, we thought we should report them as traitors. Then we found out that the town was under Israeli control. It was very hard to accept. I opened the window and saw Israeli tanks on the street. I felt like they were moving on my body. I even thought of throwing myself out of the window, committing suicide. It was too much for my mind.

In Zahera's case, she was left supporting the family mainly from her teacher's salary because one brother went to Saudi Arabia where he founded a family and had his own expenses and another, after a stint in Israeli prison, left the country and joined the resistance in Lebanon. Mariam stayed in the house to be responsible for her mother and younger children because "my brothers were outside in Iraq."

### **Families and Responsibility: "The education of my brothers and sisters is a priority"**

The pattern of an unmarried daughter taking on the care of elderly parents is clearly present in Palestinian society and indeed may have increased with the migration of sons, the nuclearization of households, and increased longevity. But there are also other patterns of family care: particularly responsibilities towards the education of younger children, especially when the father is dead or incapacitated, but also when household resources are limited. A common phenomenon in Gaza in the 1970s, fuelled by UNRWA education, was for unmarried refugee girls to become teachers in the Gulf and support other family members. Rosenfeld finds this same pattern in Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem. (Rosenfeld 2004). Teaching or other work abroad to support younger members of the family delayed marriage. This could result in singlehood – but also could result in marriage opportunities as a bride with some financial resources in hand.

Zahera returning to Jerusalem from her university education in Cairo in 1970 and already a political activist, was the oldest of eight children. She found a job teaching physics in UNRWA and almost immediately faced the death of her father:

At that moment I had to take some decisions. The first one I took was that about the building of a tomb for my father. I said 'I will not do it. I don't want to spend the money. We are poor and there are other priorities. The second decision was not to do the food for the mourning period. We send the food to the orphans school and my mother agreed. Then I decided I would make a birthday for my youngest sister, three days after the funeral. She was very attached to my father and I thought she needed to have her birthday. I also turned on the television – it was a house full of children and they needed to be normal. Also, I did not wear black.

Zahera stressed her most fundamental decision:

What I decided is that the education of my brothers and sisters is a priority

Sitt Afaf, an older woman interviewed in the mid-1980s by Moors was apprenticed to a seamstress in the late Mandate period after finishing the seventh grade. She successfully ran her own sewing workshop until the beginning of the Israeli occupation in 1967. Like Zahera, the key event was her father's sudden death and her responsibility for the family. She remained unmarried and says:

"I was responsible for my mother and seven children. I let them study, I married them and I opened a house. When one a good man came to ask for me in marriage, I sat with him and explained I was not able to marry because I had three responsibilities: my mother, my youngest sister who had just been appointed as a teacher, and my brother's son, who I had raised and whose engineering study I was paying for. Then he asked whether he would be allowed to meet my youngest sister. I told him 'that is possible'. He married her. (Moors 1995, 193)

Mariam decided to take care of the care of the family household in Breij camp and remains living with and supporting her mother to this day:

When I first opened my eyes to work, it was in the house because I had got my secondary school degree and was the oldest (of the sisters) and affairs were complicated in the house and it was necessary for someone to stay in the house and my brothers were outside on a journey to Iraq. My brother's name had been put forward by UNRWA and they don't give accept two from the same family so I thought that education did not have a specific age and I took a decision to stay in the house."

Palestinian conditions of insecurity and danger add to the more universal burdens attached to the care of the elderly, especially when the carer is alone. Abla says:

A landmark was the first intifada, it was very tough for us, often staying indoors and then there were curfews. I was afraid to go downtown but I had to shop for us. I started feeling lightheaded, dizzy, I was anxious. I resented having to be with an older person at this time, that I had no siblings to share the burden. I really had no one to support me,

Nida, working in media and teaching, finally was able to move out her family home in a lower-income suburb when she was in her late thirties. Nonetheless, within one year her mother was living with her, an arrangement that continues to be difficult for Nida who feels her space and creativity withering away without the solitude and independence she craves.

### **Marrigeability and being “out of place”**

A number of interviewees saw dislocation – being out of place – as affecting their life course Ilham moved to Nablus when she was six and idealizes her childhood freedom in Jaffa by the sea, considering Nablus as “between two mountains” and a prison.

There were really no approaches for marriage proposals to my father. I think there were two reasons. The first is that I was too out of place. My sister, for example, had loads of proposals, she was sweet and docile. Recently, a woman described what I looked like to her and her friends in Nablus when I was that age and she was younger: "As if you had come from Mars. So different from everyone else in town, we admired you."

The second reason Ilham noted was her crippled arm, saying "No one wanted a wife with one and a half arms."

Suha, from Mughazi camp spent much of her adult life in Lebanon with her mother and a brother who was preoccupied with his own family, as well as the Palestinian resistance. One of her explanations for not getting married was:

.. our dispersed situation in Lebanon. I only had one brother in Lebanon. He was thinking of his children and I was sitting there. All these circumstances make one think of oneself. And when we came here [to Gaza] one had gotten old. *Khlas* the possibility of thinking of marriage.

### **Marrigeability, Choice and Ideal Partners: "A Choice of Sorts"**

Several women cited ideals of marriage partners that conflicted with the marriage offers they received. Hania was offended by suitors who courted her as a young woman because of her family's status:

"It was because I was Kamal and Nabiha's daughter, not because I was myself. They lumped us all together "the Khoury girls."

She developed her own ideas of a suitable marriage partner:

I had a problem. I couldn't consider marrying someone when the person was weaker than me. I wanted an equal relationship. I didn't want to boss or be bossed.

Nida, reflecting on her relationships with men, believes she held impossibly high ideals of partners<sup>3</sup> partly to avoid real possibilities of marriage.

“When a man began to be interested in me, I would be bored. Oh no, I wouldn’t want to spend the rest of my life with him. *Mish Ma’oul*, he isn’t up to my view of life.”

The example of the unhappy marriage of her mother, married at thirteen to a man who mistreated and then abandoned her, also influenced her, Nida says. She defied her older brother, the breadwinner of the family, to go to university while he was pressuring her to get married. Her reflections on her relationships are complex, but she ends with saying that not being married is “a choice of sorts” for her.

Suha viewed choice and the course of her life in a different way. Citing as well the disruption of Lebanon noted above, she replied to the question of whether she choose being unmarried this way:

“*Walahi*, it was not my choice, nor that of another person. It was the situation and the circumstances the difficult nights we lived in that forced us into work And then you get distracted by work and your doings and work and you have money and spend on yourself. There was no pressure on me in the house. I drank and eat and dressed and went out as I wanted. There was no pressure on me and money was in my pocket. All this didn’t leave me to think of marriage.

Zahera explains that when she was young, marriage proposals came to her family and then she was addressed directly by suitors:

I was responsible for the family and didn’t say yes. But then it becomes your (my) decision, it’s not what you want. What

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<sup>3</sup> Dreiskins (2006) interviewing young professional women in contemporary Beirut found that contradictions in marriage ideals – where young women wanted a “modern” man who did housework but also had traditional attributes like wealth, status, and even jealousy and virility – inhibited marriage.

you want when you are young, you don't when you are older. I value the freedom and space, I don't want to lose it. I am happy with my life. It was my decision and I go with it. If my life was repeated, I will do it again."

Mariam, who rejected twenty suitors in pursuit of her education, seems to take simultaneous positions of decision and no choice, of the value of female education – she wishes three times that all girls get education – and advice to young women to get married. She says:

It was my decision not to get married.... But no girl decides not to get married and she thinks of the ties and marriage and a living life and children. I was active in the house and the family gave freedom to girls and respected girls' opinion so much so that my father shouted at my brother on my behalf. This made Mariam look for Mariam inside herself and that Mariam should be an influential force in the environment that was around her.... I hate the word "I" in my talk, but my experience says that my advice to girls is that any opportunity for marriage is suitable."

