SUCCESS AGAINST THE ODDS: PALESTINIAN FEMALE STUDENTS OUTPERFORM THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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Introduction

State controlled educational systems in heterogeneous societies with power structures of group inequality and multiple forms of oppression are notorious for their role in hindering rather than promoting the opportunities for ethnic minority, working class, and female students to achieve academic success (McLaren, 1994). Nevertheless, a growing number of presumably "at risk students" turn out to be remarkable "success stories" in such oppressive educational systems. Academic success against the odds represents an alternative paradigm, which is called "student resilience" and defined as a "set of qualities, or protective mechanisms that give rise to successful adaptation despite the presence of high risk factors" (Howard, Dryden and Johnson, 1999: 309). Among the various disciplines of the social sciences that have been applied to the field of education, psychology has made the most vital contributions to our understanding of students' learning, development and adjustment to school life. Notwithstanding, conventional theories of psychology overlooked women's psychological experiences and development, and considered male experiences as the norm against which women were examined and evaluated (Gilligan, 1982). Critical developments in women's psychology provide useful theoretical tools to our understanding of female students' educational experiences in the shadow of prevailing sexism and discrimination against them (Sadker, Sadker and Long, 1993). The field of multicultural education considers gender inequalities in education as one of its central objectives and major concerns.

Palestinian women experience multiple levels of oppression where patriarchy, sexism, colonialism and class exploitation are in continuous dialectical interaction with each other producing unbearable degrees of adversity in their daily life circumstances (Makkawi and Jaramillo, 2006). Nonetheless, it is noticeable that Palestinian female students outperform their male counterparts in academic achievement and excellence. This trend of female students' academic success in

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high school stands in sharp contrast to the decline of adolescent female students' academic achievements in comparison to their male counterparts in western societies (Sadker et al., 1993).The initial phase of this longitudinal qualitative research inquiry utilized "grounded theory" techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to explore environmental, social and personality factors which account for Palestinian female students' remarkable academic achievement in high school graduation examination (*Tawjihi*). In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of highly successful Palestinian female students upon their admission to Birzeit University in the academic year 2006/07. Findings of this phase of the study revealed a number of environmental, social and personality factors of resilience including: family support and protection, female segregated schools and peer support, supportive female teachers, educational success as a venue to the public space, and an adaptive set of personality characteristics (Makkawi, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

There is a plethora of educational literature documenting the ways by which formal educational systems in heterogeneous societies are structured and conducted by the dominant groups in manners which hinder the opportunities for academic success and achievement among ethnic minority students, students from the working class and female students (Banks, 1994; McLaren, 1994). This corpus of scholarship in the field widely known as "multicultural education" focuses mainly on educational theory and practice within the context of heterogeneous western societies (e.g., USA, Canada, and Australia). The earlier paradigm for explaining the low achievement records among minority students was labeled as the "cultural deficit paradigm" which had emphasized a wide range of factors within the cultural background of the students that place them in a category labeled as "at risk students" (Pollard, 1989). Locating the root causes of minority students' educational failure within their cultural background, rather than unpacking the discriminatory and oppressive practices of the mainstream educational system, has come under heavy critique from earlier scholars in the field of multicultural education as "blaming the victim" rather than changing the system practice (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1994; Banks, 1994).

Nonetheless, there are many examples of "at risk students" who are considered "success stories" despite the odds working against them. An alternative paradigm for understanding the educationally successful experiences of minority students despite the obstacles and risk factors in their educational environment is known as the paradigm of "student resilience" (Jarrett, 1997; Pollard, 1989; Floyd, 1996). According to scholars working from this worldview "rather than focusing on the children who were casualties of these negative factors, the studies focused instead on those who had not succumbed" (Howard et al., 1999: 309). The key question

for scholarship operating from the "student resilience" paradigm became as such: what kind of factors in the student's immediate environment and what personality characters are credited for such educational accomplishments?

Research addressing the area of child resilience is broadly conceived as a "paradigm shift" (Kuhn, 1970) in our understanding of minority and female students' academic success despite the abundant risk factors for failure present in their educational and social environment (e.g., poverty, racial discrimination, sexism). Resilience as a process rather than an outcome, is facilitated by a number of protective factors in the students' immediate environment and personality characteristics that lead to successful adaptation and development in spite of the presence of high risk factors (Howard et al., 1999). In a qualitative study with a group of highly successful African American students, Floyd (1996) found two sets of factors that explain these students' resilience. External factors included support from family members and significant others such as teachers and counselors. Internal factors included personality traits such as perseverance, optimism and persistence. It is crucial for educationalists to identify these positive factors and foster their development in order to increase minority and female students' opportunities for success.

