



**GENDER  
AND  
SOCIETY**  
*Working Papers*

"Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and  
Middle East Studies"

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"*Commentary*: Feminist Scholarship and  
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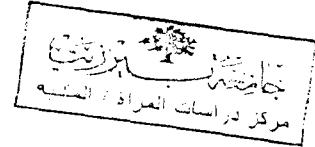
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*Lisa Taraki*



**Women's Studies Program  
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**Women's Studies Program**  
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## Introduction

The Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University is publishing the "Gender and Society" working paper series in order to begin a discussion on critical issues in the study of gender relations in Palestinian and Arab society. We also are interested in contributing to the on-going debate on how to develop strategies, policies and practices to build a democratic Palestinian society of equal citizens whose political, social and economic rights are recognized and secured.

Deniz Kandiyoti's paper, "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle Eastern Studies" was originally delivered at the opening session of a 25 November-2 December 1994 workshop on "Palestinian Women in Society: State of Research and New Directions," held by the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University. The commentaries by Lisa Taraki and Rema Hammami are based, respectively, on introductory remarks and commentary also delivered during the workshop. The structure of the working paper reflects the Program's objective of interacting with, and contributing to, international feminist scholarship on the one hand, and scholarship on Palestinian society on the other, in a serious and sustained manner. To properly study gender relations in Palestinian society, we believe, requires this dynamic interaction, avoiding both *parochialism and mechanical applications of paradigms developed in other contexts.*

The present working paper is one of a number of working papers emerging from an on-going research project on "Palestinian Women in Society (PWIS)," undertaken by the Women's Studies Program in collaboration with other local researchers. The PWIS project is a gender-informed assessment of existing literature and research on post-1967 Palestinian society in four areas we consider relevant to women: economy, education, social entitlements and support, and culture and society. The recognition of gender as a basis for social organization and a category of analysis has opened up important new avenues for scholarly research and for equitable and effective policy formulation. The Women's Studies Program hopes to make a contribution to such gender-informed research and policy formulation in Palestine.

## **Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies**

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The aim of this paper is to examine the manner and extent to which advances in feminist scholarship have been reflected in studies in and about the Middle East. I will be arguing that feminist studies in the West and studies on women in the Middle East have been following parallel and partially overlapping trajectories and that Middle East studies have been characterized by a selective incorporation of the broader agendas generated by feminist critique alongside home-grown debates. In what follows, I will attempt to outline the main thrust of feminist scholarship in the West and to evaluate studies in and about the Middle East in relation to these developments. I will conclude with some preliminary reflections on the state of the art and suggestions for possible avenues for future research.

### **Developments in Feminist Scholarship**

The development of feminist scholarship since the 1960s, corresponding to the second wave of feminist activism in the West, has been uneven both across social science disciplines and in different geographical locations. It is therefore impossible to provide a comprehensive account of the field beyond a very schematic presentation. Keeping these limitations in mind, I propose a periodization covering three main phases.

#### The First Phase : Combatting Androcentric Bias

This phase was characterized by efforts to establish the field of 'women's studies' and provided an extensive documentation of androcentric bias in the social sciences. Feminist scholars produced accounts of how the absence of women as social actors and the fact that social theory and history were written from a male perspective constituted major weaknesses in the very explanatory frameworks of

their disciplines. Some key texts of the 1970s such as Rowbotham's Hidden from History, Reiter's Towards an Anthropology of Women and Boserup's Women's Role in Economic Development all drew attention to the effects of gender-blindness on their respective areas of enquiry. Feminist revision also took place in sociology, psychology and political science and by the 1980s led to a critique of epistemology ( exemplified by Harding's The Science Question in Feminism ) which asserted that the very way science constructs knowledge marginalizes women. This led to a search for feminist methodologies and alternative ways of defining subject-object relationships in social research. In a wider context, this phase also coincided with the documentation of 'gender gaps' through the numerous studies on women in Third World development initiated during the International Women's Year in 1975 and UN Decades that followed it.

### The Second Phase: Accounting for the Subordination of Women

Although there are no clear lines of demarcation between this and the preceding phase, it could be argued that earlier attempts to account for gender asymmetries increasingly crystallized around distinct orientations in feminist theory and practice reflecting liberal, Marxist/socialist, psychoanalytic and, more recently, post-structuralist influences.

Liberal feminists located the causes of women's subordination in the customary and legal constraints blocking women's access to the *public domain* and in prejudices and stereotypes concerning their capabilities. This tendency was criticized for failing to appreciate the systemic and deep-rooted nature of gender subordination and for not providing a framework to explain it.

In the search for such a framework, major divergences developed between radical and socialist feminists. Radical feminists invoked the notion of patriarchy as a timeless, universal system of male domination perpetuating the oppression of women as a group through the control of their sexuality and reproductive capacity. The main criticism raised against this notion of patriarchy was that it tended towards a biological essentialism that provided no basis for an understanding of historical and cultural variations. Feminists working within a Marxist framework attempted to solve this problem by linking patriarchy to *different modes of production*. However, the specific nature of exploitation based on gender was submerged and subordinated to class exploitation in many such accounts. There followed a period of intense debate concerning the nature of the relationships

between capitalism and patriarchy which by the early 1980s was showing signs of increasing sterility.

However, empirical research on the relations between the changing international division of labour and sexual divisions of labour grew apace as Third World scholars and activists started making eclectic use of the major insights gained from Western feminist theory whilst attending to issues of immediate local relevance. They also called into question the universalist pretensions of existing feminist theories by highlighting the specificity of Third World women's experiences. Meanwhile, post-structuralist and post-modern feminists were also challenging the notion of the unity of women as a self-evident category and their 'oppression' as a unitary phenomenon. They drew upon Derrida's deconstructionism, Foucault's discourse theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lyotard's post-modernism to argue that the major objective of a feminist project should be to study the construction of the category 'women' through the practices that produce sexual difference and analyse how women's subordination is reproduced through a multiplicity of practices, discourses and institutions. It was even argued that analyses based on the dichotomy between 'men' and 'women' were fundamentally flawed because of their attribution of fixed unchanging essences to the genders. At the point when all universal narratives about emancipation and the category of 'woman' were being called into question, feminism itself as a viable political project could appear problematic, a question to which we shall return. There has also been a gradual shift from 'women' to 'gender' as the central analytic category.

### The Third Phase : From Women to Gender

By the mid-1980s there was a move towards transforming the purview of the field from women's studies to the study of gender, namely analyses of the ways in which all aspects of human society, culture and relationships are gendered. This orientation, applied to the study of history, is succinctly summarized by Joan Scott in the following manner; 'Studying gender consists in examining women and men in relation to one another, of asking what the definitions or laws that apply to one imply about the other, what the comparative location and activities of men and women reveal about each other, and what representations of sexual difference suggest about the structure of social, economic and political authority.'