In her 1997 novel *The Inheritance*, Sahar Khalifeh gives a powerful, if conventional, portrait of Nahleh, an unmarried woman who has returned to the West Bank after living with her brother in the heady revolutionary days of Lebanon:

When he told me the story of Beirut and the revolution, she sang the story of a house and children... His was a love story, hers was a story of hunger for a loving touch. His was the story of a leader and a rock, and hers was about the small concerns of a schoolteacher who began her life a radiant woman and ended a spinster. A spinster? A spinster! A flat word that conjures selfish personal worries and a barren woman, one like the fallow land, unappealing and uninspiring, like a land without rain." (Khalifeh 2005, 47)

## Dreams of Youth

Khalifeh's bleak vision may be a dominant one, but other visions are starting to contend. In several focus groups in Amari refugee camp with girls of different ages, girls were adamant that they didn't want early marriage and most preferred to postpone until after university education. Most planned some combination of work and marriage for their future, although one girl in the eighth grade, who had problems in school, was quite clear that she wanted to be a wife and mother as her main occupation. In another focus group, a seventeen-year old whose ambition is to be a television journalist, took a more unusual track:

"I want to work and I don't want to marry. What if Shireen [a news correspondent from Palestine for the Al Jazeera network] was married – they wouldn't let her move around." (Johnson 2006, 14)

## Delayed marriage and the new Ramallah: the paradox

In two extended interviews with four unmarried women in their twenties and early thirties that share an apartment in the Um Shariet neighborhood of Ramallah, conducted by IWS researchers in 2004, some of the contradictions facing young professional women emerged sharply. Fida in her early thirties and the most successful of the young women as an engineer managing a large project, is a returnee to her father's Ramallah-area village, but grew up in Arab cities. She observes that mothers in her village have a sharp eye out for young women with good salaries, given their sons' difficulties with employment, and poses herself as quite marriageable, but not necessarily interested right now. (Silmi 2005). For another young woman, however, her working life in Ramallah turned out to be a marriage liability. From a northern West Bank village, she became engaged last year to a young man from her village. After they wrote the marriage contract, the young man wanted to dissolve the marriage and they went before the *qadi*. The reason the young man gave: she had become like "*banaat Ramallah*," and her ways were not suitable for him. The *qadi* dissolved the marriage.



In this last example, young unmarried women in Ramallah pose a seemingly new, and disturbing model, at least to some parts of society. Our interviews with older generations of unmarried women make us question how “new” independent and unmarried working women are in Palestinian society and more important, offer models of contribution to society and self development – as well as burdens undertaken and responsibilities met – that problematize, and even overturn, the “problem” of unmarried women.

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# Communities and Identities in Situ

Lisa Taraki

The Institute of Women's Studies Three Communities in Wartime research project\* is a multi-faceted examination of the ways in which individuals, families, communities, formal organizations, informal associations, and social groups have confronted, shaped, and been affected by the profound transformations wrought by the second intifada and Israeli attempts to suppress it since September 2000. At present, the research team is producing a volume (in Arabic) profiling the Ramallah-area communities under study – Am'ari refugee camp, Umm al-Sharayit, and Masyoun – and exploring themes raised in interviews conducted over three years in these communities. In this brief excerpt from her introductory chapter, Lisa Taraki situates the three communities in the larger social universe of Ramallah and al-Bira and points to significant differences in the making of community, identity and place in the three settings.

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On the face of it, the three communities described and analyzed in the Institute of Women's Studies Three Communities in Wartime research project would appear to neatly capture three social prototypes within the Ramallah-al-Bira urban formation. They also happen to lie contiguously along an east-west axis, starting from the poorest and most densely populated community in the east (Am`ari refugee camp) and ending with Masyoun, the wealthiest and most sparsely inhabited neighborhood in the west (Masyoun). Masyoun is a relatively older, predominantly residential upper middle class area of villas, apartment buildings, and a small number of upscale commercial establishments such as hotels and restaurants. In between is the new community of Umm al-Sharayit, a sprawling, rapidly growing, and relatively new community of predominantly multi-story apartment buildings inhabited by lower middle- and middle-class families of migrants from other regions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and families relocated from the Ramallah-al-Bira area.

One of the aims of the research project was to study the social construction of community in these three socially disparate locations, and to ascertain the meanings of community and neighborhood for families and individuals; did the residents of these three areas or neighborhoods<sup>1</sup> conceive of themselves as a community, what were the manifestations of community solidarity and identification, and what was the role of institutions, whether formal or informal, in the construction of community and place-based solidarities? Was the community a framework for action, and of what kind?

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<sup>1</sup> Local residents use neither "community" or "neighborhood" to refer to these areas. In fact, the term "community" is not part of the everyday language of people. The camp is referred to as *al-mukhayyam* (the camp), while the other two areas are referred to as "areas" (*manatiq*). Recently, the word *hayy* (roughly, neighborhood) is used for Masyoun. Of the three areas, "camp" has the most solid and enduring meaning. Use of the term "community" in this study, therefore, should not be construed as an attempt to reify a social category that does not necessarily exist in local classificatory schemes.

This introduction seeks to situate the three communities within the larger social universe of Ramallah-al-Bira. Such contextualization is necessary because the particularities of the three locales can be understood more fully if they are set against the features of the larger urban formation of which they are a part. In particular, the construction of place in each of the three communities is best viewed as a continuously negotiated and contentious process that is linked to the ever-changing dynamics of city-making in Ramallah-al-Bira as a whole. Within this social-spatial universe, neighborhoods and areas rise and fall, their material and symbolic values fluctuate, and their economic and social significance changes continually. The unique mix of economic, political, social, and symbolic forces that have shaped the construction of the social universe of Ramallah-al-Bira must be foregrounded, in order to appreciate the specificities of the particular locales under study. History is also important. Massey, observing that the specificity of place derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations, has noted that these relations interact with and take a further element of specificity from the accumulated history of a place, with that history itself imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world (Massey 1994: 156).

Delving into history in our case means identifying meaningful moments and social relations in the eventful twentieth century. The decisive moments were largely dictated by the turbulent political history of the world and Palestine, primarily the First and Second World Wars, the British Mandate, the Nakba of 1948, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, and the Oslo agreement in 1993. Significant social relations, themselves shaped by these momentous events, were embodied in social networks traversing and linking territories in and beyond Ramallah-al-Bira and Palestine. Before we do that, however, we need to draw together some of the basic features of the three communities under study.

## Boundaries, Networks, and Mobility

The overall picture that emerges from the three community profiles points to the denseness of social relations and the heightened sense of community in Am`ari camp, compared to the remarkable lack of community in Masyoun, the upper-class neighborhood, and a weak sense of community in Umm al-Sharayit, the new community of migrants. Johnson notes in her profile of Am`ari refugee camp that Am`ari can be viewed as the most cohesive and self-identified of the three communities under study; in fact, it is both a place of exclusion and isolation. Furthermore, the active presence of several local organizations in the camp is significantly different than the other two communities under study, and another way of marking Amari as a community Umm al-Sharayit, in contrast, is a new community lacking in self-identity and in the kind of community organizations that characterize Am`ari camp. It is, as Hilal notes in his profile, "liberated from a memory heavily laden with symbolism and hierarchies of family, class and region" (Hilal profile: 105). Masyoun, the upscale residential community profiled by Silmi, is the closest to the globalized suburban community, composed mainly of single-family residences but with creeping multi-story apartment buildings. It is totally devoid of community organizations such as a popular committee or clubs; its residents frequent institutions and belong to organizations outside the community.

Thus, we find that the density of social relations, a shared history (as in the case of Am`ari camp), and the existence of organizations are indeed important markers of a community. Hilal notes in his profile of Umm al-Sharayit that the existence or absence of community may be a function of the density and diversity of social relations. Some of the early observations by the research team force us to question the concept of community or neighborhood as a bounded place. Researchers noted the marked fluidity of the boundaries of the three communities, especially the line separating Am`ari camp from Umm al-Sharayit. A great deal of movement between the two neighborhoods was recorded in the many interviews conducted by the research team, and we began to understand that shifting boundaries are not only a reflection or expression of the considerable change of residence

from one community to the other, or of patterns of physical expansion of built-up areas beyond the boundaries of the two areas. They also have to do with the dynamic and ever-changing nature of social networks spilling out over community boundaries. As noted in the profiles for the adjoining communities of Am`ari camp and Umm al-Sharayit, the social worlds of people in each of these two places include individuals and families from the other place, indicating that community is not only spatial, but social as well. Indeed, and in the words of Massey, we must surmount the misidentification of place with community; communities can exist without being in the same place (Massey 1994: 153).