Furthermore, feminist scholars in western heterogeneous societies took an issue with the educational system's discrimination against female students resulting in a pattern of low achievement among females comparable to their male counterparts (Sadker et al., 1993). Pioneering critical research and theorizing about women's psychological development was inspired by the realization that traditional theories of psychology were, to a large extent, developed by white male scholars and used white male research participants in their earlier stages of theory constructions (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, and Tarule, 1997). Put candidly, men and boys as research participants are *not* a representative sample of humanity! When the researcher is white male (which is the case in the early days of the discipline of psychology) and all of the research participants are white male college students, the simple generalization of such results to the broader human condition becomes one of the glaring deficiencies of psychology as a discipline. Conventional theories of psychology did not account for women's psychological experiences and development, and considered male experiences as the norm against which women's psychological development was examined and evaluated.

Working initially with Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Carol Gilligan realized that female research participants were consistently classified in lower stages of moral development, due to the theory's strong emphasis on the morality of "justice" which is more dominant among men as opposed to the morality of "caring" which is more common and encouraged among women (Gilligan, 1982). Perplexed by the consistent classification of female research participants in Kohlberg's third stage of moral development as opposed to males being classified in the fourth (and

presumably more advanced moral stage), Gilligan's question became obvious and simple: What is wrong, the women or the theory? She began a long tradition of qualitative research exploring women's moral development from "real life" stories, and subsequently arrived at results which contradict Kohlberg's original theory.

Gilligan's work had inspired other feminist psychologists to critically examine traditional theories of psychological development. Josselson (1987) poses a challenge to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development according to which Erikson and his followers viewed identity construction during adolescence as a process of *separation* and *individuation* from others. Instead, Josselson argued that identity among female adolescents is constructed within the relationship of connectedness and belonging to others, not separation and individuation.

Further developments in women's psychology were taking place in the area of cognitive development. With reference to the field of the construction of knowledge, a team of feminist researchers (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1997) conducted a breakthrough qualitative study entitled *Women's Ways of Knowing*, where they revealed that women's construction of knowledge is interconnected with their perception of power and authority and their ability to have their own voice, rather than having others think and speak for them. They have extended the cognitive theory of William Perry concerning college students' intellectual development during the college years, but emphasized the experience of female students rather than focusing on male experiences as Perry did in his classical study (1970). Perry had developed a scheme for intellectual development during the college years indicating that cognitive development continues beyond Piaget's theoretical stage of abstract thinking which is said to be culminated during early adolescence.

It is noteworthy that all three studies mentioned above employed qualitative research methodologies where feminist psychologists constructed new theoretical insights inductively from personal in-depth interviews they conducted with women research participants. These critical developments in women's psychology provided solid theoretical foundations for many scholars of multicultural education who were mostly interested in female students' education and the ways in which educational systems discriminate against them and obstruct their educational achievements and opportunities for success (Sadker and Sadker, 1982). However, consistent with the general movement of multicultural education in diverse western societies, the focus of this body of research remains on environmental factors within the classroom, the school, and the students' cultural background which limit female students' equal opportunities for academic success, rather than exploring factors that may lead to resilience and "success stories."

Feminist scholarship in the third world took a different, and yet more integrative and comprehensive stance against the presence of multiple forms of oppression against women. As Kumari Jayawardena (1986) maintains in her classic text

Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, women's feminist agendas in the third world have been, to a large extent, an integral part of internal national movements for liberation from foreign colonialism and domination. In this sense, feminism in third world countries is not a recently imported western idea, but has its historical indigenous roots in the experiences of the native women themselves. Himmani Bannerji (2001, 2002) correctly asserts, that feminist critiques—analyses rooted in the concepts of patriarchy and gender—of nationalism and nationalist movements include an examination of the cultural, economic and state dimensions from which nationalisms operate. Bannerji identifies two main strands of feminist critique that have emerged of nationalism. One strand considers any nationalism as inherently patriarchal and "containing oppressive and exclusive moral constructions and regulations within its cultural, ideological and state apparatus" (2002: 6).