This shift was greeted with a certain amount of skepticism by some as the wholesale abandonment of a central tenet of feminism, namely that women constituted a unified category around whose concerns an emancipatory project called feminism could be articulated. In particular, the fact that the field was redefined to include the study of men and masculinities (both in relation to the subordination of women and to other types of institutionalized forms of power and domination) received a mixed reception from some scholars who feel that this field appears to be constructing itself as an adjunct to feminism, appropriating its major insights, but giving it only partial credit and competing for scarce institutional resources.

In the Middle East, where the infrastructure for women's studies teaching and research is only beginning to develop there are far fewer stakes around these demarcations and therefore more latitude in judging the analytic advantages implicit in different approaches. In this respect, I would tend to agree with Joan Acker that the focus on gender has opened up new perspectives on institutions such as the state, science, the military and formal organizations, which were seldom analyzed in a manner cognizant of gender texts and relations. The work of R.W. Connell on the state and Cynthia Cockburn on technological change provide us with excellent examples of the powerful uses to which this perspective can be put. The question which still remains to be answered is the extent to which this analytical move has stimulated a further integration of gender perspectives into mainstream ( or according to some, malestream ) social science.

I will also be arguing that this shift has not yet made any significant inroads into studies of the Middle East.

## **Scholarship on women in the Middle East**

Feminist scholarship and advocacy in the Middle East has followed a distinctive trajectory reflecting both its engagement with local debates and its dialogue with broader currents of feminist thought and activism. In what follows, I attempt a rough periodization of the main currents of thought and research.

### The First Wave: Feminism and Nationalism

The first wave of feminist writing in the Middle East started with movements for social reform and modernization during the era of post-colonial state formation spanning the periods between the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth



centuries. This period exhibits striking parallels in Turkey, Iran and Egypt, establishing a lasting framework for discussions of the 'woman question'. Nationalism was the leading idiom through which issues pertaining to women's position in society were articulated. I have argued elsewhere that there have been persistent tensions between the modernist trends in nationalism, which favoured an expansion of women's citizenship rights, and the organicist, anti-modernist strands which were concerned about the dilution and contamination of cultural values and identity. Women's stake in nationalism has been both complex and contradictory. On the one hand, nationalist movements invite women to participate more fully into collective life by interpellating them as 'national' actors : mothers, educators, workers and even fighters. On the other hand, they reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms set by nationalist discourse. In that sense, feminisms are never autonomous but bound to the signifying networks of the contexts which produce them.

In the Middle East the combination of Muslim societies' encounters with an imperialistic West, the flawed nature of agendas for national development and the preoccupation with Islam as a marker of cultural identity, have constrained the discursive possibilities of feminist scholarship and established styles of debate exhibiting remarkable resilience through time. This is evident in the fact that the debate on the compatibility of Islam with women's emancipation, harking back to Qasim Amin, was still on the agenda in the 1980s and 90s.

The identification of cultural authenticity with Islam has implied that feminist discourse could only legitimately proceed in two directions: either denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic. The first strategy, in its polemical variant, counterpoises the dignity of the protected Muslim woman against the commodified or sexually exploited Western woman. The more academic variants of this strategy may be found in the work of anthropologists whose materials reveal that women lead rich and meaningful lives behind the apparent limitations set by segregation and that they wield considerable influence and power. The second strategy, in its polemical variant, depends on a 'golden age' myth of an uncorrupted original Islam against which current discriminatory practices may be denounced as falling short of truly Islamic ideals. In its academic variant, this strategy produces work which challenges uniformly patriarchal interpretations of Islam by presenting more radical alternatives as part and parcel of Islamic tradition. Excellent and sophisticated examples of this genre may be found in Mernissi's Women and Islam: an historical

and theological enquiry and Ahmed's Women and Gender in Islam . Although the implications of the first strategy are potentially conservative and the second clearly more radical, they share the same discursive space.

It is interesting to note, however, that the debates about women and Islam which were initiated during the first wave of feminist writing were submerged for a considerable period only to re-emerge in the 1980s. In the intervening period, questions pertaining to women's status were incorporated into broader accounts of social change and development emanating from the major social science paradigms.

### The Second Wave: The Rise of Social Science Paradigms and Developmentalism

The 1950s and 60s witnessed the emergence and consolidation of social science disciplines in the Middle East and the incorporation of questions about changes in the family and women's roles into broader discourses about social transformation, namely modernization theory and Marxism. Modernization theory presupposed a movement from tradition to modernity affecting all facets of social life. Disparities in gender relations within the family and society at large could henceforth be explained in terms of relative degrees of modernization with rural, uneducated, overly fertile and male dominated characterizing the traditional and urban, educated, child-centered and companionate representing the modern. Since this model, especially in its Parsonian variant, homogenized a variety of non-Western cultures under the rubric of 'traditional', culturally specific forms of women's subordination were neglected in favour of broad indicators of socio-economic development such urbanization, education and industrialization.

This discourse about transition had its counterpart in Marxist theorizing which counterpoised the feudal and semi-feudal to the capitalist/industrial, again rendering gender relations epiphenomenal and derivable from broader socio-economic structures. In retrospect, it may seem natural enough that during a period of state-led economic growth and political consolidation in the post-war period, there was a sense of both urgency and confidence about possibilities for national development in most countries of the Middle East which reflected itself in scholarship. Various forms of social inequity, including those based on gender, could be treated as social ills that would right themselves once the society had attained a certain level of development.

It is in the period leading up to the 1975 UN International Women's Year, which promoted a thoroughgoing critique of modernization theory, that a second

wave of feminist writing was reactivated in the Middle East. The women in development (WID) literature contested the notion that the benefits of modernization had trickled down to women and even argued that women were, in places, disempowered by losing access to some of their traditional avenues of livelihood and social participation. The concept of disadvantage based on gender was firmly back on the agenda, but remained tightly enmeshed in concerns about development. This had limitations, but it also had its uses, especially for those anxious to break out of orientalist discourses on the Middle East. The fact that Middle Eastern women also led material lives which could be amenable to analysis through the general concepts of social science opened up the possibility of their integration into the theoretical mainstream. Pathbreaking work such as Judith Tucker's Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt demonstrated the potential of historically informed materialist analyses. In the more strictly development-related literature the inclusion of Middle Eastern women under the broader rubric of 'Third World' women, a category justifiably found wanting by critics such as Chandra Mohanty, served to loosen the grip of orientalist exclusivity, which sealed off Muslim women into a world of total non-commensurability, thus opening the way for more comparative perspectives.