This observation is most pertinent in the case of the upper-class Masyoun area, where significant social relations lie outside the boundaries of the neighborhood. If the residents do belong to a community, then it is a community whose members are linked by common practices, activities, and sensibilities and not a common physical space. That this kind of community has come into being is itself a comment on the changing patterns of sociality in the social universe of Ramallah, one stamped by the unique signature of the middle and upper-middle-class. The two other communities, however, demonstrate another more prevalent social pattern in practice. In Am`ari and Umm al-Sharayit, the social networks and relations that are significant in the lives of the people living there are mostly familial. In Umm al-Sharayit, since the majority of the residents are recent migrants to the area, they are still intimately connected with their families in their places of origin. Many are employees of Ramallah and al-Bira institutions, having settled in Ramallah since the imposition of strict restrictions on mobility after 2000 in the wake of the second intifada. For the residents of Am`ari camp, their social worlds, while more solidly located within the camp itself, also include important familial nodes in other neighborhoods in Ramallah, including in the rapidly expanding adjacent village of Baytunia; in the rest of the West Bank; the Gaza Strip; as well as further beyond in the Arab world, especially in Jordan.

Having said this, it is important to realize that communities usually have an actuality in a specific place, even if this is not always embodied in



concrete social relations embedded in the place itself. A community may also be constituted as an idea or a concept, upheld by social practices and representations as part of the conscious process of place-making. This can be illustrated again by the case of the upper-class neighborhood of Masyoun. There, one can say, the very absence of a community is one of the most important assets of the place, both in the eyes of the people who live there and those who aspire to do so. The residents of Masyoun, unlike those in Umm al-Sharayit, do not seriously lament the lack of neighborliness and its trappings in the neighborhood. On the contrary, an important part of the shared sense of “community” there is the prevailing lack or superficiality of relations. All of the residents interviewed claimed that “people do not have time to build relationships with their neighbors,” a comment made without much regret and bordering on pride. It would appear that what unites the people of Masyoun in a community is the consciousness of constituting a particular kind of community, a unique place; it is not one in which there are strong neighborly relations in everyday life, but one in which people “mind their own business” behind the gates of their stand-alone private homes. That “mark of distinction” is part of what Harvey (2001: 405) calls the collective symbolic capital which attaches to names and places.

To return to the issue of understanding communities in their wider contexts, it is useful to remember that communities, neighborhoods, and other socially significant zones are located within spatial hierarchies created by and reflecting social divisions within the larger social space of a city, region, or nation. Communities are ranked according to their value in the relevant markets, whether they are real estate markets or symbolic ones. While Masyoun sits on land whose price has skyrocketed in recent years, its social valuation as an elite area is not solely determined by the price of land in the economic market. Value in the symbolic market is just as important, and maintaining this value means, above all, maintaining the distinctiveness of the place. The resentment of some Masyoun residents towards the municipality, which, in their view, has violated zoning regulations by giving in to the demands of real estate speculators to build apartment buildings in the area (See Silmi, 2007), is a commentary on the importance of Masyoun as a distinguished place, even if the place

itself is not the locus of the social activities of its residents. Perhaps this is what Amira Silmi has in mind when she notes that the anxiety about the encroachment of multi-storey apartment buildings and the invasion of “privacy” expressed by many of the residents of Masyoun is not uneasiness about over-crowding in the neighborhood per se, but a reflection of the desire of all its residents, irrespective of their histories and experiences, to maintain class boundaries.

This is hardly unique for urban centers. All modern cities have hierarchies of places and neighborhoods, reflected in their disproportionate value in real estate and symbolic markets. But this has not always been the case in Ramallah-al-Bira. This urban center at the turn of the twenty-first century is a different social universe, an emerging city much more conscious of rank and status, more self-consciously aware of its national standing, and increasingly differentiated along class lines.

### **Fashioning Ramallah-al-Bira**

I return to the idea that Ramallah-al-Bira is the product of critical events and moments in the turbulent modern history of Palestine, and that it was constructed out of a unique set of social relations and networks—themselves born of this history—that have weaved in and out of that place. Massey, arguing for a “global sense of place,” has noted that each place is a unique point of the intersection of global and local networks of social relations and movements and communication (Massey 1994: 154). The social networks and chains of communication and movement that have intersected in Ramallah-al-Bira extend all over the world, from Belize to Detroit, from Gaza city to Amman.<sup>2</sup> We will have occasion to refer to some of these diasporic networks later.

In this context, it is relevant to refer to the debates about place-making of which Massey’s contributions are a part. Arturo Escobar, surveying

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<sup>2</sup> Sari Hanafi (2001) has discussed different types of Palestinian diasporic networks and their intersections in Palestine.

the state of “the anthropology of place,” advocates a cross-fertilization of political economy and phenomenological or constructivist approaches to place-making; place is neither produced exclusively by structural factors (capital and global forces) nor by existential factors, or “the senses” (Escobar 2001: 150 - 153). In a similar vein, Thomas Gieryn, also surveying the sociological literature on place, has noted that the insights of political economy and urban ecology (a kind of “structural determinism”) must be balanced against an approach that recognizes that ordinary people extract from continuous and abstract place a bounded, identified, meaningful, named, and significant place; locality is as much phenomenological as spatial (Gieryn 2000: 471). He argues, after Bourdieu (1990), for an anti-reductionism and anti-determinism that precludes geographical fetishism, environmentalism, determinism, and unbridled social constructivism; the material and interpretive domains work both autonomously and in a mutually dependent way (Gieryn 467).

These admonitions have relevance to another point made earlier about history, when I noted that the decisive moments in the creation of Ramallah al-Bira were largely dictated by the turbulent political history of the world and Palestine. However, it should be noted that just as it is important not to fall into the trap of an exaggerated structural determinism or constructivism, it is also important not to ascribe excessive agency to “history.” No place is “created” or produced by historical events; places may be obliterated, shattered, or transformed by momentous events like wars, occupations, and political agreements, but people’s agency—whether through collective action or individual and familial decisions—also shape places and give them their unique identities against the backdrop of the critical events.

Indeed, when we consider the trajectory of the twin cities over the last century, we find that decisions of ordinary people—to emigrate to the United States, send money to build a home in Ramallah or al-Bira, move the household from Nablus to Ramallah, borrow money from relatives in Amman, go to work as a teacher in Kuwait—while taken in the shadow of wars and occupation, have stamped the character of these places. Collective resistance has also been important in place-

making in Palestine; for example, representations of Nablus (the “Mount of Fire”) and Jenin refugee camp (which acquired iconic status as a site of resistance during the Israeli invasion of 2002), are a reflection of resistance activity that has given them a special status in the national imagination. Closer to home, the identity of Am`ari camp as a place is intimately linked with resistance to the occupation, especially during the first intifada in the late 1980s. While the camp today has become a zone of exclusion and may be stigmatized by Ramallah’s middle and upper-middle class as a site of disorder and unruliness, it has also served as a surrogate conscience for the very same social groups in a different time and a different era. During the first intifada, for instance, the towns’ prosperous merchants paid their political dues to the camp by supplying it with food and provisions during the long sieges, a practice that also involved nearby villages and Jalazon refugee camp.

Resistance activity has also resulted in severe punitive measures by the occupying forces on certain places, cutting them off from their economic and social networks and imposing states of siege and isolation upon them. Nablus, historically an important center of trade and production and a site of extensive investment after the Oslo accords, has been under siege and assault for varying periods since 2000, and has seen its landscape devastated, its economy ruined, and its borders sealed by military checkpoints controlling movement in and out of the city. Businesses have relocated to other parts of the West Bank, particularly Ramallah, and the town lives from one curfew to the next, from one military raid to the other. Within the span of seven years, Nablus, the West Bank’s largest city and a crucial node in the Palestinian economy, has become an inaccessible place, a place of hardship and devastation.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the regime of closures and checkpoints, exacerbated by the wall, has transformed the West Bank into a number of isolated pockets where even the largest city is cut off from its hinterland and its traditional trade and social networks disrupted. The longer-term effects of such Israeli

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent insight into the ambience of Nablus under siege, see Doumani (2004).

measures are slowly beginning to emerge: the contraction of Palestinians' social worlds, and the introduction of new forms of localism, including the curious case of a "cosmopolitan" localism in Ramallah, as insulated from the rest of Palestine as the "localized" localisms of insular Hebron or Nablus (Taraki and Giacaman 2006: 32).

Finally, it is fruitful to recognize, as Gieryn has noted, the play of agency and contingency as significant forces in place-making (Gieryn 2000:469). A host of political and geographic contingencies intersected with individual and collective actions and practices to make the place that is called Ramallah-al-Bira. These two towns have become the center of political and cultural life in Palestine today, overshadowing East Jerusalem, which until the 1990s was the occupied territories' main urban center. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the transfer of its main institutions to Ramallah-al-Bira, buttressed by Israeli policies of siege and encirclement, recently culminating in the total sealing off of the Palestinian city from the rest of the West Bank, have seriously eroded the viability of East Jerusalem as a coherent urban center.