According to Bannerji, feminist criticisms of nationalisms primarily center on the placement of women—both figuratively and concretely—as part of an overall movement towards nationalist transformation. Feminist critiques, as Bannerji also asserts, are important and necessary because they dutifully illustrate how women and the concepts of gender and patriarchy have either been ignored or manipulated to achieve un-feminist goals and objectives. But, as she also notes, such criticisms do not fully consider the social, political and economic sphere of feminist struggles within nationalist movements. According to Bannerji, such an undifferentiated view does not offer us a lens through which to examine the complexity of women's participation in nationalist projects, and it does not allow us to move beyond the static formulations of "feminist" versus "nationalist" movements. Importantly, dominant conceptions of feminism and nationalism do not consider how both frameworks—when conceived as simultaneous projects towards liberation and justice—dialectically inform one another and how they can empower all members of a nation to rewrite their social location. As Bannerji notes, the purpose of expanding feminism's critique of nationalism is to "broaden the parameters…both as politics and as an epistemology, by situating the issues of patriarchy and gender justice within a wider space of revolutionary social criticism rooted in a demand for social justice—for all and at all levels" (2002: 6).

Palestinian Women: Education Under Occupation

Following the conquest of 1948, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza became subjected to the administration of Jordan and Egypt respectively until these two Palestinian territories were occupied by the Israeli invading army two decades later. The two populations of Palestinians in historic Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Palestinians within the 1948 occupied territory) have been divided by the virtual "green line," living under two contradictory political conditions. One,

as Israeli citizens and one, under occupation. This study focuses on the educational experience of Palestinian female students in the West Bank.

Palestinian education in the West Bank and Gaza Strip went through a number of changing authorities since 1948; starting with the Jordanian regime aiming at the annexation of the West Bank to the Kingdom and manipulating education for the Palestinians under its control accordingly. Subsequently, the Israeli military administration has targeted Palestinian education since 1967 as a central component in its colonizing policy in the West Bank and Gaza. And currently, the Palestinian Authority—which is constrained with the restrictions embedded in the "Oslo" agreement signed between the PLO and Israel—is aspiring to reconstruct the educational system as part of the nation building process (Brown, 2001; Santisteban, 2002).

Since the outbreak of the Palestinian *Intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1987, education has become one of the major areas for direct confrontation between the Israeli military authorities and the Palestinian community. With prolonged periods of closure of schools and universities by the military authorities, Palestinian education during the first *Intifada* went underground. Palestinian teachers (and students) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have played a key role in the popular resistance, as they "constituted an assisting force in the organization of un-institutionalized (and militarily declared illegal) educational activities, in conditions of widespread popular resistance" (Mazawi, 1994: 507).

Palestinian universities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are "not only centers for learning but are also symbols of survival and resistance to the military occupation" (Kurd and Herrscher, 1995: 301). Palestinian students in these campuses constitute one homogeneous group (all Palestinians with very few international students), who feel a strong sense of belonging and attachments to the university as a national institution. Unlike their brethren in the Israeli universities, political organizing and activism among these Palestinian students is supported and recognized by the university administration. Our research participants in this study are high school graduates who just entered one of these Palestinian universities in the West Bank. It is within this stage of transition from all-female high school to gender-mixed university campus, that Palestinian female students grapple with issues of identity and intellectual development.

During the *Intifada*, Palestinian women were involved not only in economic and social projects. They also organized demonstrations, smuggled wanted youths to safety, mobilized and issued political manifestoes and communiqués, and threw stones at the soldiers. Furthermore, women have been arrested, beaten, shot and killed in numbers unprecedented in Palestinian history. According to Sayigh (1989: 465), "after decades of media-starvation, Palestinians are suddenly bombarded by journalists, film-makers, researchers, novelists, conference-conveners, all interested

in one topic: Palestinian women." It is this turning point that made Palestinian women's voices advocating a combination of feminist and nationalist agendas finally be heard. This qualitatively new form of Palestinian women's participation led to the conclusion that the *Intifada* was not only against the Israeli occupation, but also a new way of life the Palestinians were creating. As the question of how much social change Palestinian women accomplished during the *Intifada* remains debatable, "some writers went so far to claim that women had achieved equality through the *Intifada*" (Hammami, 1991: 73).

