

# REVIEW OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

# 5

## Focus on Gaza

**War Diary from Khan Younis:  
"My life is not my life"**

*Majeda Al Saqqa*

**Negotiating Survival:  
The Impact of Israeli Mobility Restrictions  
on Women in Gaza**

*Aitemad Muhanna and Elena Qleibo*

**Voices from Another War:  
Refugee Women in Gaza Tell of War and Survival  
in 1948 and its Aftermath**

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**Osama's Daughters:  
Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism,  
and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11**

*Nadine Naber*

**Palestinian Women's Organizations:  
Global Cooption & Local Contradiction**

*Eileen Kuttab*

**Rethinking Agency:  
Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival  
and the Feminist Subject***

*Lena Meari*

Institute of Women's Studies



BIRZEIT UNIVERSITY

# REVIEW OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

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*An annual review of women's  
and gender studies*

**Institute of Women's Studies**

**Birzeit University**

Editors:  
Amira Silmi (Arabic)  
Penny Johnson (English)  
Editorial Committee: Islah Jad, Rema Hammami, Eileen Kuttab

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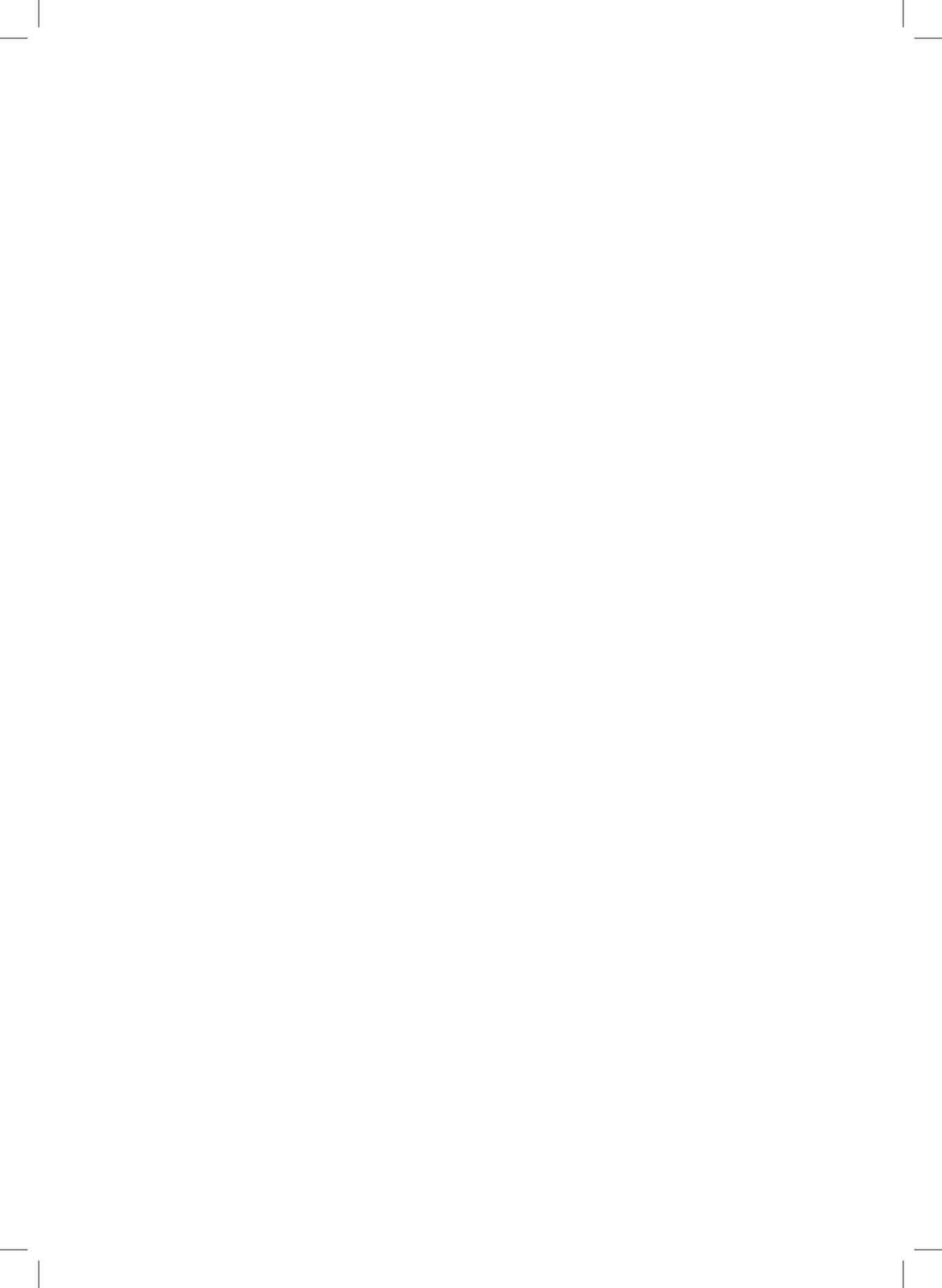
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# INTRODUCTION

