

Commentary
**International Aid, Women's Interests, and the
Depoliticization of Women**

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In Eileen Kuttab's commentary, she notes the importance of nationalism in determining specific types of discourses on gender and development. One of the main points of her presentation pertains to the limitation of the WID/WAD/GAD theoretical constructs in bringing about an understanding of gender in situations of political conflict and war. The GAD (Gender and Development) framework is certainly an improvement over the earlier WID and WAD approaches, offering the possibility to incorporate issues such as North-South relations, ethnicity and class into the wider debate. Moreover, it provides potentially useful tools for analysis, including such key concepts as strategic/practical gender interests and women's triple role, and the market/household/state matrix. However, GAD does not adequately deal with women in situations of war or national struggle, and, as suggested in Valentine Moghadam's paper, it also lacks an adequate theorization of class when in fact, gender intersects with class and ethnicity to determine access to resources and power. At the more practical level, Palestinian women at the receiving end of these discourses seem to have accessed a giant tool box of concepts. While some concepts seem appropriate and others not, what is really needed is an overall conceptual construct linking gender relations to the national struggle.

In fact, the GAD framework has not as yet been applied by international aid agencies in the Palestinian context. Instead, we appear to lag behind the world, with international aid agencies generally continuing to use the older policy approaches to gender and development. On the whole, the agencies use either the welfare or equity approaches, and to a lesser extent, the empowerment approach which has been adopted by European NGOs working in this area, such as NOVIB and OXFAM. With the recent and increasing involvement of the World Bank in the area, the anti-poverty and efficiency approaches have emerged as major policy frameworks of development in the area. However, the World Bank does not seem to have developed a policy approach to gender in the local context. Even worse, judging from its recently published reports on Palestine, its policies appear to be completely gender blind.

Although WID/WAD/GAD models are preferable to these older approaches, they still remain gravely deficient in addressing the specificities of the Palestinian context. The national struggle has had an important impact on the women's movement as well as on gender relations in both positive and negative ways. Because of the national struggle, women were prompted and received social sanction to move beyond the domestic sphere and participate actively in the political struggle. The move of women into public political life often occurred in ways understood as an extension of their domestic responsibilities: assisting men, husbands and sons in fulfilling political agendas primarily determined by males. However, many women went beyond the assigned boundaries, ultimately producing what is now recognized as a Palestinian feminist consciousness.

The main tenets of this consciousness rest on an embryonic analysis of power relations in politics and in society, and in particular a growing refusal to accept gender hierarchies as natural and given. This refusal has been deeply influenced by political activism. Women political activists gradually developed an awareness of entrenched gender bias within the nationalist movement by virtue of their experience within organizations dominated by men. At the same time, they gradually accepted the need to include discussions of "social issues" (or gender inequities and discrimination in society) within the nationalist discourse, by virtue of a long and protracted debate among activists, Palestinian nationalist feminist scholars, professionals, and advocates. This consciousness offers the needed space for discussions of key issues such as the way in which society is organized in determining gender relations in Palestinian society today. The terms of this discussion are rooted in what is called "distributive justice," and locally includes such factors as the inseparability and articulation of the national struggle; the globalization and entry of Palestine into the world market; and the analysis of development strategies within the framework of this globalization and their impact on women. While such constructions are far from adequately theorized, they nevertheless offer the necessary space to further develop crucial issues that the WID/WAD/GAD frameworks have not adequately addressed.

As has been noted, proponents of WID/WAD/GAD include advocates (feminists), practitioners (international aid agencies), and scholars. Since international aid today is unfortunately one of the main determinants of the nature and course of the Palestinian path to "development" and sets the terms of the policy-making discourse, the following analysis will focus on it, rather than on the local practitioners. More important, it is becoming clear that neither GAD, nor even WID and WAD, are being employed by these agencies as principal theoretical

constructs informing the conceptualization or implementation of projects. Indeed, there is an urgent need for increasing the active involvement of scholars and advocates in critically assessing present international aid development policies and practices at the local level. It is crucial that we develop conceptual frameworks and analyses in order to address fundamental issues raised by the current approaches of these aid agencies in the local context. One such critical issue is the way in which their policies for women tend to ignore the larger context of power relations within which social relations operate-- a phenomenon that has been called "the de-politicization of women's experience". Also, in urgent need of attention is the wide range of social and political problems which will inevitably arise as a result of the process of Palestine's integration into the global market.