Many Palestinian women activists dwell on the lesson they have learned from the experience of Algerian women. Ask any Palestinian woman activist and she will tell you that Algerian women had fought in the revolution and when Algeria was liberated they were sent back to the kitchen; and we are not going to make the same mistake. An activist member of one of the women's committees was quoted by Hiltermann (1991: 165), saying: "The struggle for our rights as workers and as women should start now or we'll end up with another bourgeois state and another kind of regime that will oppress women and the working class. It all has to go side by side." Another Palestinian woman activist, representing her committee at the international women's conference in Nairobi in 1985, was quoted by Hiltermann: "If a woman is going to participate only in the national struggle, she'll have to start at square one after liberation" (1991: 165).

Palestinian women, and equally Palestinian female students, are exposed to multilevel sets of oppressive factors which are determined by the interplay between patriarchy, sexism, colonialism and class exploitation producing an unbearable degree of adversity for them to deal with (Makkawi and Jaramillo, 2006). Consequently, Palestinian female students are exposed to a series of "risk factors" embedded in their educational environment throughout all levels of their education. In addition to conventional concerns of teenager females typically discussed in the psychological and educational literature, Palestinian female adolescents face a complicated set of societal restriction, demands and pressures as they enter high school. The phenomenon of academic success among Palestinian female students, despite the mounting difficulties and obstacles, indicates a trend of students' resilience in the face of acute adversity. It is intriguing to explore which factors account for the phenomenon of Palestinian female students' academic achievement when most factors in their environment are hindering rather than promoting educational achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The annual publication and public announcement, by students' names, of the results of the *Tawjihi* exams taken by Palestinian students upon their graduation from high

school in the West Bank and Gaza Strip may seem to be a conventional cultural practice for the ordinary observer. However, a noteworthy piece of data regarding female students' academic achievements in these national exams prompts a great deal of intellectual curiosity in the mind of the interested educational researcher. Consistently, Palestinian female students occupy the lion's share among the distinguished list of high school graduates. Out of the first forty distinguished Palestinian students who graduated in 2004/05 school year, divided into four categories (Arts and Sciences in the West Bank and Gaza Strip) an overwhelming majority (37 students) were females. In the academic year 2006/07, the total of female students in the same four categories was 38 out of 40.

Furthermore, an examination of previous years of the *Tawjihi* results reveals a common trend of Palestinian female students' distinguished academic achievement, something which is most likely to be the case in the near future. This phenomenon of female outstanding educational achievement, when juxtaposed against the widely documented environmental "risk factors" in the Palestinian educational system and Arab-Palestinian society with regards to the status of women in general, certainly indicates that a process of "student resilience" is taking place.

The purpose of the current phase of the study is to explore in depth, through qualitative inquiry, the "real world" and educational experiences of a purposefully elected sample of Palestinian female student high achievers. It focuses on their perceptions and evaluations of both external factors in their immediate environment and internal personality factors that, from their perspectives, led to their "educational resilience" and noteworthy academic success against the odds. Furthermore, this phase of the study also explored the students' successful transition from high school to the university. This component of the inquiry is considered as the first phase of a longitudinal research study following the paths of their intellectual, emotional and social development during college over the four years of their higher education.

Methodology

This study used "grounded theory" research techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as a qualitative methodology in order to explore in depth the experiences, strategies, identities, learning styles, psychological resilience, goals, aspirations, and coping methods among a purposefully selected sample of highly successful Palestinian female students drawn from the distinguished high school graduates in the West Bank. The main instrument for data collection in this phase of the study was in-depth open-ended qualitative interviews which lasted approximately one hour each. The interviews were conducted in the researcher's office in Birzeit University. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis and the construction of emerging themes using "grounded theory" techniques.

The sample of participants for this inquiry consisted of "data rich cases" (Patton, 2002) purposefully selected from the graduating cohort of Palestinian female high school students during the academic year 2005/06. Immediately after the results of the *Tawjihi* exams were announced and names were published in the summer of 2006, and following unsuccessful attempts to contact female students who scored in the top ten students in each category (Arts-West Bank, Science-West Bank, Arts-Gaza, and Science-Gaza), it was decided to limit the focus of the current study to a cohort of high achiever female students who were admitted to Birzeit University for the academic year 2006/07. A total of 33 female students whose *Tawjihi* grades were among the top three in their respective districts in the West Bank with an average ranging from 95 to 98.5 percent were admitted to Birzeit University and granted student scholarships for their four-year undergraduate studies. This group of distinguished and scholarship receivers included between two to three female students from each of the twelve districts of the West Bank. They were distributed among the various faculties at the university as follows: Arts (ten students), Commerce (seven students), Law (six students), Science (four students), Engineering (four students) and Media (two students). This list of students was obtained from the student registration department of the university.