When the Institute of Women's Studies launched its first undergraduate course in 1996, there was already an absence on campus — the Israeli occupation's increasing restrictions on the mobility of Gazan students had already led to a sharp decline in their ability to study at Birzeit University. In the 1980s, Gazans made up about one-quarter of the student body and the exchange among students from various locales in the West Bank and Gaza enriched campus life and students' understanding of their society. By 2000, there were only 350 students from Gaza at the University and by 2005 less than forty. Despite a number of human rights campaigns focusing on the right to education — which continue to this day — the Israel occupation's regime of spatial segregation, with its checkpoints, permits, barriers and borders has forced Palestinian students, teachers and researchers to be divided from themselves.

Even before Israel's continuing siege of Gaza and the January 2009 aggression, the consequences of the separation of the West Bank and Gaza for Palestinian education were dire. Research cannot be conducted in enclaves; Gaza students need to expand their horizons whether through study in the West Bank or abroad; researchers and institutions need to interact. Among the consequences, the Institute of Women's Studies also lost some of its outstanding graduate students and the students lost their opportunity to pursue the only advanced degree in gender and development in Palestine.

In the aftermath of Israel's war on Gaza, the losses for higher education are of a much greater magnitude, including the physical destruction of Gazan educational institutions. Among the multiple war crimes committed by Israeli forces during their brutal war was the bombing of two main buildings of the Islamic University of Gaza, containing 74 science and engineering labs. Total damage to post-secondary institutions is estimated at about 21 million dollars and fourteen of 15 higher education institutions in Gaza have been damaged. At present, university officials report many students unable to register for the new semester due to lack of funds, trauma and displacement. And a full generation of students in Gaza have been denied the ability to use their hard-won scholarships to study abroad. The *Review*

*of Women's Studies* urges its readers to work for the right for education of Gazans and an end to the Israeli occupation's punitive and illegal siege.

This issue of the *Review* has a special focus on Gaza in its English section, including the war diary of Majeda Al Saqqa, a colleague living and working in Khan Yunis, Gaza, researchers Aetimad Mohanna and Elana Qleibo's insights into the effects of the siege on Gazan women and girls, and an excerpt from Rema Hammami's doctoral thesis which examines how women refugees in Gaza contributed to family survival in the wake of the 1948 nakba. We also welcome into our pages Nadine Naber, whose analysis of the intersectionality of gender, race and class oppression of Arab and Muslim Americans in the wake of 2001 broadens our own horizons both theoretically and empirically. Eileen Kuttab's analysis placing the dilemmas facing the Palestinian women's movement within the global dynamics of empire, and Lena Miari's thoughtful review of an important new book by Saba Mahmoud also expands our understanding of the complex times in which we live.