Before we trace the unfolding of this story, a note on nomenclature is in order. Ramallah and al-Bira continue to be two administrative entities, each with its own municipality and municipal council. However, the social and physical boundaries between the two have all but dissipated, and attachment to distinctive town identities survives only among the "original" natives who today constitute a small proportion of the population in the two towns. Al-Bira has a somewhat problematic relationship with Ramallah, having been marginalized and sidelined, in both the cultural and political sense, by Ramallah. In current usage, the term Ramallah generally subsumes al-Bira. Two of the three communities studied here, Am`ari camp and Umm al-Sharayit, actually fall under al-Bira municipal jurisdiction, but for all intents and purposes their residents consider that they are living in "Ramallah." However, the matter is not as straightforward or as simple as it may appear. The assertion of an Am`ari eighth-grader that "I like to go to Ramallah because there is no occupation there" (Johnson 2006, 5) shows that there is not one but several Ramallahs. Exploring how this came about is one of the tasks of this chapter.

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# **The Role of Non Governmental Organizations in Supporting Palestinian Women in Elections**

Hadeel Rizq - Qazzaz

This article is excerpted from research conducted by Dr. Hadeel Rizq-Qazzaz for the Jerusalem Center for Women to evaluate the programs of women's organizations' and other NGOs to increase Palestinian women's participation in local and parliamentary elections (2004-2006). Qazzaz raises questions of efficiency, such as targeting and duplication of activities that may be familiar to observers of the NGO field in Palestine or elsewhere. Of particular interest, she employs interviews – with women candidates, participants in training programs, and NGO and women's organization activists – that show that women's participation in elections can have contradictory results (both positive and negative) rather than constituting a straight path to greater democracy. Particularly in the local elections, women may stand in for other family members, or be deployed by political factions without real political participation. An analysis that goes beyond "counting women" is clearly called for and the Review is grateful to Qazzaz for translating and revising this portion of her research for publication.



In both the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and the phased local elections of 2004 and 2005, women's organizations and other NGOs in Palestine launched initiatives to increase women's political participation, with a strong focus on strengthening the capabilities of potential candidates through workshops and training sessions. Amendments to the election laws that provided quotas<sup>1</sup> for women also encouraged more women to stand as candidates. Did these NGO programs and activities make a difference, and if so, how? Has women's political participation been strengthened by such activities? In order to make a preliminary assessment, a questionnaire was circulated to women who either ran for elections or had expressed an interest in doing so asking them to evaluate the effectiveness of NGO activities and whether their needs were addressed. There were responses from 147 women. Another twenty women were interviewed in depth. In addition, interviews were conducted with twenty-three women's organizations or other NGOs that had programs on supporting women's participation in elections to identify the way they designed their programs and how they reach out to their constituencies.

## Background

Palestinian women participated in national elections in 1996 when 672 candidates, 27 of whom were women (15 from Gaza and twelve from the West Bank) competed for the eighty-eight seats of the first Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). The percentage of women candidates was around 4%. Five women won the elections constituting about 6% of the total number of the legislative council members<sup>2</sup>. This proportion

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<sup>1</sup> A 2005 amendment to the Election Law included a formula for women's inclusion in election lists (one woman in the first three, one in the next four, and subsequently one in five) as well as other changes such as increasing the overall number of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council from 88 to 132. An 2004 amendment for local elections guaranteed women two seats in each municipal or local council.

<sup>2</sup> Among the women who won, three were from Gaza strip (Intisar Al Wazir, Rawya Al Shawwa, Jamila Saidam), and two from the West Bank (Hanan Ashrawi and Dalal Salameh)

was lower than expected, given the long history of Palestinian women's contribution and participation in the struggle. Habashneh (2002) argues that reasons behind the low representation of women are that the first elections took place shortly after the Palestinian Authority assumed power and before passing laws: thus no special quota or supportive laws were implemented.<sup>3</sup> In addition, some political groups who may be more supportive to women's participation boycotted the elections due to their opposition to the Oslo Accords. At the same time the PNA was lacking experience and sufficient financial resources to run modern and fair elections process.

Between the years 2004-2005, local elections were held in several phases. At the beginning of 2006, the second election for the Palestinian Legislative Council took place in the Palestinian territories. In both, an increase was evident in the number of women participating as candidates, partly due to the quota provisions. Currently, of the 132 members of the Legislative Council, 17 or 13% are women. Women also obtained 300 seats in the four-stage municipal elections.

Disappointed by results in the 1996 elections, many women's organizations and associations concentrated their efforts to increase the number of women candidates in elections. The quota provisions in the 2004 and 2005 amendments to election laws attest to the women's movement's advocacy and interventions, even if those provisions, particularly at the parliamentary level, do not meet the movement's demands. The significance of the increase in successful women candidates in the two elections, however, needs to be assessed. In our interviews, many activists questioned whether the women elected would be able (or willing) to introduce women's visions and perspective to parliament as well as the various municipal councils. Concern was also expressed that some elected women were inactive in public life and were elected for reasons of family influence, factional affiliation or tribal status.

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<sup>3</sup> See Habashneh, "Quota system: A positive intervention for equality and democracy", 2002, Panorama Center.

## Who did NGOs target?

In the prelude to the local elections (2003), women's organizations started working with women on election-related issues without setting a clear vision of who to target. Simultaneous, different and sometimes, contradictory training courses were taking place. Also, the three-month period between each electoral phase was insufficient to allow organizations to implement effective training. The training modules were designed in great haste rendering their role and impact negligible. The ambiguity surrounding the political situation in terms of postponing the elections and making last-minute changes to the law, forced NGOs to act frantically in order to cope with the ever-changing dynamics of the elections.

Training was the major activities for most NGOs working on promoting woman's political participation. The bulk of time, resources and efforts were concentrated in training programs, raising awareness and promoting candidate competence. Half of the 147 women who were interviewed (by questionnaire) said they benefited directly from the activities of NGOs that support political participation of women, especially training and rehabilitation programs. An additional 21% said they indirectly benefited from the change in the public attitudes towards women as candidates. When asked about the type of programs that they attended, 86% of women said that they benefited from training programs; 22% from advisory programs; 44% from social awareness campaigns, 33% from electoral campaigns management; 5% from financing electoral campaigns; and 4% from changing the electoral system.

The trainee selection process also drew sizeable dissatisfaction and criticism. Opinions differ on whether NGOs targeted the right groups in their training and programming. Some believe that these organizations targeted women candidates who clearly benefited from the training and gained skills and information they needed. Others, however, believe that the training programs were hastily implemented and were designed to attract large numbers of participants. Some expressed concern that such programs were directed at fulfilling conditions set by international

donors in the hope of securing future funds, thus, compromising the standard of design and implementation for the sake of producing reports that seem impressive on paper yet lacking in quality programming.

A staggering 67% of women interviewed, indicated that they had participated in recurring, and often similar, activities with two or more NGOs. This indicates that these organizations targeted the same group of women most of the time.

### **Targeting the right group?**

Considerable evidence suggests that the training did not target the right groups. Many organizations targeted well-known women activists who had both the ambition and the experience to run for elections. In some cases, organizations targeted either their own members or members of established political parties. A woman, who won in the elections, criticized the role of NGOs, saying: “I think that they [NGOs] worked with certain women affiliated with political parties or who top the list while, in fact, ignoring the base. I would say to these organizations that many women are more accepted by society than the ones you know. Go look for them.”

Women interviewed pointed to a gap between those targeted and those women who actually needed training. They claimed that many women received training for elections but were either unable to get nominated by their parties, whereas the majority of those who were nominated did not receive training. Responsibility for the existence of such conundrum rests on both, the NGOs and the targeted groups, as organizations are thought to have traded the quality of service for size, while not enough women heeded the calls and invitations of NGOs.

In numerous interviews with women who won in the local elections, it was revealed that many of the municipal candidates who won, in fact, did not receive any training in elections from any organization and have no experience whatsoever in municipal or community work. In addition they admitted that they had no time to dedicate for municipal work as

they held full-time jobs in the health, education or, the private sector. They are accused of having been tactically drawn to the elections to consume the quota system and leave no place for strong and qualified women from other parties.