The focus on this particular cohort of high achieving Palestinian female students from Birzeit University served several proposes: First, this cohort of resilient female students represents the various districts of the West Bank. Second, due to travel difficulties (especially to the Gaza Strip) it was more feasible to complete the research project with such an accessible sample from the West Bank. Third, working with college students on one campus allows for the exploration of students' social and intellectual development during college within a homogeneous educational context. Finally, the first wave of interviews with this group of students has been considered as the initial phase of a longitudinal study planned to follow the same group with the intention to explore the paths of their intellectual development throughout the college years.

All the students on the list of 33 were contacted through an official letter sent to their student account using the university's website *Ritaj* system. A total of fourteen participants responded positively to the letter and agreed to participate in the research projects. The findings reported in the following section, emerged from the first wave of qualitative interviews with this group of research participants.

All the tape-recorded interviews, which lasted approximately one hour each, were transcribed verbatim and submitted to inductive analysis following the procedures of "grounded theory" data analysis techniques. Initial reading of the transcripts resulted in a larger number of "topics and categories" identified directly from the students' expressions and statements using their exact words and descriptions. This level of analysis simply represents the data as it is, documenting directly the "first

level" interpretation of the participants. The second step of data analysis included "comparing and contrasting" the various categories and subsequently "clustering" them into a small number of theoretically meaningful themes. The themes were then compared to existing theoretical notions in the literature of multicultural education, educational resilience and third world feminism. The final group of themes identified in this phase of the study are presented and discussed in the next section.

Findings

Supportive Family Relationships

Participants indicated an exceptionally strong, warm and accepting support from their nuclear family, especially from their father, during their high school educational experience. This "safety net" provided by family support was in many cases coupled with a high level of expectations regarding their educational achievement. The stereotype of the father in a patriarchal male-dominated society as an authoritarian figure is being critically contested in the life experiences of our research participants. They all have had close and warm relationships with their father leading to their desire and commitment for educational success in order not to "disappoint them." The following excerpt illustrates the father-daughter affectionate and accepting relationship.

> *Hiba:* My father died from cancer when I was in 10th grade; he had cancer for one year and then died around that time. This was one of the main things that prompted me to work hard to achieve something. I was my father's favorite daughter and he had very high expectations from me. He constantly encouraged and supported me both materialistically and emotionally. He used to brag about my literary writings and show them to teachers and doctors whom he knew; he took me many times to meet with them and tried to publish my short stories in the newspapers. Whenever I wrote something, even the most simple thing, he used to listen to what I wrote and encourage me. This had a great impact on me.

Another participant was also transformed, while preparing for the *Tawjihi* exam, by a "critical incident" in her village reminding her of the sacrifices made by her father in order for her to get "good education." The incident rendered her relationship with her father more powerful and meaningful and increased her commitment to work harder in order to keep up with her father's "legitimate" expectations.

> *Madlin:* One of the biggest problems for me was the occupation. I remember one incident during my preparation for the *Tawjihi* that had affected me so much. I used to go to sleep and then wake up to study. When I woke up, my parents told me about the news. There were four workers from *Al-Khalil* who used to go to work in Israel without permission and

they used to pass through our village. At that night the Israeli soldiers shot and killed them all. I was so terrified because my father too goes to work in Israel without permission. My father used to tell me, "I will put up with all of this suffering only for you… just get me the good grades and I will give you everything in life." At that day, I felt an enormous level of responsibility on my shoulders. During my study for the *Tawjihi* I wrote on my wall the grade 98.5 and underneath I wrote "mom and dad." I wanted to get this grade for them.

Love, nurturing and parental support, coupled with assertiveness and high expectations is an ideal parenting style leading to positive development and adaptation. This parenting style is held in sharp contradiction with the stereotypical authoritative patriarchal figure of the Arab father commonly reported in the literature. Both educated and non-educated fathers of these high achieving female students held similar expectations regarding their daughters' education. For Ghada, her father's education is perceived as the legitimate reason behind his unconditional support for her: "…because my father is educated, he knows the value of education for the girl. He always says that 'education for the girl is her weapon in her hands'." On the other end of the continuum, Ola's father is supportive exactly for the opposite reasons: "…my father always encourages us to do well in our education; he is very supportive of our education maybe because he himself did not have a chance to study beyond high school, so he wants us to do well… the same thing is true for my mother."