### The Third Wave: Dialogues within Feminism

It is also after 1975 that we witness more significant inroads being made by Western academic feminism into Middle Eastern scholarship. This influence was mediated through different constituencies with somewhat different agendas: Western women working on the Middle East with a high stake in bringing their Middle Eastern material in line with the various paradigms of academic feminism, Western-trained Middle Eastern women, expatriate or locally resident, with multiple reference groups in Western academe and their countries of origin, and locally trained scholars, some with access only to works in translation and to more localized debates.

The result was a selective and uneven incorporation of the various concepts of feminist theory into Middle Eastern scholarship. To take but one example, Michelle Rosaldo's invocation of the public/private dichotomy as the basis for the subordination of women seemed to find a natural home in a region where this dichotomy appeared to take concrete forms in patterns of spatial segregation and female confinement. Thus, although Rosaldo proposed these concepts within a

much broader frame of reference, it is in Middle Eastern studies that we find their most detailed elaborations.

The liberal feminist approach, with its emphasis on removing 'obstacles' to gender equality, also received a warm reception. This approach is implicit both in work inspired by modernization theory and in 'women in development' studies with their emphasis on closing 'gender gaps' in education, access to resources and in legal status.

Socialist feminisms also found a home in the various applications of the world systems and dependency theories to the Middle East. If one wing of the women in development literature reflected a liberal worldview, another strand emanated from neo-Marxist theories of development and underdevelopment. This work reflected an engagement with the systemic effects of underdevelopment and their impact on women in a manner that sometimes privileged colonialism and neo-colonialism as the prime movers of gender inequality. Mervat Hatem (1993) suggests, with considerable justification, that this represents an extension of nationalist discourse since Middle Eastern patriarchies can hardly be explained solely with reference 'to those aspects of their political economies and societies that serve colonial or post-colonial interests'. Nonetheless, the terms of production and reproduction, class and patriarchy found their way into many materialist analyses of the condition of women.

Here again, local agendas added original twists to the usage of certain terms. The concept of patriarchy is a case in point. For instance, Hisham Sharabi introduced the concept of 'neo-patriarchy' to designate post-colonial state formations in the Middle East in a manner which elaborates upon the designations commonly associated with it in Western feminist theory, since he uses the term to characterize both the macro-structures of the economy and polity and the micro-structures of the community and family. Although this is not a particularly helpful category from the vantage point of either political economy or political theory, it *nonetheless emerges as a provocative item of cultural criticism and an attempt to formulate a language to talk about forms of authoritarianism at all levels of society.* Feminism, in this context, emerges as a radical challenge to the very premisses upon which such authoritarianism is based, an idea also strongly present in the work of Fatima Mernissi.

It is interesting to note that neither radical feminism nor psychoanalysis were to have any significant impact on mainstream studies about gender in the Middle East. Indeed, with the exception of the early works of Nawal el-Saadawi which confronted women's oppression as sexual beings and raised questions about

violence, abuse, incest, rape and clitoridectomy and Mernissi's earlier work on Islamic constructions of female sexuality there was little emphasis on sexuality as such. This could be explained with reference to both a resistance against delving into culturally taboo areas and a reaction against the gender essentialism implicit in some radical feminist theorizing which bears some resemblance ( albeit with different implications ) to the categories deployed by Islamic fundamentalists. If, according to feminists, women's essentially different natures qualify them to be the custodians of a more environmentally friendly, less violent and more democratic world, these different natures may be invoked with equal force to disqualify them from everything except domestic and child-rearing roles. I would venture to suggest that the category of 'Western feminism', sometimes used as a pejorative term in the Middle East to denote the general irrelevance of a diversionary, alien project, is constructed through a conflation of all feminist tendencies with its radical feminist variants. Indeed, a perceived emphasis upon the primacy of individual autonomy and gratification, including sexual exploration, and the denunciation of men as the main enemy could easily go against the cultural grain in societies where both men and women are tightly enmeshed in familistic networks of mutual rights and obligations and where both genders may be labouring under much harsher forms of economic and political repression.

#### The Fourth Phase : Where to From Here ?

The current phase of feminist theorizing presents new challenges the effects of which are much harder to detect. Despite internal divergences within feminist currents prior to the 1980s they did display important commonalities. They assumed that women constituted a category sharing a common oppression, that the reasons for their oppression were amenable to causal explanation ( despite sharp disagreements on the causes themselves ) and that meaningful forms of struggle and association could be evolved to achieve their liberation.

The late 1980s have witnessed a breakdown of this consensus and set the scene for what might be characterized as an internal crisis about 'difference'. In the United States white, middle class feminism came under attack for displaying racist and ethnocentric tendencies. In Europe, this internal critique coincided with non-European migrants' and ethnic minorities' demands for their rights to cultural distinctiveness and was punctuated by events such as the Salman Rushdie affair in England and the 'foulard' debate in France. The policies of multi-culturalism and identity politics in the West thus had a significant impact on feminist theorizing. A

question which is possibly premature, but important to address, is how the combined effects of post-modern criticism and debates about multi-culturalism are being reflected in Middle Eastern scholarship.

Questions about difference and the analysis of power hierarchies *implicit in* depictions of the 'Other' have, of course, been central to critiques of orientalism initiated by the inspiring work of Edward Said. Post-orientalist scholarship had a great deal to say about gender since representations of the 'Oriental' woman were integral to orientalist texts with depictions of harem life, exoticism and the erotic. This produced a new genre whereby textual analysis and the study of representations gained significant momentum across all social science disciplines, extending well beyond comparative literature and literary criticism where they originated. For example, Julie Marcus's *A World of Difference: Islam and Gender Hierarchy in Turkey*, castigates the producers of orientalist texts and, although the author is an anthropologist, relies mainly on secondary sources confining her not very abundant original ethnographic data principally to one chapter. Her invocation of 'purity law' in Islam as the basis of all social organization and gender hierarchy in Turkey makes one wonder how far, in fact, the argument against orientalism has been advanced through this endeavour.

There have been numerous texts about gender written from a Foucauldian and Saidian perspective, some more illuminating than others, mainly emanating from Western rather than local sources. This scholarly strategy, especially in disciplines normally mandating actual fieldwork, might have partly been a response to the occasionally crippling effects of having to seek authority for one's authorial voice with reference to one's positionality ( i.e. who one is ) rather than the analytic grounding or credibility of the arguments being elaborated. Deconstructing texts emanating from one's own culture- preferably from male authors with imperial connections- is a much safer enterprise than having to engage with the far messier realities of contemporary social life and the perplexing cross-currents evident in the politics of gender in actual Middle Eastern societies. But the more serious disservice of certain types of post-orientalist writing resides in the fact they remain locked into the categories of colonizer and colonized, East and West, Islam and Christendom, Western Self vs. Native Other in ways that keep our gaze fixed upon the discursive hegemony of the West. This usually occurs to the detriment of more self-referential analyses of culture and society which could inform local feminist critique. Ironically, it is principally in the writings of Islamists that such constructions are mirrored and utilized as justifications for presumably counter-hegemonic moves, where the universalism of the Enlightenment, denounced as an

imperial project, may be pitted against an Islamic universalism based on principles of an immutable *divine order*.