In an interview a socially active ex-Fatah woman member said that she wanted to run in the elections so desperately, but due to internal conflicts within the faction, her name was not selected. She defected to Islamic Jihad and ran on their list. She did not win and was eventually excommunicated by Fatah.

In another case, a woman who was a midwife was nominated in Beit Hanoun as a Hamas representative in the municipal elections because she was popular and they knew she would win. Some commented, cynically: "she has assisted in delivering half of the town's residents."

Another candidate from the Gaza Strip listed her husband's phone number as her contact information. When a fieldworker attempted to reach her by phone to fill out a questionnaire, her husband answered and refused to let his wife speak with them, he asserted: "You can interview me if you want but my wife has nothing to do with the elections."

Another case is that of an elected member of a Gaza Strip municipal council, who admitted that she is a housewife and that she has not the time to attend to her responsibilities as a council member because she is too busy attending to her household chores and responsibilities. She added that other male municipal members told her that: "You can stay home, we will do all the work and your monetary compensation for attending the meetings will be sent to you at your home." In a central West Bank village, a council member said that she could not attend the sessions of the village council meetings without the company of her nephew, who is also an elected member. Another said that her father-in-law accompanies her to council meetings. These examples imply that there are many cases where women were pushed into the elections without any prior preparation or mentionable experience. Their intent to run in elections was thus undetectable to NGOs, hence, the failure to define them as target groups.

## Some target groups ignored

Most of the NGO activities targeted secular women from national political parties that are members of the PLO, ignoring Hamas and independent candidates. A woman close to Hamas blamed the international boycott of Hamas for the exclusion of almost all Hamas candidates from training programs related to elections. An NGO staff member in Gaza<sup>2</sup> said it was overwhelmingly agreed among the majority of organizations not to engage in any activity with candidates from the Islamic movement, for fear of sanctions and loss of funding.

Women interviewed in the West Bank faulted the NGOs for narrow means of communication and coordination, consisting mainly contacting municipal councils, meeting activists individually, and relying on candidates of their own selection. Hence, many independent and Islamic Movement candidates were excluded. This generated a sense of indifference and obliviousness to the role and significance of NGOs.

When asked about how they learned about NGOs and their activities, 50% of the women interviewed answered that local groups or political factions nominated them for training or other activities, thus implying that NGOs had solicited the services of women's committees, political parties and other NGOs operating in the same area, to identify women who are likely to be interested in enrolling in training programs and the activities of these NGOs. This method was designed to exclude Hamas members either on basis of ideological differences or out of fear of donors halting funding. Almost a fifth of women learned about NGO activities through personal contacts, whether family or political.

Some organizations said that they contacted the leading members of local councils and sought their assistance to extend and distribute invitations among the candidate members of these councils. This method proved unreliable as many candidates said that either the male council heads failed to give them the invitations. Other organizations received useful assistance from the local elections committee and the Central Elections Commission who gave them lists containing the names of candidates

after the nominations were concluded, Commission staff attended some NGO meetings to explain to women their rights and duties, the elections process and, electoral law.

Not unexpectedly, only one percent of the women interviewed said they learned of NGOs and their activities via the mass media as NGOs relied the least on the use of mass media to publicize their missions, objectives and activities.

In one case the employees of an organization, which works in civil education and democracy, conducted an unofficial referendum in villages and towns in one district about a woman who was who enjoyed wide-spread popularity and respect. Afterwards, they went to this woman and tried to convince her to run for the elections even if she wasn't interested. In one of the villages in Ramallah, a woman, who is the director of the girls' school in the village, recounted s how the man who works in this organization contacted her, her husband and children. He sat with each of them for long hours to convince them of the importance of her participation in local elections because the entire village respected and appreciated her. He was finally able to convince her and her family to participate in a one-month training course about the political participation of women, The woman was convinced of the idea and joined later under the "Reform and change" list which is affiliated to Hamas. The criteria of selection and support was popularity and respect – perhaps not unusual in selecting male political candidates as well –but not the feminist agenda.

### **Raising awareness among women electors**

Various NGO's played an important role in raising awareness among women voters of their rights and responsibilities. NGO's, in general, and women organizations in particular, contributed in raising the awareness of society of the importance of elections and women participation as voters as well as candidates.

Various awareness campaigns were conducted targeting different segments of society especially women and youth. During the period that immediately preceded the elections several impassioned media campaigns were launched with a bevy of road-signs, radio and TV spots and newspaper advertisements. Many bore mottoes such as: “Your confidence in women is your confidence in your homeland”; and “When they vote, women participate in decision-making.”

### **Inter-organizational coordination**

Apart from their limited coordination during campaigns to enhance the political participation of women, no mentionable coordination to plan, to implement and, monitor and evaluate programs existed among NGOs. The absence of inter-organizational coordination led to the wasting of efforts and, in many cases, it resulted in program duplication. An interviewee stated that she had received the same training from two different organizations with two different trainers.

Not only did the lack of inter-organizational affect the services NGOs provide, it also created aggressive competition over donor funding and further complicated progress as many organizations were unable to cope with the spending (burn-rate) requirements of donors and effectively implement programs and projects.

In Nablus, many local organizations hesitated to cooperate with larger or West Bank-wide organizations. They termed as “futile” their assessments and research requirements. A common belief that exists among the development community in the Northern region is that the larger organizations, based in the Central region [Ramallah], are “only interested in soliciting funds through assessments and research. They are accused of having little or on impact in the field.”

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs attempted to assume the role of coordinator of NGO activities and extended invitations to the various organizations to enlist their effort and support to augment the efforts



and set a strategic plan of action to ensure efficiency and optimize results. These efforts were aimed to find creative ways to overcome the challenges facing the empowerment of women to participate in public and political life.

### **NGO achievements: Increased acceptance of women as candidates**

The activities of civil society organizations, in general and women's organizations in particular, contributed to the increase witnessed in social acceptance of women as candidates and as local and legislative council members. This achievement is the outcome of cumulative efforts, activities, programs, public awareness and media campaigns.

### **Ratification of the quota**

Women organizations and civil society organizations played a vital role in the endorsement the quota system, especially in the local councils where it constitutes a unique step in the Arab region. Moreover, NGOs were able to influence political parties to give women better roles and allow their nominations for elections. It is worth mentioning that before the woman quota system was approved, none of the political parties were willing to nominate women in advanced positions on their lists. But with the adoption of the quota, political parties became more open to, and accepting of women's participation.

This did not protect the quota system from drawing criticism in that the system allows for unqualified and incompetent women to be nominated in elections. The system, they argue, granted the party, faction, family or clan influence in the nomination of women for local and legislative elections. An interview commented: "Women weren't chosen on the basis of merit and qualification; rather, they were randomly selected to participate in elections [as candidates]. Moreover, many women were selected only to fill the lists as deadlines were nearing. The political

parties were clever enough to choose women from influential and powerful families.” Another said that “nominating women in this manner was only to fill out space and satisfy the International Community and not for the sake of national interest.”

## **Evaluation of performance**

Inconsistent with their demographic representation, the results of the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council showed that only seventeen women had won. Despite relatively weak representation in nominations, the preparations and efforts of Women organizations and cadres for the legislative council elections led to an increase in women participation as voters.

Due to familial, tribal and factional considerations, that do not necessarily favor women, of 414 candidates running as candidates in the districts (where the list-based quota does not apply) only 15 women (less than 4%) participated. In the national lists, there were, 314 candidates, of which 70 were women (22%). The manner in which political parties allowed women to run as candidates proves that they only did so to meet the requirements of the quota system imposed on them and not of their conviction that women participation is of any importance. Democratic and leftist parties were not exempt from gender discrimination. Women did not head any of their lists and were in second slots only on two of the Lists.

## **Evaluations of candidates**

Opinions concerning the effectiveness of NGOs and their programs varied among women candidates. However, many of them said that they hardly benefited or did not benefit at all from the programs. This opinion was especially detected among those candidates who won in municipal councils as well as Hamas candidates. One of the members of the Nablus Municipal Council said that she did not receive any training related to the elections.

Another group of candidates stated that they decided not to attend the training courses terming them “repetitive and ineffective.” Not to mention, “time and resource wasting”, they declared that they found the training courses “very ordinary” as they dealt, mainly, with character and leadership skills.

However, counter to their claim that they were not targeted for NGO training programs, many women candidates for the legislative council are said to have ignored the invitations of NGOs to participate and left their call unheeded.