In the Arabic section, we are pleased to feature Lila Abu Lughod's incisive analysis of the *2005 Arab Human Development Report: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, with responses by the co-editor of the Report, Islah Jad, as well as Amira Silmi and Eileen Kuttab. The section also includes a contribution one of the the Institute's master's students, Ziad Yaish, who discusses the contradictions resulting from having a dual legal system in Arabic societies including Palestine by comparing the newly proposed Palestinian personal status law to the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Abla Abu Ilbeh, a co-researcher in a project on the Palestinian women's movement carried out by the Institute of Women's Studies, contributes an article on the changes that took place in the Palestinian women's movement in the Arab countries hosting the Palestinian refugees after the signing of the Oslo agreement in 1993 and the return of the Palestinian leadership to the occupied territories in 1994.

Mahmud Yazbek, from Haifa University, contributes an article on strategies used by minor wives to rid themselves from an undesired marriage. Yazbek's article gives interesting insights on contradictions of modernity in the Palestinian society by showing how modernity put an end to minor marriages while at the same time imposing restrictions on women's sexuality.

The Institute of Women's Studies mourns the loss of Maha Nassar, a graduate of the Institute's master's program and an activist and leader whose record in promoting both women's and national rights is memorialized in a contribution to this issue by Rula Abu Dahu. Maha's courage in facing her illness matched her courage in the rest of her life and work, whether during imprisonment by the Israeli occupation or in her untiring mobilization for national and women's liberation.

*The Editors*  
*April 2009*

# ARTICLES

## FOCUS ON GAZA

## War Diary from Khan Younis: “My life is not my life”

**Majeda Al Saqqa**

*Many of us in the West Bank spent the terrible days of the war on Gaza seeking (and fearing) news, whether from television, the internet, friends and strangers. When we opened up the email and saw a heading “snippets from Khan Yunis from Majeda,” a click brought the distinctive voice of Majeda Al Saqqa, long-time activist, a lover of her hometown Khan Yunis and a community worker on its behalf. Majeda is a strategist, always seeking to expand the horizons of Palestinian activism, in particular women’s participation and women’s health and well-being. As her diary shows, she is also a devoted daughter – and an even more devoted aunt to her young nephews and niece. Her diary, written while the war was waged around her, is excerpted here with Majeda’s kind permission. Readers around the world have responded to excerpts from her diary published in numerous languages and a variety of media. The diary offers a window into the world of war as experienced by Gazan women and their families – the shrinkage of life into domestic space, the endless strategizing to protect children physically and psychologically, the perils and joys of daily survival. Besieged in her home, Majeda reaches out to find out the welfare of friends and relatives in all of Gaza’s danger zones; she observes herself changing and struggling, despondent and resilient, afraid and conquering fear, if even for a moment when a silent mobile rings. When we asked Majeda if she would write a postscript, she only said: “Just remember to say I am from Khan Yunis.”*

*Majeda Al Saqqa is director of public relations and deputy general director for Khan Yunis’s Culture and Free Thought Association. She has a master’s degree in anthropology of media from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).*

**27 December, 2008**

I had a strong feeling that the Israelis would attack over the Christmas holidays. I know deep in my heart that the neither EU governments nor the USA will care much about responding. But I also know that the Israelis will calculate to commit their massacres when they have more time. But I didn't imagine for a second it would be like this. At around 11 or 11:30 am, I felt like an earthquake hit Khan Younis with sounds I'd never, ever heard before — not even when the Israeli occupation forces used sonic booms a few years ago.

The first thing that came to my heart was my mother, sisters and the kids at school and kindergarten. I rushed down the steps, faster than the sounds I was hearing. Looked into my sister's eyes, looked into my mother's eyes and, in no time, I ran towards the steps into the garden to go get the kids from kindergarten and school... The kids were scared and talking about the huge sound which they didn't understand. Wael, my 4-year-old nephew didn't understand a thing — he didn't even know that Israel exists.

Now he knows. All of them do.

The whole family didn't know what to do, so we all gathered in the garden. Last time the Israelis attacked, our windows crashed in over our heads and some doors were broken. This time the shelling is stronger, so the best solution seems to be, to stay out in the open.