Female Schools and Peer Support

Most Palestinian public high schools are segregated by gender, something which is commonly attributed to cultural and religious norms and values. Regardless of the educational controversy prevalent in the literature about the issue of high school segregation with regard to gender, female schools for these research participants were perceived as safe social spaces providing them with "safe environments" away from cruel competition with male students over educational achievement and other school related activities. A participant who graduated from gender-mixed public high school had this to say about her experience with sexism and discrimination against female students in her school.

> *Ghada:* I still don't know why they always say that boys are better students than girls! When the superintendent comes to visit our class he would always ask one of the boys to answer a question or do something. Yes, this had a very negative effect on us the girls. We used to feel as if we were less worthy than the boys. The boys used to sit in the front row and the girls in the back… Once we asked our teacher to be seated in one line and the boys in parallel line in the same class. The teacher refused our request and said to us "it is against religion that you sit in front of the boys, so you have to stay in the back."

She continues to describe her experience with sexism and discrimination with immense feeling of regret and disappointment:

> *Ghada:* Every time when there was a contest or activity outside the school they used to select the boys to participate. We have not participated in any of these contests. Despite the fact that I was rated first in my class, when we had an open day in the school the boy after me gave the students' speech. They say it is disgrace that a girl stands in front of people from the village and gives a speech, so the boy after me gave the speech!

Female peers during high school were loving and supportive despite the visible competition between them over grades and educational achievement. Apparently, orientation towards people and caring for others, something which has been documented as one of the characteristics of women's psychology, is not and should not be in contradiction with task oriented behavior, assertiveness and a quest for high levels of educational achievement. These female students reported healthy integration between their desire for achieving (hence competition) and loving relationship with their female peers. Let's examine some of what they say:

> *Ola:* My girl-friends always supported me, not only because this is me, but also because I love to help the other girls. For example, mathematics is the most difficult subject for the girls, and I was good in math because my brothers used to help me. I used to finish the material for the exam early and help my girl-friends with all the questions they may have. Some of the girls used to come to my house and I used to help them with mathematics homework. I felt that they love me because I cooperate with them and help them.

> *May:* There was one girl and we used to be in close competition for the first place in our class, but we were very good friends. I did not want her to get higher grades than mine but we still were best friends.

> *Masa:* For me these girl-friends were part of the support system I had. This does not happen to me very often, but when I don't do well in an exam they all come to me and offer their support. They would say "don't worry, even if you don't do well in one exam you will make it up in the others."

The process of leaving gender-segregated high school and entering gender-integrated university campus is a remarkable transitional event for these female students, and is worth further investigation. Their initial adjustment to campus life was marked by the maintenance of close and warm relationships with their parents despite the fact that most of them live on campus and only visit their parents' homes at weekends. This round of data was collected earlier in their college experience, but later phases of data collection would focus on their adjustment to the gender-mixed educational environment in comparison with their high school experience.

Supportive Female Teachers

The worldwide trend called "feminization of education" where more and more female teachers enter the teaching profession, takes quite different shape in the Palestinian occupied territories. With very limited job opportunities in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, teaching becomes an equally attractive profession for both male and female university graduates. For college-educated Palestinian women, teaching is considered a culturally appropriate profession, something which is consistent with the international trend of "feminization of education." On the other hand, their male counterparts reluctantly choose the teaching profession because other venues of employment are quite limited. Consider two examples of outstanding female teachers as role models for our participants.

> *Hiba:* I had one teacher who I consider my second mother; not *like* my mother but really my mother. She taught me from 4th grade, she taught me the Koran by heart, and she kept very close to me since I was very young. She involved me in everything and opened many opportunities for me. Whenever there was a celebration or something she would say "I have a student," and she would recommend me to participate in that event. She always encouraged me to participate in contests outside the school and used to put lots of pressure on me to do well. She taught me Arabic in 8th grade… she is very creative in what she is doing and very committed to her work. There are very few teachers who are really committed to their work like she is.