## **Conclusion**

NGOs, especially women's organizations, played a central role during local, presidential and legislative elections. Some contributed in raising public awareness on the importance of participating in the elections, the rights and duties of voters and candidates, in addition to monitoring the election process in all its stages. However, the most palpable achievement of NGOs and women organization is the ratification of the quota system into the law and allowing for relatively better representation of women. A woman said “the quota was ratified, thanks to the efforts of the women's movement.” Nevertheless, significantly increasing the number of women the Palestinian Legislative Council will remain a distant ambition without a wider mobilization of women's participation in public life. Thus, political parties are urged to begin to target women and activate party bases, especially the youth, to ensure wider participation of women in local and general elections.

Despite these accomplishments, many women activists believe that more could have been accomplished had, either the quota system been adopted in the electoral districts, as well as the lists, or if the electoral system was changed into a proportional system that guarantees women representation in each of the lists. However, some women activists expressed their dissatisfaction with the “type” of women who won as competence and merit were forfeited to achieve factional or tribal objectives.

Moreover, a general feeling exists that these accomplishments are too little compared to the amount of money and efforts expended on program projects that aim to empower the political participation of women. This is due to selective targeting in short-term programming that were not designed to be sustainable, whereas long term, consistent and sustainable social change is in fact required. Moreover, the exclusion of Islamic candidates had an adverse impact on the results of the campaign as many women were either left out or boycotted the efforts of NGOs because of the implications and pressures of international donors who serve their own interests as opposed to those of Palestinian women and society.

An important question remains whether enough attention is given to the different forms and types of the political participation of women and their involvement. Political participation, democracy, political diversity and gender, remain abstract notions for many ordinary housewives and non-working women. What went wrong and what can be build upon for wider and more sustained initiatives? These are challenges for the future work of the Palestinian women's movement and civil society.



# REVIEWS



## **Point of Debate: The Human Rights Watch Report and Violence against Palestinian Women and Girls**

Penny Johnson

Introducing a new feature of the *Review of Women's Studies*, Point of Debate aims to raise questions and encourage debate among researchers and activists in Palestine. The November 2006 report by Human Rights Watch on violence against Palestinian women and girls is discussed below in this spirit. There are a number of specific issues raised by the report that require reflection or a critical response. More generally, a sustained discussion and analysis among activists and researchers in Palestine is needed to understand how international human rights frameworks might be either useful or problematic, or perhaps need adaptation or complementary strategies, to address violence against Palestinian women and girls living under occupation, sustained warlike conditions, and a transitional and weakened Palestinian Authority. Because Point of Debate is focused on raising critical questions, the review below does not fully cover all informational aspects of the Human Rights Watch report. Readers will be interested in the report's analysis of existing formal legislation<sup>1</sup>, interviews with counselors, lawyers, and police officers, and most movingly, the voices of women who have suffered severe domestic violence.

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis of the important informal legal system (customary law) is less helpful because of its broad generalizations on the operation of clan systems (*hamula*) in Palestinian society.



In 1990, Palestinian women activists and researchers gathered in the Friends School in Ramallah for a pioneering conference discussing domestic violence in the West Bank and Gaza. The late Dr. Hala Atallah, a faculty member in Birzeit University's Department of Education and Psychology, and Nadera Kervokian, then a graduate student and now a leading researcher on crimes against women, gave presentations. Atallah provided a comparative framework for understanding domestic violence while Kervokian, drawing on her doctoral research in the Jerusalem area, argued that violence against women in the home was a significant issue and cut across classes and settings in Palestinian society. The researchers made no claims either for universal knowledge or for complete solutions --- but rather aimed to initiate a collective discussion among women's movement groups, the legal profession and other interested parties in Palestine. At the time, there was no press coverage, only the interest and resolution of women and men to better the welfare of Palestinian women and society, spurred by the mass mobilization of the first intifada and given confidence by the contribution of Palestinian women and women's organizations to the national struggle against occupation.

Over fifteen years later, in November 2006, a respected New York-based human rights organization, Human Rights Watch (HRW), issued a major -- and problematic -- report, *A Question of Security: Violence Against Palestinian Women and Girls* which both raises and provokes a series of issues for discussion and debate. The report argued that it was "already well established that violence against women and girls is a serious problem in the OPT," (p. 4) citing, inter alia, new PCBS data that 23% of "married women in the West Bank and Gaza said that they had been victims of domestic violence in 2005" (p. 36). Palestinian society was seen as unrelievedly patriarchal, with the killing of Palestinian women in so-called "honor" crimes termed "the most tragic consequences and graphic illustration of deeply embedded, society-wide gender discrimination." (p. 49) Although recognizing the present weakness, but not necessarily the transitional legal status, of the Palestinian Authority, the report laid much of the blame and accountability on that Authority for its failure to take decisive action. Israel's continuing occupation,

siege and attack on PA institutions were acknowledged rather briefly, but called “no excuse for inaction.” (p. 3)<sup>2</sup>

Coverage was extensive in the Western media. In a analysis of a feature news article on the HRW report in the New York Times, O’Connor and Roberts found that of eighty human rights reports by major human rights organizations on human rights abuses in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict since 2000, seventy-six were primarily critical of Israel, of which only two were featured in the New York Times, while of the four critical of Palestinians, two received such coverage, including the present report. Equally important, they argue that “by omitting crucial details and emphasizing certain others, The New York Times... has turned a valuable piece of human rights reporting in to a tool that can be urged to reinforce a Western agenda that has cynically exploited “saving Muslim women” as an excuse for dominating and abusing the rights of peoples from other cultures.” (O’Connor and Roberts, 2006).

Here is a central issue for debate and reflection. Taking into account the present climate of imperial military intervention obviously does not mean a blanket condemnation of the work of Western-based human rights organizations on gender issues in the region: rather it demands a critical engagement and dialogue. Even in 1990, the presentations of Atalla and Kervokian in the Ramallah meeting were criticized by at least one participant in the conference as reflecting “Western agendas”: this is a dilemma with deep roots and histories. As Welchman and Hosain note:

Both the colonial heritage and contemporary global power structures (military, political, economic and others) necessarily complicate strategies of response to violence against women.” (Institute of Women’s Studies 2005,75)

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<sup>2</sup> It is particularly unfortunate that those who try to explain (or “justify”) the PA’s failure are dismissed as “defenders of the status quo.” (p. 3)

Human rights interventions, whether global or local, must be judged by their effectiveness in assisting such strategies.

***Reading and analyzing statistics: How prevalent is domestic violence against Palestinian women and girls and how severe? Is it increasing? How do we assess crimes of violence?***

The first national-level survey of domestic violence, conducted by the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics from 18 December 2005-18 January 2006 with 4217 households in the West Bank and Gaza, is an important benchmark for assessing the prevalence and severity of domestic violence in Palestine. Unfortunately, data from this survey, as used in the HRW report, tends to be under-analyzed and possibly misleading.<sup>3</sup> An example is HRW's quote of a major finding that "23% of married women in the West Bank and Gaza said that they had been victims of domestic violence in 2005" (p. 36) The report failed to add, as PCBS does in its summary statement of the same finding, that such violent acts occurred "at least one time" in the calendar year.<sup>4</sup> (PCBS 2006) An initial analysis of the survey by the Institute of Women's Studies for PCBS noted that the aggregate figure may be misleading in grappling with "the real extent of domestic violence" (Institute of Women's Studies 2006) and provided additional figures for women who experience three or more acts of physical violence from their spouses during the year 2005, finding that about 9% (40% of the 23%) of women surveyed experienced this level of physical violence. This is almost one in ten women and is not a negligible figure, but it is obviously important to any assessment to look at the incidence rate. Obviously, much more analysis needs to be done.

PCBS also provides data on types of spousal physical violence experienced by women which is not analyzed in the HRW report but is also offers a window to understanding the severity of such violence.

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<sup>3</sup> Data from the PCBS survey was newly-released as HRW completed its report, which may partially explain the lack of analysis.

<sup>4</sup> The PCBS survey also considers psychological violence (the most common at 61.7% of married women "exposed for at least one time" in 2005) and sexual violence.