All of that and the noise of the bombing continues, there's smoke

around us everywhere and the smell of shelling is back to pollute our life one more time.

I was trying for over an hour to call my brother and his family in Gaza city to know that he was safe. Landline and mobile lines were out of service! After an hour we managed to get hold of one of them — my nephew Azzam. He tells me that he's safe at one of the shelters in the UN compound in Gaza. It's the first time I hear that shelters even exist in Gaza! Later, we discovered that the bombing happened at the same time in all of Gaza Strip. How lucky my family and I are because we are not among the scores of people killed in the first 5 minutes of the attack! We are *lucky*, we really are!!!

For the past 20 days we haven't had cooking gas. Last month my cousin gave us his extra 6 kg to use. This morning, on Black Saturday, the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, 2008, we managed to get some cooking gas from the black market which I have been trying to avoid all my life. At 5 pm I felt it was safe to take the cooking gas cylinder to my cousin's house because the shelling had stopped. The house is only 5 minutes away from us by car. The kids insisted to come and they started to cry, so I took them with me. We drove in a loop around the house and entered the street from behind. But then I remembered that there was a police station there, so I thought it's better to take the other road. I reversed and took the other street to find in front of us an Israeli warplane shelling a car.

The kids see the flames and hear the sound. They're so scared. I tell them this is fireworks for the New Year. We leave the fireworks behind and come home. My mother tells us that the Israelis have just shelled Asda'a Media City, at the edge of Khan Younis. Arslan, my 5-year-old nephew, is furious. Arslan, like all other kids, likes this place because it has fish, a small zoo, a small playground and a restaurant. He cries and cries. I cannot promise him anything: "I'm sure we'll find another place that is more beautiful..." All night I couldn't sleep, hearing the shelling, calling friends and family to make sure they were ok, listening to the radio because there was no electricity to watch TV, and cursing myself for being so stupid as to take the kids out of the house!!! Isn't it wise to take kids out?... Of course, it is... But not in Gaza.

### **28 December, 2008**

In the morning, Wael wakes up and comes to me to show me his finger which is swollen: "Look, this is from the shelling and air strike!"

"When?" I ask.

"Last night when I was sleeping, they hit me."

"You lie," I say.

He smiles and says: "You lie too..."!!!

### **31 December, 2008**

Last night I called my friend Wafa, who is living in Gaza City, in Tel Al-

Hawa neighborhood, to check on her. She is fine and they are a *lucky* family, as she said. Because on Saturday when the first bombing of Gaza Strip started, she had all her doors and windows open since she was about to clean and rearrange her apartment. None of her windows or doors are broken, unlike all her neighbors, who are now seeking her apartment's refuge on the second floor.

"Mira, my daughter, is the one who is scared," Wafa told me. "You remember her, right?"

"I thought if I take her out to see the reality of Gaza she might be less scared because we're all living the same situation and I'm sure we're better off than others. So I took her for a walk around the neighborhood. I wish I hadn't!"

"When I saw what I saw, I got scared myself," Wafa explained. "I wanted to blindfold her eyes and run back home. I cursed myself for taking her out of the apartment. But I'd never imagined Gaza could become a ghost city in less than a day! If you see our neighborhood you will not recognize it."

Wafa added with a hysterical note: "You know, Majeda, we are all fine. Really. Our only problem is that we don't get any electricity since the bombings on the first day. Since then I make the bread dough and send it to my neighbor in the building nearby to have it baked.

“To be honest, the bread, the cold, buildings and all of that are not the problem for us today,” Wafa told me. “Our real problem is that we have this rocket which didn’t explode in front of the building.”

“What rocket?”

“The F16 rocket. We called several people but no one can do anything about it,

“You mean it’s still in front of the building?!”

“No, not right in front now. The Civil Defense came and tied a rope around it and moved it up toward the road.”

“They put some sand over it so no kids or others would get hurt.”