The multi-culturalism debate in the West was based on a recognition of the internal heterogeneity of modern states and the necessity to accommodate difference within pluralistic polities. Identifying an 'external' site for the production of difference in Middle Eastern societies, namely the West and its internal allies on the one hand and the 'truly' indigenous on the other, conveniently by-passes the necessity to take on board the equally heterogenous, ethnically and religiously diverse nature of such societies and potentially deligitimizes the voices and concerns of those deemed to be 'outside' the true collectivity. In short, the transposition of concerns about 'difference' to the Middle East has often taken polemical forms which have not, by and large, favoured the development of productive feminist agendas but instead, to paraphrase Marnia Lazreg ( 1988 ) turned difference into 'mere particularity', letting orientalism in through the back door.

Yet, there are other possibilities implicit in current developments and in the shift from women to gender, alluded to in the earlier part of this paper, which have not yet been fully exploited in the Middle East. The abandonment of grand narratives to account for the subordination of women is making room for detailed analyses of the different institutional realms through which gender hierarchies are reproduced and has broadened the research agenda to include a wide variety of cultural practices which shape gendered identities. In this perspective, social institutions do not merely reflect some unitary patriarchal logic but are the site of power relations and political processes through which gender hierarchies are both created and contested. Families, educational institutions, the law, the market and the military, to take a few examples, all contribute to cultural constructions of gender and the shaping of actual contexts in which gender roles are enacted, often producing complex and mutually contradictory effects. These institutions have received surprisingly little attention in relation to gender in the Middle East. Judith Tucker ( 1993 ), for instance, draws our attention to the fact that despite the assumed centrality of the family to Middle Eastern societies, there is hardly any historical research that reveals the variability of household formations in the Arab world through time and space. The same argument could be advanced about other social institutions, especially those which like the army, state apparatuses and formal organizations, typically exclude women. A gender-aware focus on social institutions has the additional advantage of necessarily including a temporal dimension and a sensitivity to changes in the global contexts which shape and

constrain local agendas. This will inevitably further fragment the vocabularies and terms of reference of feminist scholarship since we cannot expect those, say, dealing with law and jurisprudence to necessarily share the same language and concerns as educational sociologists, anthropologists or economists. This would, in my view, constitute a productive development if it ensures the diffusion of gender-aware perspectives throughout the humanities and social sciences in the Middle East.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued in this paper that advances in feminist scholarship have been incorporated into studies about the Middle East in a partial and selective manner. The historical connection between feminism and nationalism in the Middle East has left an enduring legacy of concerns around the effects of cultural imperialism which has discouraged a systematic exploration of the local institutions and processes centrally implicated in the production of gender hierarchies and forms of subordination based on gender. Social science paradigms such as modernization theory and Marxism ( and its dependency theory variants ) have unwittingly reinforced this tendency by focusing on broad processes of social transformation at a level of generality which rendered an engagement with local cultural specificities irrelevant. This was mirrored by grand narratives within feminist scholarship itself which attempted to pinpoint universal causes for the subordination of women. The abandonment of such narratives has produced contradictory effects; on the one hand, an emphasis on 'difference' which may potentially degenerate into unprincipled forms of relativism and on the other, more context-dependent and micro-level explanatory frameworks which may potentially yield new ingredients for an 'internal' critique which has tended to elude feminist scholarship in the Middle East. Future research agendas could be productively grounded in the latter tendency.



## *Commentary*

### **Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and the Literature on Palestinian Women**

**Rema Hammami**

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In her paper, Deniz Kandiyoti discussed theoretical developments in feminist scholarship historically and then attempted to situate the literature on Middle Eastern women within this broader academic history. This commentary will attempt to relate some of her insights to the literature on Palestinian women.

Kandiyoti outlined three main periods in the development of Western feminist scholarship which were marked by specific theoretical approaches to the study of "women" and later, "gender." The first period was dominated by the attempt to establish women's studies as an academic discipline and focused on a feminist critique of the major theoretical literature within different academic disciplines. This was followed in the second period by various attempts to actually account for the subordination of women and was marked by the development of a range of feminist theoretical approaches including liberal, Marxist, psychoanalytic, radical feminist and finally, post-structuralist. The third period saw the transition from an unproblematized focus on women to the development of the concept of gender, whereby subordination is viewed not simply as acts directed against women as persons but as a relational process in which gender differences, identities and inequalities are produced through a multiplicity of forces and institutions. In this perspective gender is actually constitutive of other economic and power relations in society.

#### **Phase 1: Combatting Andro-centric Bias in the Palestinian Literature**

What is initially striking when reviewing the literature on Palestinian women through the lens of the development of Western feminist scholarship is that the first period, a feminist critique of the general scholarly and semi-scholarly literature on Palestinian society, economy, history and politics, has not yet occurred within the literature on Palestinian women, or on Palestine in general. Without going into

depth, there are potentially a number of factors that could account for the absence of such a critique. If we use the social science literature as a paramount example, we find first, that there has been, and continues to be, an absence of central "Palestinian" social science texts and especially a lack of theorization in most areas of social science practice.<sup>1</sup> Second, the dominance of the issue of national liberation for the women's movement led to a focus on asserting women's presence in the national struggle. Thus, the minimal academic writing on women tended to center on this issue while simultaneously, the majority of academic women tended to focus their feminist praxis outside of the academic milieu, as activists rather than scholars. Finally, there are a limited number of social scientists in general locally, and women social scientists even more so. A community of discussion and debate about women's issues within academics frameworks is very recent; such a community is a pre-requisite for the building of critical social science discourses. Ultimately, our current "Palestinian Women in Society Project" parallels Kandiyoti's first phase; it is no accident that the first project towards building a local women's studies program begins with a critical review of the literature on Palestinian society and women.

## **Phase 2: Accounting for Women's Subordination in Palestine**

Historically, much of the local feminist literature falls under the second phase of Kandiyoti's schema: attempts to actually account for the subordination of women. However, in the literature on Palestinian women the dominant paradigms have been Marxist and liberal modernization theory with psychoanalytic and radical feminist frameworks being virtually ignored.