The following is another example where a close female teacher has been consistently perceived, and perhaps rightly treated, as a real family member. The metaphoric use of family relations to indicate the strength of a relationship and interconnectedness with others is common practice in Arab Palestinian culture, and more so among women.

> *Madlin:* Mrs Gahda, I don't have an older sister, but for real I considered her like my older sister and even more. What can I tell you about her, she is perfect. I used to say to her "you are perfect teacher." She really is an outstanding teacher. She is well informed about religion and politics and cares a lot about political issues. We used to feel repressed by the school headmaster, but Mrs Ghada was a really special teacher. She used to walk into our classroom and tell us "you are going to attend the university and you have to understand your responsibilities towards your religion and your homeland." I was very attached to her and I loved her like my real sister.

Palestinian female teachers, mostly teaching in all-female schools, view their teaching role as a great career achievement and one they have to struggle to maintain, and therefore take it quite seriously compared to their male counterparts in the Palestinian educational context. Another explanation for the dedication of female teachers may be found in the perception of their teaching role as an extension of

their domestic role as mothers and care providers for their family members. At any rate, female teachers are personally devoted and committed to their teaching profession, and consequently serve as positive role models for their female students.

Educational Success and Access to Public Space

The private-public space divide is visible, clear, and often characterized by rigid boundaries in male-dominated patriarchal societies. Women's traditional positions according to conservative gender role differences are typically confined to the private space and domestic sphere, whereas men have free access to the public space domain including travel, education, employment and politics. For women, the struggle to participate in the public space is conditional upon educational and career success. They have to prove to society that they are equally capable to perform roles and duties beyond the domestic role of child rearing and housekeeping.

As expressed by participants, Palestinian female students increase their chances of participating in the "public space" when they are highly successful in their educational work. The alternative for the low achieving female student is to be "married off" earlier and remain within the household doing mostly domestic work. This perception of educational success as a chance to be involved in the "public space" serves as a challenge to be taken by Palestinian female students.

> *May:* I will talk about what I see in the villages. When they realize that the girl is not all that successful in school they marry her off right away to the first man who asks for her hand. They are quick to judge her as a failure if she fails once even if she wants to continue her education and thinks that she may do better in the future. That is it, if she fails once she is doomed, she gets marries against her desire… some parents even don't wait to see her grades, they decide that she is for marriage from the beginning. I know married women who came back to take the *Tawjihi* exam with me. They feel lost without the *Tawjihi* certificate and they want to be able to help their children with school work etc. If a girl does not succeed, she gets married but on the other hand if the boy does not succeed they keep on pushing and encouraging him to do well at school; they have more investment in the boys.

> *Masa:* No matter how much progress I made, I still find that our society has a backwards perception of women. Still as an Arab society, you will find people who would say "why does a girl need to get education" and things like that. I faced this kind of thinking from society when I used to participate in community activities after school in my town.

Contrary to women in Arab-Palestinian society, female students and women in western societies have unconditional access to the public space; they can move out of their parents' home when they turn eighteen, marry whenever they want and to whomever they want, if they don't do well in school they still can find alternative

employment. Unlike the case of Palestinian female students, lack of educational success for western female students is not a "one way" ticket to imposed early marriage and a traditional domestic role. It might be possible to conclude that educational success for Palestinian female students is considered the "last chance" to evade early marriage and gain access to the public space. Accordingly, their motivation for academic success could be understandably attributed to internal psychological energy they derive from the position of "last option" to gain access to the public space.

Personality Characteristics

A wide range of psychological and personality characteristics which are common among resilient students have been reported in the literature about minority students' educational achievement. Participants expressed remarkable degrees of self-confidence, internal locus of control, self-esteem, persistence and motivation in their academic work. These personality characteristics, one would safely argue, were developed and nurtured within loving, accepting and supportive family relationships (first theme). While some were very clear, and some were not quite clear about how they developed such characteristics (e.g., role models, critical events etc.), most participants were quite conscious about their personality strengths and the way in which these helped them during their preparation for the *Tawjihi* exam, a period which is typically charged with emotional stress for the ordinary student in Palestine.

The following are some of the examples of their personality characteristics expressed in the interviews. Consider the notion of willpower the way Ola puts it:

Ola: First of all I have strong will. When I decide to do something I have the will and the determination to finish it. When I say I will do something, I will do it no matter what happens. Willpower for me means that when you decide to do something that is positive for your life and someone *encourages* you to do it then you have to do it no matter what. I started feeling like this after my mother's death because I knew she wanted me to be successful in school.