A principal concern here is that international practitioners de-politicize women's experience of development and politics, through focusing on women in isolation from their relationship with men, by excluding the social context of women's reproductive responsibilities, and finally by ignoring women's positions in class and other hierarchies. And this tendency to de-politicize women's experience seems to exist regardless of the theoretical model that is utilized to develop policies. The Occupied Territories continue to lag behind the world in terms of international aid approaches to development and women, with the welfare policy model still widely used in this country today. It was only recently (perhaps within the last three to four years) that the equity approach was introduced in the local context, despite the fact that globally it predominated from 1975 to 1985 due to the ascendancy of WAD in that period. In fact, it was only within the last four years that academics and practitioners in the local context even became aware of the theoretical debates around WID or WAD or GAD.

Another example of the time lag between ongoing global development debates and the context of the Occupied Territories was the experience of the anti-poverty approach to development. This approach, which held sway globally in the 1970s as part of WID, was only programmatically adopted in the latter 1980s by aid agencies operating locally who made "small productive projects for women" a principal domain of their activities. As elsewhere in the developing world, and with a few exceptions, such projects were supported in terms of their "usefulness" for development, understood in male terms rather than being conceived in terms of women's empowerment. Such projects were generally developed in a political vacuum; as such they failed to recognize the fact that women's work outside the home is under-valued, simply because they are women. As Eileen Kuttab's presentation makes clear, they failed to recognize the pivotally important notion

that women within these projects were responding to national political agendas and not solely to women's needs and interests, precisely because activist women were enmeshed in a specific power relation with men. The international agencies' exclusion of this political context--in which men dictate action and women execute--assured the failure of such projects from the outset.

Following the period of micro-level income generating projects, there were the subsequent waves of varying strategies and priorities identified by international aid for Palestinian women and Palestinian development. This was partly a manifestation of the recent globalization of the area, but was predominantly propelled by the peace negotiations. The dominant assumption was that the military occupation and Israel's economic and political control over the area (the two faces of control) was ending. In contrast, Palestinian lived experience thus far indicates that military occupation and Israel's control over the area continues and will continue for a while to come--despite peace negotiations and despite the gradual handing over of very limited authority to the Palestinians. This effectively means the incorporation of the area into the global economy in a subservient position. That is to say, this is a secondary or sub-incorporation in which Israel is the direct global partner and its political and economic interests in the area shape the form of the relationship. Thus, while women's experience is largely depoliticized in the programmatic agendas of international aid, these same agencies direct and implement policies which contain within them larger geo-political agendas, though often hidden, that have an important bearing on gender relations in Palestinian society. For example, in 1994 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) allotted \$23 million (US) towards the "rehabilitation" of the health care system in the occupied territories, a system which plays a crucial role in fulfilling the practical as well as the strategic needs of women. Recently USAID decided unilaterally that the grant would no longer be used to support the health sector. Instead, the funding has now been channeled towards building industrial border zones--a means, among other purposes, to ensure Israel's economic interests. These industrial zones allow Israel to continue employing low-paid Palestinian wage labor under subhuman conditions, while minimizing the political risk of violence against Israelis entailed in the movement of Palestinian labor into Israeli territory. Moreover, while such an arrangement ensures the interests of Israeli capital, it simultaneously offers a palliative solution to the severe unemployment crisis that has hit the West Bank and Gaza Strip and that threatens to undermine the "political stability" of the area.

Within the same period that aid was being directed away from health and into industrial zones, we find that "gender consciousness raising" suddenly became the main strategy aimed at liberating poor peasant women, urban women, women in politics and women from different classes. How gender is conceptualized in these awareness raising models is extremely problematic. In the current approach of these programs, the focus is on changing "women," rather than understanding and changing the context within which women can change. Moreover, a variety of key issues are fundamentally excluded from the overall conceptualization such as the meaning of consciousness in gender relational terms; whether gender consciousness is autonomous or embedded in a material context; and which structures and institutions determine how consciousness is structured. Moreover, issues of how to apply these gender awareness approaches to the local context seem to have been deferred. Thus questions such as *who should be the target of this sensitization, in what particular context, and what are the structural changes needed to assist in creating change of consciousness* have not been raised.