Attempts to account for the subordination of women within the local context can be grouped under two topical headings: first, writings which focus directly on the political role of the occupation and women's roles in the national movement and second, writings which focus on issues of political economy and women's integration into wage labor. In the treatment of both topics, the root cause of Palestinian women's subordination is located in the realm of "tradition." However, compounding or mitigating factors are variously attributed to national oppression and/or integration into wage labor.

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<sup>1</sup>. See Salim Tamari's comments in this regard in, "Problems of Social Science Research in Palestine: an Overview," **Current Sociology**, Vol.42, #2, Summer 1994.

## Women and Occupation: National Oppression, National Resistance

The literature on Palestinian women has been dominated by a focus on women's roles in national liberation and the effects of the Israeli military occupation on women's lives. Given the experience of the occupation it is both obvious and reasonable why this has been so. However, this focus has ultimately led to the de-development of other important areas of analysis on gender in the local context. Not surprisingly, in both topical and theoretical approaches, there is little difference between the works written by individuals from inside and outside Palestine.

Works in this area from the early 1980s tend to locate the source of women's oppression in an admixture of traditional society's oppression of women worsened by the experience of the Occupation. The term patriarchy is rarely used although Palestinian "traditional society" is deemed as patriarchal in the anthropological sense. Again, there is little difference in this approach between writers from within Palestine engaged in the women's movement and foreign or outside observers. Most of the papers on Palestinian women delivered in Nairobi at the 1985 United Nations International Decade for Women conference conform to this model.<sup>2</sup>

The starting claim of most of this writing is that Palestinian women suffer under two types of oppression, social and national. While the original source of oppression is society's customs and tradition, the Occupation with its de-development of the whole range of Palestinian institutions, including social services, education and the economy, puts extra burdens on women, who are forced to compensate for the lack of these institutions in society. This means that women do not have the ability to prioritize their struggle as women. Moreover, women who are politically and publicly engaged are harassed and punished by the Occupation forces. Thus, the occupation compounds and extends women's traditional support roles, while at the same time mitigating against their politicization through threat of violence and imprisonment. This paradigm is

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<sup>2</sup>. See for instance: The Association of Women's Committees for Social Work, "Women in Emergency Situations: Palestinian Women Under Occupation," Submitted to the Nairobi conference, Jerusalem, July 1985. In the same vein see: The Palestinian Federation of Women's Action Committees, "The PUWWC's Paper presented at the International Decade for Women in Nairobi," Jerusalem, 1986.

replicated in works written during the same period by women writers living inside or outside Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

However, the majority of these works tend to also claim that the Occupation in some ways creates the context for the possibility of women's liberation through women's participation in nationalist resistance. The national resistance movement offers women the opportunity to break out of traditional norms and patterns (without, however, challenging the overall traditional structure). Through political mobilization and organization into women's committees, women challenge the occupation and simultaneously, their society's perceptions of women's correct "traditional role." As such, much of this writing concludes with a confused optimism. The Occupation oppresses women but it simultaneously creates new spaces for women to challenge "traditional society." The women's committees are here the collective mechanism to utilize and develop the political force of women's activism. However, where the women's committees will take this challenge to social norms is never spelled out, nor is a clear statement made that social transformation is a goal of the women's movement.

There are clearly a number of problems with this overall conceptualization of the sources of women's oppression in Palestine. First of all, while it is generally a relief that in this literature women's oppression is not blamed on religion, there is a clear lack of theorization of concepts such as "norms and traditions" or "traditional society." Many Western writers tend to discuss traditional social forces of oppression in terms of women's roles in *hamula* structures.<sup>4</sup> In the literature by local writers, if norms and traditions are specified, it is usually in terms of women representing "family honor." The problem remains that these overall concepts are not deconstructed, but are simply used in their commonsense usage, uninformed by a questioning of the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. Tradition

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<sup>3</sup>. See for instance: Antonious, Soraya, "Fighting on Two Fronts: Conversations with Palestinian Women," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol.8, No.3, Spring 1979; Abu Daleb, "Palestinian Women and their Role in the Revolution," *Peuples Mediterraneans*, No. 5, October/December 1978; Talhami, Ghada, "Palestinian Women: The Case for Political Liberation," *Arab Perspectives*, Vol. 4, January 1984; Haddad, Yvonne, "Palestinian Women: Patterns of Legitimation and Domination," *The Sociology of the Palestinians*, edited by Khalil Nakhleh and Elia Zureik, Croom Helm, London, 1980.

<sup>4</sup>. For instance this is central to Haddad's analysis (*op.cit.*) A more recent example of this overall genre which puts the *hamula* as the pivotal structure of "traditional society" that institutionalizes the oppression of women can be found in: Warnock, Kitty, *Land Before Honour: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories*, MacMillan, London, 1990.

is seen as certain static beliefs and components of society -- a priori beliefs that seem to have little to do with social or material forces. Nor is it possible, given these conceptualizations, to see traditional practices and discourses as something constructed actively in everyday life by a variety of social groups, representing contending visions of collective identity.

The other problem with this overall literature is that the wider social context of Palestinian society is never drawn out. Thus the internal dynamics of social ideas and political movements are non-existent. The social context for women is composed of oppressive traditions, but those traditions are never put in the context of the larger society. It is the Occupation which produces a national movement, not internal social and political forces. Finally, women seem to simply exchange a set of traditional norms and mores for modern political activism. Thus, women are never really situated in a Palestinian social structure but only within contending sets of ideas which are abstracted from larger social structures.

Finally, a related problem is that the practices of the Occupation and their effects on women are rarely linked to the social dimension of women's oppression. Thus, women are oppressed by traditional society and then separately by the Occupation. Rosemary Sayigh was one of the first writers to attempt to link the two together with the insight that the Occupation may play a role in reproducing women's social oppression through societal demands on women to represent some pure constancy of Palestinian culture unaffected by the culture of the occupiers.<sup>5</sup> *More recently, other writers have developed this insight through analyzing the Occupier's mobilization of indigenous social discourses about the family, religion and culture as a means to control women politically. For instance, the exploitation of the discourses and practices of honor in interrogations of women political prisoners has been clearly documented.*<sup>6</sup> Others have gone on to demonstrate how the transformations of the Occupation have actually created seemingly "traditional" social structures and practices.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>. Sayigh, Rosemary, "Women in Struggle: Palestine," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No.5, October 1983.

<sup>6</sup>. Thornhill, Teresa, "Making Women Talk: The Interrogation of Palestinian Women Detainees by the Israeli General Security Services," *Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights*, London, 1992.