The need for distinction has been reported by several participants, something which has been reinforced and supported by role models such as their female teachers**.**

Riman: As a student, I like to be distinguished not only in my grades. For example me and my friend used to be in charge of the schools' broadcast. I like to be distinguished and successful in my studies too and my teachers knew that and *supported* me. This made me feel that I have more responsibility to be successful in my studies.

The typically stressed-out *Tawjihi* student experiences an immense level of psychological pressure stemming mostly from external societal and familial pressure. This pressure is internalized by many students and creates an internal

condition of "set up for failure." Research participants were quite aware of the destructive effects of such pressure; they were relaxed, confident and prepared for the exam in a regulated fashion. May had this to say:

> *May:* During the *Tawjihi* I was very relaxed, not like other students who get stressed out and have psychological problems. I finished all of the seven books in sixteen days and did not stay up all night like the rest of my friends. I asked my *mother*, "is it that I don't study well or am I really fast?" She told me it is because I used to study on a daily basis, then I realized that studying the material on time really helps rather than exhausting yourself right before the exam.

Notice that for the most part, these positive resilient personality characteristics were at work in conjunction with support and nurturing from significant others, mainly parents and teachers. The encouragement and support provided by others is critical for this cohort of resilient Palestinian female students. This is evident even in the case when they talk about individual personality characteristics that in the conventional psychological literature sets the individual as a single individuated entity apart from relationship and connectedness with others.

Discussion

Classical theories of developmental psychology were quite clear and linear in their predictions of "normal" and "abnormal" child development. Both extremes, behaviorism and its focus on external environmental factors on the one hand, and cognitive theories with their focus on internal mental processes on the other, argued that rich, stimulating, healthy and supportive environments are necessary conditions for positive development of the child. But not all children grow up in such ideal environments. Concepts such as psychological and educational resilience, evolved from the experiences of many children around the world who turn out to be adaptive and successful despite abundant adversities in their environment. Resilience studies in education and mental health help identify context-specific environmental and personality factors that together facilitate an individual's success and healthy development, despite the odds.

Palestinian female students in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, grow up and attend school in an environment full of risk factors such as the Israeli occupation and its colonialist practices, poverty, patriarchal relations and oppression of women. The consistent fact that Palestinian female students occupy the lion's share among the distinguished high school graduates points towards a phenomenon of student educational resilience. Understanding the immediate environmental, relational and personality factors in their educational experience may be helpful for targeting specific educational changes in the system and learning environment so that these factors facilitate the educational experiences of other students.

Among the most compelling findings of the study was the father-daughter warm, accepting and supportive relationship. This finding is in sharp contradiction with the image of the Arab male patriarch, where the stereotype alludes to the authoritarian type of parenting style. Fathers of this group of high achieving female students exert authoritative parenting style in which love, support and acceptance have been intertwined with firmness and high level expectations. If this is indeed the case, then educationalists and policy makers should direct their energy and resources towards a planned process of cultural change where the Palestinian family, and particularly fathers, take serious steps towards adapting more democratic principles in their parenting styles especially with their daughters.

The debate over the issue of integration-segregation by gender in public high schools in Palestine is controversial and culturally loaded. Taken on its face value, female schools and female peer relationships seem to have had a positive effect on our research participants' academic achievement. However, the transition from all-female high school to gender-mixed university campus, would uncover the consequences of such gender-segregation in terms of the students' social development and interpersonal skills. The social and interpersonal effects of school segregation in contrast to university campus integration is the subject of a follow-up study with the same research participants four years later into their university educational experiences.

In education, and particularly education of the oppressed such as the case of Palestinian women, policy makers must shift their focus from "fixing the individual" to "fixing the system" where factors of resilience such as the family, peers and teachers, and school environment are utilized to support "at risk" female students who are victims of sexism, oppression, and discrimination. Palestinian women have been historically involved as equal participants in the struggle for self determination providing solid bases for their claims of equality. The remarkable success stories of Palestinian female students discussed in this article add more substantiated evidence for these claims and quest for equality and liberation. Although the overall average of educational performance among Palestinian female students in comparison to their male counterparts is not known, the current study was limited to the distinguished group of female students who scored first in their respective districts in the *Tawjihi* exam. Future research should focus on the overall comparative educational achievement among Palestinian male and female students.

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