As a result of this de-politicization and de-contextualization of issues, donor-led programs to "sensitize poor rural women" were launched, without awareness of the futility of raising this consciousness out of context, and also without allowing women the means through which to exercise this consciousness for their own benefit. Simply stated, what good is it to raise the consciousness of poor rural women in order to encourage them to claim their rightful inheritance under Islamic *shari'a* laws if every structure, custom, and norm of behavior and control dictates that by doing so they would lose their entire network of social and familial support, and indeed, livelihood? In such a context, to unproblematically promote the idea that rural women should demand what has been denied them through the exercise of power relations within the household, the community, and society, is farcical. The problem here is not gender sensitization per se; if applied properly and directed at specific groups, such as policy-makers, the approach can be very useful. In other words, the approach is useful but only if those who are the target of sensitization **have the power to change**.

Thus the problem here lies in the application of a strategy out of context and without regard to the constraints of power relations. The fact is that women act within the context of serious gender inequalities. The various formal and informal social and economic structures which maintain these inequalities result in making it impossible, as in the preceding example, for rural women to claim inheritance in the face of communal isolation and the loss of support from the family.

Another recent wave of donor-led, and at best mis-applied, policy

approaches to women's liberation comes in the form of so-called "family planning" programs. Here, the approaches range between "family planning to reduce maternal death and contribute to family well being" to more radical approaches of the right of women to control their own bodies and the improvement of reproductive health for women. Although these programs come couched in different types of terminologies, like sugar coating a bitter pill, they all share the same hidden agenda. Simply stated, the basic aim of every single family planning program (regardless of its packaging) is "population control" as a means to assist in solving the developmental problems of the area. Thus, uncontrolled population growth is identified as the key cause of underdevelopment and of all the environmental and ecological problems that the world faces today. Once again, the theoretical underpinnings of such policies appear to partially stem from the efficiency approach, where, as Valentine Moghadam made clear, "stabilization and adjustment rely on women's economic contributions to development," and where fertility control becomes an essential ingredient in the recipe of incorporating women into the labor market and reducing developmental problems emanating out of over-population. As others have noted before, this approach fails to challenge the fundamental traditional role of women as being primarily responsible for reproductive labor. It also fails to recognize the context in which fertility decisions are made, as well as gender inequality and the various social and economic structures which maintain it. The failure of such approaches have been the subject of myriad critiques internationally, which however, seem to have been largely ignored by the policy makers.

In the Palestinian context an additional bitter experience unfolds with the introduction of contraceptive devices such as Depo Provera, which have been the subject of critical international inquiries regarding their safety for wide use, especially in countries where the very notion of informed consent is still virtually unknown for men, let alone women. In our context, as in others, the large majority of clinics have yet to develop protocols for risk factor identification or even patient files adequate enough to allow for rational and professional judgement of whether it is suitable for a woman to take such a contraceptive with minimal risk to her health and life. The bitterness of this experience is compounded by the fact that those in charge of these programs, unwilling to accommodate the critical questions raised by some Palestinian women, relegate such inquiries to the realm of the "extreme," thus isolating what are actually informed concerns from the "mainstream" pre-determined process of agency agendas. Ironically, this is happening at a time where, increasingly, family planning is becoming a priority

issue for the Palestinian women's movement--albeit from a totally different perspective. Valentine Moghadam calls such a perspective one of "control over life's options," while in local discourse it is understood as the right to choose one's family size based on the socio-economic realities within which individual families live.

In the current context, Palestinians are largely experiencing international aid as a crushing wheel rather than an enabling gateway to development. Huge amounts of aid are being poured into an extremely resource-constrained environment, and in a situation where local forces find themselves unable to develop a strategy in response. Neither the PNA nor the democratic NGO movement (the main political framework of the women's movement) have developed a vision of what kind of society Palestinians should build for themselves. In the absence of an indigenous vision and a national resource base, it becomes clear why various ministries easily succumb to both aid money, and with it, aid agency agendas. Aid-propelled projects which are currently being swallowed whole will in the near future come to distort our society and its gender relations further, and women most likely will bear the brunt.

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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