<sup>7</sup>. For works in this genre see: Hammami, Rema, "Women, the Hijab, and the Intifada," *Middle East Report*, no. 164/165, May-August 1990, pp. 24-30; Jad, Islah, "From Salons to Popular Committees: Palestinian Women, 1919-1989," *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, edited by Jamal R. Nassar and Roger Heacock, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1990, pp. 125-142; Jad, Islah

A re-reading of some of the literature on Israeli rule of Palestinians within the Green Line through the mobilization of seemingly traditional structures such as *hamula* and clan might provide a useful starting point for this type of analysis on women under occupation.<sup>8</sup>

### Political Economy Approaches to Palestinian Women

The other type of scholarship that attempts to account for women's subordination in the Palestine context falls under the rubric of studies on women and political economy. In the early 1980s, the Israeli civil administration made claims in international contexts that Israel had helped "modernize" Palestinian women by providing them opportunities to work outside the home in Israeli industry.<sup>9</sup> However, the formative moment of the Palestinian literature on this topic seems to stem from a growing awareness of women engaged in sweatshop-type labor, as well as the attempts to organize them as part of the labor movement.

Theoretically, this literature uses dependency theory frameworks or liberal versions of modernization theory. This reflects the divisions in the wider debates on the transformation of the Palestinian economy that were taking place in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The liberal version of this literature mirrors many of the assumptions underlying the literature on women and national liberation. Thus, "traditional society" remains the root cause of women's oppression. Under occupation, women have been forced into wage labor by the imprisonment of their husbands or by the need to supplement family income. Women are exploited in the wage labor market

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and Hammami, Rema, "Women and Fundamentalist Movements," *News From Within*, (October-November 1992) vol. 8, no. 10/11, pp. 3-6.

<sup>8</sup>. See Lustick, Ian, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1980. Also see, Rosenfeld, Henry, "Men and Women in Arab Peasant to Proletariat Transformation," in *Theory and Practice: Essays Presented to Gene Weltfish*, edited by Stanley Diamond, Mouton, New York, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>See the Israeli paper produced for the United Nations conference in Nairobi by Ethia Simhe, "The Status of Arab Women in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip," Israeli Civil Administration, Jerusalem, 1984, mimeo. The claim was that Israeli "development" of West Bank and Gaza was providing work opportunities for Palestinian women outside the home that liberated women from their traditional seclusion.

(through lack of labor rights, benefits and poor wages). Nonetheless, their entrance into the public sphere, where women workers experience collective oppression, does allow the women's movement, through trade unions, to reach and organize these women. This greater ability to organize working women is also due the heightened consciousness and relative autonomy women gain by being breadwinners. It is important to note that this overall discourse runs counter to Israeli claims that the transformation of the economy liberates women directly. However, contrary to classical modernization theory, there is a confusion about how to approach traditional society. While the literature blames tradition for blocking women's emancipation, there is not a clear call for the destruction of tradition in order for modern women's identities to appear. In fact, modern female identities -- based on individualism and the marketplace, are generally criticized, while the authenticity of women's role as wives, sisters and mothers is valorized.<sup>10</sup>

The other theoretical outlook within the political economy approaches are a group of studies that use neo-Marxist or dependency theory frameworks. These works more systematically theorize the relation between the Palestinian economy's dependence on Israel and how that relation structures female wage labor. As such these works tend to focus on women's role as a reserve labor force, in this instance replacing men's jobs in local industry while men work for higher wages in Israel. The other issue analyzed is that women predominantly work in local workshops that sub-contract to Israeli industry. As such, women wage workers are positioned structurally in ways which reproduce this economy of dependency. In order to control and maintain women within this subordinate labor position, traditional gender discourses are mobilized by local and Israeli capitalists. Women internalize these discourses and thus accept exploitative wages and work conditions and do not show signs of the hoped-for militant consciousness that would allow for their being organized for either labor, women's or national rights.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>.For examples of this overall approach see: Rimawi, Amal, "Peoples' Activities and Trade Union Work: A Personal Account," **Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience**, edited by Ebba Augustin, Zed Books, London, 1993. Also see, Lajnat al 'Amal al Nisa'i, "Hawl awda' al mar'a al Filastiniyya fi al Manatiq al Muhtalla: Dirasa Maydaniyya," Ramallah, 1980.

<sup>11</sup>. For works in this genre see the following: Rockwell, Susan, "Palestinian Women Workers in the Israeli-Occupied Gaza Strip." Bachelor's Thesis, Harvard/Radcliffe Universities, Cambridge, Mass, 1984. Samed, Amal, "The Proletarianization of Palestinian Women in Israel," **MERIP Reports** (August), no. 50, 1976, pp. 3-8; Siniora, Randa George, "Palestinian Labor in a Dependent

While this literature lays to rest the claims of women's liberation arising from their integration into wage labor, it still does not problematize women and tradition in ways substantially different from the liberal paradigms. Women's traditional roles in subsistence agriculture are usually mentioned only in passing. But tradition only appears in the guise of discourses which attempt to maintain women's identities as economic dependents as opposed to instrumental economic actors. Thus while this local literature clearly reaches out to the feminist theorizations on women in the international division of labor, it ignores the historical dimension of those theorizations when it treats women in the local context.<sup>12</sup>

The exception within the women and dependency theory literature in terms of historicization of women's labor is the work of Annelies Moors.<sup>13</sup> In her analysis of the changing role of dowry payments since the turn of the century, Moors is able to show the changing productive roles of peasant women within various historical moments in the transformation of the Palestinian political economy. As such she is able to go beyond the general typification of a static traditional society transformed by the Occupation to a deeper analysis of peasant social and economic relations and their historical transformation. The social history of peasant women's labor and property relations is then analyzed in this context - making clear that 'traditional' roles and discourses of and about women were much more complex and subtle than any of the literature on Palestinian women would have us believe.

Moors's work clearly shows how fruitful a concrete historical analysis of women in peasant social and production relations can be in problematizing the meaning of "tradition" beyond the facile way it has been treated in the literature on Palestinian women. It is only once feminist writers have dealt with the actual context and relations which produce specific discourses and practices of the

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Economy: The Case of Women in the Sub-Contracting Clothing Industry in the West Bank." Master's thesis, American University of Cairo, Cairo, 1987.

<sup>12</sup>. The major sources on the international division of labor cited by these writers are Mies, Maria, **The Lace Makers of Narsipur**, Zed Press, London, 1982 and Mies, Maria, **Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale; Women in the International Division of Labour**, Zed Books, London, 1986.

<sup>13</sup>. Moors, Annelies, "Gender Hierarchy in a Palestinian Village: the Case of Al-Balad," in **The Rural Middle East: Peasant Lives and Modes of Production**, edited by Kathy and Pandeli Glavanis, Zed Press, London, 1990, pp. 195-210. Also see Moors, "Women and Property: A Historical-Anthropological Study of Women's Access to Property Through Inheritance, the Dower and Labor in Jabal Nablus, Palestine." Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 1990, Amsterdam.



female in Palestinian society that the role of tradition, culture and the social can be clearly understood.