Again, more analysis is needed here, but it is clear that the most common acts of physical violence (for married women by spouses) by far were pushing strongly (the most prevalent), slapping the face, throwing an object or twisting the arm or pulling hair, while a small (but not to be neglected) minority report possible life-threatening attacks. (PCBS 2006, Table 3, 11) For effective intervention, it is important not to conflate all these acts. The HRW report suggests this conflation by juxtaposition: for example, after a paragraph citing the 23% figure above, it follows with considering legal remedies “Palestinian women in violent or life-threatening marriages....” (p. 36)

Generally, the report seems to place all such acts, from pushing to strangulation, under the rubric of “crimes,” which cannot be helpful in developing a strategy (or even a public discussion) to address criminal violence against women and girls. Here, a better use of the data could have been used to explore women’s recourses and remedies. The report is almost certainly right, citing social workers, lawyers and counselors, that women are hesitant to seek legal remedies – indeed, the weakness of the police and courts under the Palestinian Authority means that many Palestinian do not seek recourse there. One of the most useful sections of the report is its analysis of discriminatory legislation and the problems of police intervention. However, the very low rate of women in the survey who experienced any form of spousal violence and reported it to the police (at about 1%) has also to be understood in the context of the types and severity of violence experienced, including the fact that the most common form reported was psychological. The fact that many women turned to either talking with their husband (43%) or temporarily leaving home to a father or brother (40%) makes more sense when the nature and extent of the acts of violence are taken into account. Strengthening the access and acceptability of women to legal remedies for abuse, and developing appropriate legal and police capacity, will be more effectively undertaken by understanding what kinds of family violence need to be addressed by the legal system.

The HRW report also reflects the perceptions of women’s movement activists and others that violence against Palestinian women and girls

is increasing, a perception widely shared but still difficult to prove statistically. Given that the 2005 PCBS survey is the first national-level survey, this awaits confirmation.<sup>5</sup> These points are not made to quibble and certainly not to diminish the importance of addressing domestic violence against Palestinian women and girls. Rather, only by understanding the extent, severity and trends by a careful analysis of data – and by understanding the resources society may have to offer – can effective campaigns and strategies be mounted.

*Providing context: what social, political, legal and economic conditions encourage or restrain family violence in Palestine? How is it related to other forms of violence, particularly the pervasive colonial violence of the Israeli occupation, conflict, sustained warlike conditions and insecurity? Who is responsible for addressing violence against Palestinian women and girls?*

An Amnesty International report on violence against Palestinian women (issued on 31 March 2005) provides a context and offers an implicit critique of the narrow framework of the later HRW document in its title: “Conflict, occupation and patriarchy: Women carry the burden.” It is the first two terms – conflict and occupation, that are largely missing in HRW’s approach, while the third, patriarchy, seems to be seen as a fixed, rather than shifting, social order where Palestinian women are fated to subordination. In contrast, Amnesty surveys violence in its many facets, whether at Israeli checkpoints or in the home, by Israeli laws restricting marriage or prevailing Jordanian law restricting complaints of abuse.

The HRW report acknowledges that domestic violence in Palestine may be “aggravated during times of political violence” (p. 3) but offers no wider framework that includes the pervasive violence faced by Palestinian women from the Israeli occupation and Israel’s siege against the Palestinian people. The effect of political and economic crisis on social and family relations is largely absent. In contrast, the Amnesty International report notes an important dynamic:

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<sup>5</sup> The report’s citation of an earlier local survey to provide “evidence that marital rape is prevalent” is also somewhat problematic as HRW does not contrast it with the lower figures found in the national level survey. (p. 36)

“The breakdown of the economic and security situation caused by the conflict has imposed increased pressure and restrictions on women, and at the same time it has further curtailed women’s ability to control their own lives.”

While “blaming the occupation” for all the social ills in Palestinian society would also be unhelpful, the HRW Report isolates domestic violence and implicitly gender relations and Palestinian families from all the contexts in which they function. Such isolation cannot reflect the reality – whether literally, when Palestinians are made homeless by Israeli air raids or bulldozers, or conceptually, as family relations both extend into, and are affected by, the political and economic realm.

As noted above, the HRW report recognizes the weakness of the Palestinian Authority but nonetheless states that “the PA holds ultimate responsibility for protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable.” (p. 6) Leaving aside questions of the PA’s criminal jurisdiction outside Area A constituting the main Palestinian cities, this statement does not acknowledge the responsibility under international law of the Israeli occupation an occupation that continues in the period covered by the Report. Here the Amnesty International report makes an important distinction between such responsibility by the occupying power to implement human rights treaties, and the fact that the PA is “best placed” to address family violence against Palestinian women and girls which requires a confidence by the victims that is obviously absent in the case of the Israeli occupation (Amnesty International, 13-14)

*Beyond victims: women as agents. How do we assess women’s status and characterize Palestinian society in relation to violence against women and girls? How do we approach grave crimes against women and girls?*

The report’s brisk and un-nuanced analysis of the status of Palestinian women tends to view gender relations and discrimination solely as products of patriarchy (and attitudes), rather than political, economic and social structures and dynamics. It thus offers no explanation, for example, of how restricted and gendered labor markets, themselves

derived from Israel's occupation, shape women's low labor force participation, although opinion polls (not cited) tend to show that a majority of both men and women support women's work outside the home. An unfortunate use of statistics culled second-hand from a Freedom House report reinforces an unrelieved view of women's lack of agency, reinforced by blanket statements like "Male relatives (usually their fathers) often arrange marriages for Palestinian girls," (p. 28) disregarding the clear and documented role of mothers in marriage arrangements.<sup>6</sup>

Most disturbing, is a tendency to make serious crimes against women – which unarguably exist – emblematic of society as a whole, a conflation that would probably not occur in approaching such violent crimes in a Western society. "Honor" crimes are thus positioned as a "graphic illustration" of society-wide gender discrimination, a statement which is uncomfortably close to broader Orientalist depictions of Arab societies. Another side of the same coin is to see all Palestinian women as potential victims of these crimes as this statement from the HRW report:

A Palestinian women's life is at risk if she is suspected of engaging in behavior her family or community considers taboo, such as talking with a man who is not her husband or a blood relative (even in a public place, refusing to tell a close male relative here she has been and with whom, or marrying someone without the approval of her family..." (p. 49)

Many Palestinian women, as well as men, would find this statement not only unreflective of their lived experience, but offensive in its stereotypical generalization. Just as important, this view seems to preclude wider community mobilization to address and prevent such serious crimes, leaving punishment, rather than prevention, as the only remedy. In a thoughtful article, An Naim argues that such community involvement discourse is essential:

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Tuastad 1997 on the role of mothers in marriage arrangements (for sons and daughters) in Breij refugee camp.

Unless one subscribes to the patronizing and authoritarian view that people should simply be coerced into ‘doing what is good for them,’ it is necessary to gain their cooperation and support through an internal discourse within the community around cultural norms and institutions associated with these crimes.”  
(An Naim 2005, 65)

Women’s movements and organizations in Palestine have made important strides in addressing family violence, including hot-lines, counseling, legal advice and cooperative efforts to establish shelters, among other initiatives. The establishment of the Palestinian Violence against Women Forum in 2002 provides a space for strategy-making and collective action. Engaging and debating some of the questions raised by the new Human Rights report is one way to develop and deepen strategies that address violence against Palestinian women and girls in all its forms and, hopefully, to develop an internal discourse that can complement rights-based approaches.



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## **Report: Re-Thinking Arab and Palestinian Families: New Research Agendas and Policy Directions**

Chivvis Moore

Researchers from the Institute of Women's Studies have participated in a regional Arab Families Working Group since its founding in 2001. On 10 February 2006, the Institute held a workshop to discuss the preliminary findings from current AFWG research projects with researchers and activists in Palestine, including presentations from Institute researchers, as well as visiting scholars. Chivvis Moore, staff member at the Institute, provided the following report on the workshop.

*How do young people in Hebron view their futures differently from the way youth in Ramallah view theirs?*

*What new forms of marriage are currently being practiced and what do these mean?*

*Are Lebanese villagers raising their children with a concept of responsibility to the state? And why are Lebanese immigrant parents in Canada afraid of the police?*

These kinds of questions, along with many others embracing theoretical and methodological concerns, were raised and debated as the Arab Families Working Group met with more than 25 local scholars and community leaders in a workshop at the Institute of Women's Studies in February. The Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) was set up six years ago because of its founders' belief in the "absolute centrality of families and youth to Arab society," as Suad Joseph, Professor of Anthropology & Women's Studies at the University of California, Davis, and workshop chair, explained, as well as because of the scarcity of research on Arab families that is "scientifically and rigorously researched, empirically sound, and adequately theorized".