## **2 January, 2009**

Wael woke up really angry with me this morning. He came to me frowning and, as he hugged me, he said: “I don’t want to give you a hug or kiss you today.”

I ask why.

“You promised us a Christmas tree and you didn’t get one. You promised to take me to the beach when it rains and you didn’t. You promised we would watch the birds in the sky and now you won’t even allow us to move from the living room and play in the garden.”

Wael loves to watch birds. For the last six days, every day he looks up at the sky and wonders why the birds take so long to go to their nests. Yesterday Wael was watching his birds and all of a sudden an F16 started roaming about, occupying the sky. The birds flew from right to left and then back again — every time they found a safe area in the sky an airplane would drop another shell and the birds would flee to the other side. In the beginning, Wael was laughing and he called all his brothers to watch how the birds were dislocated. But today Wael is really angry; he feels that the birds are not safe.

Wael tells me: “Last night when I went to sleep the airplane hit my finger again. I know you don’t believe me, but it fell down and set fire to our garden. I could smell the fire.

“What did you do?”

“I was looking for my airplane to go up and take all the birds to their mother because they were calling me to help them.”

He asks: “What is war?”

“War is what we are living now. Like what you saw in your dream.”

“And why would any one make this war?”

I think that he’s got the idea and then he continues: “Why would anyone

not want the birds to go back to their nests?"

#### 4 January, 2009

Yesterday was the most awful day we ever lived, I think. My mother said even the 1967 War was not this bad. No electricity, very little water, freezing cold and most horrific was the cold accompanied by the live war orchestra.

Tanks bombing from the ground incursion, F16s bombing, the drone which keeps going around in circles all day and night non-stop, making this annoying sound as if there is a bee just at the edge of your ear. And added to all of this, the sound of shelling from the sea.

War melody, is what I want to call it.

I ask Wael to come inside because it's freezing cold outside. His birds are no longer in the sky. "Come let's play the Alaska game!"

"What is Alaska?"

"It's a new game we'll all play with grandmother. Each of us has her/his own blanket to cover all of the body from head to toe."

I don't know if we were trying to warm ourselves or trying to hide from all the bombing... Whatever it was, it felt better under the blankets since there was no electricity and no birds in the sky comforting us.

"Ok, Wael, you are the head of the state of Alaska, and we are the people of Alaska. What do you order us to do?" I started the game...

"I order you to go to the shop and buy me an airplane, a cage and seeds," he said, sucking on his thumb.

"Why?" I ask. "You need to explain to me."

"I want to fly up, up, up — till I reach God!  
I will bring all my birds,  
and put them in a cage.  
I'll fly again,  
and I'll catch the pilot.  
I will bring him here  
and give him the seeds to feed the birds."

...And I thought the Alaska game could bring some kind of creative ideas to bring warmth to our bodies and some life under this bombardment.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a very smart idea. So I just obeyed my mother's order: we all got closer to each other and created a net of hugs that really brought warmth to our life and a little bit of security.

#### 5 January, 2008

Just before going to bed Wael says: "Actually, I like war."

I ask why.

"Because I don't have to wash my face and hands. I don't have to wash my hands and face in this cold. And

I don't have to go to kindergarten in the morning."

"But you won't be able to count the bombs... if you don't go to kindergarten, because you'll only be able to count until 50."

"I don't like to count bombs anyway," he answers and goes up the steps.

I feel how stupid I am to make this little boy count bombs. I'm so angry with myself.

### 7 January, 2009

Like a can of sardines, we're all gathered in one room. It's too unsafe for my brother and family to sleep upstairs. The house-quaking experience is too scary.

Wael and I share a small narrow mattress on the floor. We both start looking at photos on my mobile, trying to ignore the live war orchestra outside. Within minutes, Wael is asleep, holding the mobile in one hand and his thumb in his mouth.

He looks like an angel with his eyes half open – as if he doesn't want to miss a moment of pleasure — he loves mobiles. I can't afford to let him take photos all day like he demands because I have to save the battery.