### **Phase III: From Women to Gender in Palestine**

Kandiyoti's third phase in the development of feminist theory in the West was marked by the move from positing "women" as the central object of study to its replacement by the concept of "gender."

In the local context "gender" was introduced in the guise of gender awareness courses or gender training within the women's NGO sector over the last four years. Most of these courses were roughly based on training manuals or courses originally produced by international organizations in or for other Third World contexts. The acceptance of these foreign organizations' treatment of gender in the local context also expresses the extent to which Palestinian NGOs have become integrated into the wider networks and discourses of Third World NGO movements. However, the term "gender" has yet to find an appropriate Arabic translation.

This introduction of the term through NGOs rather than through academic writing has played an important role in shaping the way that "gender" has come to be used and understood locally. "Gender" was quickly and unproblematically adopted by the Palestinian women's movement at the same time that movement's *historic lack of a social program for women (versus a nationalist agenda)* had resulted in the easy accomplishment of social backlash against women's rights. While this backlash was spearheaded by Islamicists, it was clear that some sectors of the national movement passively supported it, while others simply ignored it. The women's movement, (factional activists as well as independent NGOs) realized it was necessary to work on women's issues as women's issues, and attempt to mobilize women around their shared oppression as women. "Gender" awareness became perceived as the appropriate method within a general craze for training occurring simultaneously.

However, "gender" was and is used as equivalent to "women" as a unitary category focusing on women's rights or lack of them. In practice, gender training focused on women's oppression and how women could liberate themselves through a knowledge of their rights. As such, "gender" was de-linked from the theoretical framework in which it was developed, leaving behind much of its usefulness in understanding the way that wider social, institutional and discursive processes produce male versus female identities. This "womanization" of gender

also excluded the crucial dimension of power. The production, authorization and reproduction of gendered subjectivities takes place within specific relations of power. Knowing one's rights or becoming aware that one is lacking rights is very far from the ability to understand how the whole range of institutional, discursive and social practices produce and authorize those lack of rights. It is even further from being able to change the power relations that maintain these overall institutional arrangements.

On the positive side, this local conception of "gender" has shifted attention to a number of key issues. Recently, issues such as educational curriculum, legal literacy and reform, and the family as a site of violence against women as opposed to the sacred frontline of women's national resistance, are being addressed. This implies that there is a growing awareness of the variety of institutional forms through which "women" subjects are produced. It also implies that women are no longer simply being treated as empirical objects whose numbers in or out of the workforce, politics, prison, university, or **Shari'a** courts is the issue. What is now on the agenda is to analyze how these institutions actually produce discourses and practices that shape female subjectivity.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the importance of *Kandiyoti's* call for more context-dependent studies on the production of gendered subjectivities through focusing on the institutions, discourse, and practices through which they are produced. In the different sectors of the Palestinian Women and Society Project, what does this type of approach mean for the analysis of existing literature? Ultimately, how can we use this approach to develop new ways of understanding economic practices, education, religion, national identity and the production of culture?

**Commentary**  
**"Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Research on Palestinian Society"**

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Deniz Kandiyoti's paper was presented at the introductory session of the workshop held in November 1994 by the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University. The aim of the session as well as the workshop as a whole was to review major developments and debates in feminist scholarship in order to situate the Program's Palestinian Women in Society (PWIS) research project within trends in feminist scholarship. The provisional theoretical framework which had guided the initial identification of research questions was informed by some of the questions posed and categories of analysis employed in the last two decades by feminist scholars. Our initial premise is that the bulk of scholarship on Palestine has not taken gender into account. The challenge which the project faces, therefore, is to contribute to the legitimization of gender analysis within scholarship on Palestine by introducing into it the basic concepts and analytic frameworks of feminist scholarship. One of the major contributions of feminist scholarship is the simple proposition that like social class, race, ethnicity, and other bases of social differentiation, gender is an important category both in the constitution and in the analysis of the social order. Given the intellectual and political climate within which much of the scholarship on Palestine has been produced, and to which Rema Hammami has referred in her commentary, this theoretical point of departure will require a sustained scholarly effort before it can make any significant inroads into academic and policy discourse in and about Palestine.

Deniz Kandiyoti's paper was a sobering statement on the long way scholarship on Middle Eastern societies has to traverse. Her observation about the historical relationship between feminism and nationalism in the Middle East was most relevant to the state of scholarship on women in Palestine. Here, as in other (post-colonial)

Middle Eastern societies Kandiyoti refers to, the concerns around the effects of imperialism have also discouraged a systematic exploration of the local institutions and processes implicated in the production of gender hierarchies and forms of subordination based on gender. The challenge which faces feminist scholarship in Palestine is to go beyond the conceptualization of the colonial situation as a unitary, fixed, and static reality producing uni-dimensional, fixed, and predictable outcomes, and to identify the many ways in which the Israeli occupation and internal social processes and forces interact to generate unpredicted processes and dynamics. These constantly emergent realities demand description and analysis; Rema Hammami has identified some of the questions that need study in her commentary here.

Kandiyoti's periodization of feminist scholarship stimulated workshop participants to consider how to locate work on Palestine within past and current trends in this scholarship, and in particular, to identify which approach best characterizes the Women in Society project. Regarding our project, it is tempting to say initially that we are firmly anchored in the third phase, that is, viewing all aspects of society, culture, and relationship as gendered. The adoption of gender as the main analytical category is evident from our research strategy, which is to review and assess works on Palestinian society and not only Palestinian women. Upon further reflection, however, it becomes clear that we are also engaged in analysis attributed to the two earlier phases, namely combatting androcentric bias and accounting for the subordination of women. That this should be the case is in fact a feature of the third phase: it assumes and is based upon the developments of the first two phases; in other words, what we in fact have is a continuum, along which we can locate concepts and analytic categories as they emerged and were defined and redefined. What makes our work unique is the intellectual context in which the literature we are reviewing is situated; Kandiyoti has observed that the shift from studying women to gender has not yet made any significant inroads into Middle Eastern studies, not to mention the fact that the task of combatting androcentric bias and accounting for the subordination of women also suffers from some serious shortcomings in works on the Middle East.