AFWG members come from the fields of anthropology, sociology, history, media studies, and literature, among others; and they live in Europe and the US as well as in the Middle East. Their approach is collaborative, interdisciplinary, inter-generational, comparative, and committed to long-term endeavour.

Goals are to produce and disseminate research to scholars, planners, policy makers, and others; and to engage with other scholars, activists, practitioners, NGOs, government ministries, the media, and others in the investigation of Arab families. The group wants to "open the conversation", as Joseph put it, and to ask others what they are doing on the subject. As group members focus on the impact of war, violent displacement, and migration on Arab families and youth, they know no methodological constraints: they are using in-depth, qualitative

interviews; surveys; archival work; media; the Internet; and other means. Results are to be disseminated in both English and Arabic.

Three Arab countries were selected for the first studies, on the basis of the abundance and quality of research material about them and because their differing circumstances made them particularly significant for comparative studies. The countries are Palestine, because of its unique “quasi-state formation” under military occupation; Lebanon, because of its experience with civil war and reconstruction; and Egypt, because it is a highly centralized state.

Two of the seven presentations centred on Lebanon. One, by Ray Jureidini, from the American University in Cairo, was an historical study of the relationships between women domestic workers and the Lebanese families who employ them. The study concentrates on the role that can develop as women servants become “fictive kin”, as they and then later their children and then their grandchildren establish long-term relationships with the Lebanese families for whom they work. The research on these “families serving families” is being done largely by means of in-depth interviews, with not only the domestic worker and her employer, but also with other available members of both families.

Suad Joseph, herself of Lebanese origin, reported on the longitudinal research project she began on her return to Lebanon during “the first lull” in the civil war in 1994. It was a time, she recalled, when the country was fragmented and the population’s only security came from just two sources -- militias and families: “The idea of Lebanon as a state had almost dissolved.” Settling in a Lebanese village, she began to research “how parents socialize their children and raise them for citizenship after a war ... in the absence of any idea of a public sphere that belonged to everyone.” She was interested in how, within such an environment, children could be raised with “a sense of national identity and a sense of their own rights and responsibilities to their community, their village, and their country”. Of the dozen or so families, all with children under the age of 10, which Joseph began studying, so many had left Lebanon by 2004 that Joseph followed them to the communities in Ottawa and

New Jersey where they had settled. These “transnational families” are the subject of her AFWG research project.

The methodological and conceptual questions which arose in the discussion following the two presentations on Lebanon were rich in their challenge and contribution. Might there be a problem with methodology, it was suggested, in the domestic worker study, which was turning up “many stories of love,” apparently reciprocal, between the domestic workers’ families and the Lebanese families they served? Might exclusive reliance on interviews as a research tool mask relationships of exploitation and feelings of unexpressed resentment which these relationships must, at least in some cases, involve? Juredini, who has done extensive work on contemporary human rights violations of foreign domestic workers in Lebanon, responded by acknowledging the difficulties and suggesting methods to probe these important questions.

Regarding her study of Lebanese village families, Joseph reported that her interviewees found her questions “almost nonsensical”. When she asked about children’s rights, for example, parents were likely to say, “They are entitled to everything, to all rights!” Joseph’s conclusion was, “I was getting empty answers because the question itself did not make sense to them.... The language of rights didn’t translate.”

Another workshop participant, Rita Giacaman, of Birzeit University’s Institute of Community Health, agreed that “The problem is not in the questions themselves; the problem is in the concepts and paradigms that are used – which [are] very much a function of the West, and which [have] very little to do with the goals of socialization ... in the local culture.... Generally speaking, the state is absent, but for a very good material reason. Who takes care of the children – their education, health, etc. – and why should the family think of raising citizens” when the state is not providing for them? “The real question is: if those concepts don’t work, then how do we collectively go about developing the ... concepts and instruments that do work” as we go about trying to understand our reality.

Interchanges were lively and responses were not defensive; indeed, one was completely disarming. “I don’t have answers to that,” one speaker responded frankly to a question put to her. In short, the workshop was marked by the very spirit of interdisciplinary and intergenerational collaboration that the Arab Families Working Group prizes so highly. Throughout, it was made clear that all findings were preliminary and tentative, and that the reason they were being presented at all at this stage was to garner precisely the kind of feedback the speakers were receiving.

Three of the presentations on Palestinian families concerned changing marriage patterns resulting from the Israeli occupation; and two dealt with the desires and ambitions and concepts of rights articulated by Palestinian youth. The five studies on Palestinian families are being undertaken by members of the Institute of Women’s Studies.

As part of the AFWG research project entitled “Marriages and Movement: Weddings and War,” Penny Johnson described ways in which some marriage arrangements and ceremonies observed during the first intifada differ in striking ways from marriages taking place now, during the second intifada. In the case of one marriage that took place during the first intifada, the bride’s choice of partner was at least partly based on his high degree of involvement in nationalist activities. The bride, an engineering graduate from Birzeit University, dressed simply, wore her hair in braids, was married at home, and received a mahr (dowry) of just one Jordanian dinar. “*Walla dibleh, walla dahab*” (No ring, no gold), she exclaimed.

Almost 20 years and another intifada later, a young man from a Ramallah-area refugee camp, also an engineering graduate from Birzeit University and from a nationalist family with a record of sacrifice, specified that the woman he would marry should have a post-secondary education, be at least six years younger than he was, and should not have been employed for a long period outside the home. To him, it did not matter whether or not his bride was politically active. For the wedding party he rented a hall and invited over one thousand guests. Johnson is exploring the hypothesis that “the times – politics in its broadest senses as environment,

power, resistance, crisis, identity, means of agency and field of meaning – play a critical role in shaping marriage arrangements and ceremonies in these two cases, and in Palestinian society as a whole.”

Investigating another facet of the subject “Weddings and War,” Lamis Abu Nahleh related how Israeli military restrictions on mobility are limiting the marriage choices of young Palestinians. Citing two recent marriages, in which the choice of partners was made for very different reasons, Abu Nahleh described her research into the relative importance of various factors – conservative or progressive family traditions, religion, identification with a village or community, and politics – in determining marriage choices.

“A new form of marriage” was described by Islah Jad in a third investigative thread in the “Weddings and War” research project. The collective marriage, in which large numbers of couples are married simultaneously in the same place is most characteristically sponsored by Islamist organizations, Jad said, but has also been deployed by the main-stream Fateh movement. This development is significant on several levels – the political, for its combination of religious and nationalist symbols, expressing the “Islamisation of society;” the social level, where its austerity acts to reduce expenses and to combat class distinctions, and where it represents a shift in gender relations; and the sexual level, where in some cases polygamous marriages are included with the rationale of containing male sexual desire.

Finally, perspectives of contemporary Palestinian youth were addressed in presentations by Eileen Kuttab and Randa Nasser. Using a combination of research methodologies, including surveys and polls, interviews, and participatory observation, Kuttab’s study suggests that, while Palestinian youth in general “don’t have real hopes for the future”, youth at Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities tend to speak more about issues relating to freedom and democracy, while youth in Hebron express greater ease with the mores of traditional Muslim communities and do not refer to issues of personal freedom. Nasser’s study, which replicates at Birzeit University an earlier study of Joseph’s with Lebanese children,

investigates students' views of their rights, and finds Birzeit students more concerned with civil, political and social rights than with basic survival needs.

Again, other workshop participants ventured cautionary responses. Beware of comparing the two intifadas, one warned. In doing this, we are comparing two different societies, two different generations. In the second, the gap between rich and poor has widened and the national project has been lost, in comparison to the hopeful era of the first intifada. It's important to examine just who is influencing the views of Palestinian youth, suggested several others. Is it families, and if so, what kinds of families – nuclear or extended, and where? Is it NGOs, media, popular songs, fashion, mosques and churches, civic education in schools or universities? To what degree is the outlook of Palestinian youth determined by class? Another person asked: "If we are changing people's concept of rights, then aren't we shifting also their sense of who the authority is? And if we are shifting the sense of authority from state to family, and both these are patriarchal, then what kind of shift are we affecting?"

"We assume," said Joseph, that once we've got a concept – like the concept of marriage, or of citizen's rights -- that the concept is stable. What we are realizing is the fundamental instability of conceptual tools.... Not only do our concepts not work well when transferred from West to East; they don't even work in our own areas over time."