At 5 am I'm fast asleep. Wael starts drawing on my face with his little fingers.

He softly touches my forehead, my mouth.  
Then he starts whispering in my ear.

"I'm talking softly in your ear because I don't want to wake you up," he says. "What did you say? I didn't hear you." "The war is over and today we must go out," he whispers. "Ok," I say and fall back to sleep.

"Wael, I want to sleep."  
"The war is over."  
"No, the war is not over."

Wael leaves me no choice but to wake up.

He starts waking everyone else up too and by 5:30 the whole house is in action

"Let's go now."  
"No," I said "the war is *not* over."  
"We won't buy anything, just go in a loop around the house." he said  
"Wael, believe me it's too dangerous to go out of the house. Just go and play."

He's mad at me again. He goes to the garden and chooses to play exactly in the area I asked him and all the kids not to play in. It's just a few minutes before there's supposed to be a three-hour lull in the bombings – Israel has announced it will allow 'safe passage' for humanitarian assistance. But I can't believe it:

"Wael, I asked you not to play there."  
"I asked you to take me out," he retorts.  
"But it's dangerous!" I scream.

He ignores me and heads further toward where I don't want him to be.

I go inside the house for a second.  
Wael runs after me.

All of a sudden, there's a huge explosion.

Black airplanes are everywhere.

They cover the sky.

More than one.

More than two.

More than three.

At least half a dozen at once.

A terrifying sound.

Everywhere in the neighborhood, children start crying.

Wael's clutching on to my pants, his thumb in his mouth.

I pick him up and throw him at his mother.

"I don't want to go out today," Wael announces.

### 9 January, 2009

Today my mother brought out the old style kerosene lamp she inherited from her mother. It had long ago become part of the decor in our guest sitting room where she keeps all her fancy and kitsch souvenirs. She filled it up with kerosene despite the fact that half of the family has allergies to kerosene.

The lamp makes a nice atmosphere during the quiet moments early this evening!

The full moon coming in from the opened windows and doors adds more light to the room. It feels warmer today. Oddly, all of us, sitting there in the living room are talking softly,

as if we're hiding our voices from something. Someone I don't know. My brother Nael, my sister Zeinat and my nephew Hitham start playing cards.

The game sounds too serious because everyone's trying to suppress their anxiety.

"I think one of the stitches in my eye is coming out," Zeinat says. "My doctor is in Gaza, the road to Gaza is cut, and the hospitals are only taking emergencies and this is not an emergency! And your mother's old lamp is adding to my problem," she adds looking at my mother, who is not impressed with this comment.

Hitham looks at me and says, "Can't you do it?"

"What?"

"Can't you remove the stitch?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

But before he finishes, the house starts shaking.

Left and right.

Endless horrific sound.

Winds sweep in from the windows.

Doors slamming.

And everywhere across the neighborhood, children are crying.

A huge glare lights up the entire city of Khan Younis.

Our eyes stare at the door.

We're trying to recall what we memorized yesterday.

About what to do when an F16 hits your area.

But is it an F16? Because if its tanks shelling, then the instructions are

different...  
 A few seconds pass.  
 Obviously, we are bad students  
 because our only reaction is silence.  
 We stare wide-eyed at the door.  
 And wait...  
 Can we call three seconds “waiting”?  
 I guess in Gaza you can.  
 Three seconds in Gaza can actually  
 change your future.

### 10 January, 2009

Logic is my key for today.  
 I want to apologize to all the  
 musicians in the world for calling the  
 sounds of bombing an orchestra.  
 After a horrific night of tank  
 shelling, bombardment by F16s,  
 maybe an Apache too, the drone  
 and, most scary of all, the smell of  
 phosphorus gas reaching the edge of  
 our neighborhood, today, I want to  
 apologize to all musicians.  
 No, war sounds are far more  
 frightening and ugly.

Today I will not joke.  
 I will think logic and talk logic.

Not enough food at home.  
 Children frustrated, wanting out of  
 this prison.  
 It's not going to end today.  
 It might last for much longer.  
 Demands are increasing at all levels  
 and from every side.