Briefly, then, what we are engaged in is trying to "catch up" with contemporary feminist scholarship by addressing in our work concerns which may perhaps have been dealt with and considered exhausted by feminists working in the context of Western society. However, it should be pointed out that accounting for women's

subordination or marginalization, for example, can still be viewed as the central task of the "new" feminist scholarship on gender, by virtue of its insistence that all aspects of social existence are gendered, as when Joan Scott (quoted by Kandiyoti) observes that what studying gender means is asking "what the comparative location and activities of men and women reveal about each other, and what representations of sexual difference suggest about the structure of social, economic and political authority." It is evident from such a study, we can assume, that we are to discover how men and women's differential location and activities reveal inequalities and asymmetries to women's disadvantage, and that the representations of sexual difference almost always suggest that social, economic and political authority is hierarchically structured, marginalizing and disadvantaging women. Finally, we should also keep in mind that we are talking about trends in feminist scholarship, a scholarship which does not appear to have abandoned its intellectual and political agenda of serving women's interests.

More concretely, we can benefit from Kandiyoti's identification of openings for what she calls gender-aware research on Middle Eastern societies, considering advances in feminist scholarship on the one hand and being mindful of the gender-poverty of much of the existing research on the other. Here, she has delineated three "waves" of scholarship on women in the Middle East, namely, feminism and nationalism, the rise of social science paradigms and developmentalism, and dialogues within feminism. In the coming fourth wave, Kandiyoti proposes a research agenda focusing on detailed analyses of the different institutional realms through which gender hierarchies are reproduced.

It may be useful to pause here and relate some of the concepts associated with the different "waves" of scholarship and advocacy in the Middle East to academic and political discourse in Palestine. As I have already referred to the problematic of feminism/nationalism already, I shall confine my comments to the impact of social science paradigms, notably modernization theory, and the liberal feminist approach.

The modernization paradigm continues to cast a heavy shadow over writings and advocacy on women in Palestine. I refer here to the implicit adoption of this framework by those who view Palestinian society in terms of the traditional/modern dichotomy and who stress the importance of overcoming traditional attitudes and practices as a prerequisite for gender equality. The pervasiveness of this approach can be discerned on many levels: in the discourse of the women's movement, in

reports and programs prepared by international agencies, and in the plethora of "studies" about Palestinian women by Palestinian and foreign writers alike. Parenthetically, it should be noted that challenging this deep-seated--and in essence commonsense--perspective in university-level teaching in the social sciences and humanities is a daunting task. My experience in driving home a simple point made by Halim Barakat<sup>1</sup> concerning the problem of attributing the subordination of women to immutable cultural traditions has been less than satisfactory.

The liberal feminist approach with its emphasis on removing obstacles to gender equality in areas such as health, education, political participation, and legal status has also made its impact on research and advocacy on Palestine. This approach made its appearance in Palestine at about the same time that "gender" became a main referent in feminist discourse in Palestine. Encouraged by international aid agencies and propelled by their own search for an effective women's agenda, Palestinian women activists and some academics began the task of identifying the obstacles in these various areas, by and large ignoring the larger social context within which detrimental practices or institutional structures were located and in which they operated. Rema Hammami's comments regarding campaigns to raise women's awareness of their rights within the law address this issue, particularly her comment that becoming aware of one's rights is very far from analyzing why one is deprived of these rights or how to change the power relations that maintain the structures which perpetuate gender inequality. The liberal feminist approach is also reflected in current campaigns to encourage women's participation in the political process. The identification of "governance" as the "foremost policy issue" for Palestinian women in a document produced by a major international organization (UNDP)<sup>2</sup> and some Palestinian women's organizations is a further example of this trend both in international aid and in the thinking of some sectors of the Palestinian women's movement.

Kandiyoti's proposal of a research agenda focusing on "detailed analyses of the different institutional realms through which gender hierarchies are reproduced" is a fruitful one in our context. The identification of social institutions as a relevant focus

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<sup>1</sup> Barakat, Halim, "The Social Order and its Relation to the Problem of Arab Women," Al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi, No. 34 (December 1981), pp. 51-63 (in Arabic).

<sup>2</sup> Hamadeh-Banarjee, et. al., At the Crossroads: Challenges and Choices for Palestinian Women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, United Nations Development Programme, New York, 1994.

for scholarship is in line with the original conceptualization of the Palestinian Women in Society project, although that was not as clearly articulated then as it may be now. By choosing to focus on the educational system, the family and kinship structures, quasi-state bureaucracies, and economic institutions, we implicitly assumed that these were the social locations where gender hierarchies were created and reproduced, and that we needed to ascertain the extent to which current scholarship on Palestine took cognizance of it. Kandiyoti's further identification of cultural practices and discourses which shape gendered identities is also consistent with our original conceptualization of the project, which aimed at assessing *if and how studies of Palestinian society* focused on how practices and belief systems shaped gender identities and the conceptualization and assignment of gender roles.

The Palestinian Women in Society project undertaken by the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University comes at a time when the need for understanding the context and modalities of women's current realities is becoming more pressing. We hope that through this effort we can contribute to the emerging debate within academic, activist, and policy circles by identifying research and policy priorities.

## WOMEN'S STUDIES PROGRAM AT BIRZEIT UNIVERSITY

### *Teaching \* Research \* Community Outreach*

The launching of Women's Studies at Birzeit University comes at a critical time, as Palestinian women, as well as Palestinian society as a whole, seek to address a complex range of social, economic and political issues. Understanding gender relations in Palestinian society, analyzing and debating key social issues facing society, and developing effective gender-aware policies require a comprehensive and sustained initiative. The Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University aims to contribute to this effort through an innovative teaching program, systematic and directed research on gender relations in Palestinian and Arab society, and an active community outreach program.

**Teaching:** Women's Studies is a Program within Birzeit University's Faculty of Arts; the Program currently offers a minor in Women's Studies. Teaching began in the 1994-1995 academic year. The Program has developed an interdisciplinary core curriculum of eleven courses, among them Introduction to Women's Studies, Women and Development, Women and the Law, Women in Arab Society, the History of Women's Movements, Gender and Discourse, and Women and the Family.

**Research:** The Women's Studies Program aims to facilitate research on Palestinian women, both through instituting its own research projects and through collecting archival materials and offering services to other researchers. In September 1994, the Program launched an extensive collaborative research project on "Palestinian Women in Society," which aims to produce a gender-informed assessment of the existing state of research in four areas of Palestinian society and social policy relevant to women: education, social entitlements, economy and culture and society. The research project aims to develop research and action strategies that reflect and promote women's needs, interests and rights in the emerging public debate on the future of Palestinian society.

**Community Outreach:** In addition to its scholarly and academic objectives, the Women's Studies Program aims to develop avenues to empower Palestinian women through a community outreach program in conjunction with the expanding network of Palestinian women's institutions, as well as to contribute to gender-informed public and institutional policies that recognize and secure the economic, social and political rights of all citizens. Current plans include a systematic assessment, from a gender perspective, of training programs in Palestine, and groundwork for gender planning training in selected key institutions and locales.

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