So, best is to act.  
 No safe place in Gaza Strip.  
 If my own bed is not safe,  
 then the market is not safe.

But it might be safer than, or at least  
 as safe as my bed could be....

So, I'm up early.

I call the children: “Come, we'll all go  
 to the vegetable market.”

“Is the war over?” screams Arslan, my  
 5-year-old nephew happily.

“No, but there will be a ceasefire, a  
 ‘safe corridor’ from 1 to 3 pm,” I tell  
 him.

“Is it 1 pm?” Arslan asks.

“What's a ceasefire?” Wael asks my  
 sister at the same time.

“Is a safe corridor like the one we use  
 next to our bathroom?”

For me it seems safer to get out *before*  
 the ceasefire because it doesn't seem  
 that there really is one, or at least that  
 it's observed....

I catch Arslan's eye: “Looks like there's  
 movement in the streets, so we'll try  
 to go now.”

I haven't seen the children so happy.  
 They don't wait for me to get the  
 car out from the garage. Like birds  
 escaping the cage, they all start  
 singing and dancing on the door step  
 of our house.

I drive and decide that I will only  
 look in the car mirror straight in front  
 of me.

I don't want to see anything around  
 me.

I love Khan Younis.

I can't do anything for Khan Younis  
 today but wait patiently and survive,  
 so tomorrow we all can do something.

Halfway to the market, we're the only car in the street.  
Arslan is looking out on the other side of the road. He screams: "Hey look, our kindergarten! They destroyed the building near our garden!"  
Majed, my 6-year-old nephew, asks me "Who did this?"  
I answer, "The airplane."  
"I know, but *who* is in the airplane?"  
Majed repeats his question "Who did this destruction?"  
I look at him and say: "The Israelis. But don't ask me who they are now because if you look just in front of you, you'll see where we'll buy our stuff."

There was a huge truck distributing flour to people.  
We sat and waited until some families got their quota and then they sat in the sun and started selling half of what they'd received.  
An old woman was sitting covering her face.  
I went to her and asked if I could buy from her.  
"Yes, please, I have to get back quickly. If my sons know I am here, they'll be upset with me. I came because we have nothing left at home. And we have twelve children at home who need to eat three times a day."  
I asked her why she is selling the flour in this case.  
"Because we got two bags from UNRWA, we'll use one and with the money of the other one we'll buy vegetables."  
"Ok, then how much is this?"  
"NIS180."

"Why? It was 90, I say.  
"Everyone in the market is selling at this price."  
"Ok then, I will take it."  
Some young men come and help me put it in the trunk.

When I switch the car on, Dima asks: "Why did you buy that sack of flour? It's got 'Not for Sale' written on it"  
I look at her jokingly: "I *bought* it, I will not *sell* it, because it is not for sale."

And we drive back, with my eyes staring only straight ahead.  
I hear Wael, Arslan, Dima and Majed playing their new game "I see something different."  
I'm not ready to look.  
Shelling starts in Khan Younis.  
Strikes somewhere not far, but far.  
I drive quickly, passing down the main market road – a road I've not been able to drive down for the past 20 years because it's always so packed full of people and stands.  
Today I can drive as fast as I want; it's totally empty.

We reach home and everyone's happy.  
The phone rings.  
Wael runs to answer.  
"Hello. Who is it?"  
A few more seconds of silence.  
"But we need sugar."  
"And I want a car and an airplane with a remote control."

I run to pick up the second phone.  
This boy is out of control. He has to

stop asking my friends to buy him things every time they call:

“Hello?...”

It’s a recorded message from the Israeli military.

The message repeats:

“If you have guns at home you should get rid of them.

“If you are hiding any of the militias, report them at the following number...”

“If you have information you want to share, call the following number...”

Precisely at 1pm, the cease fire starts. I was right in my calculation and logic.

The military planes are back in the sky, performing their daily shock and awe show, complete with the sound and motion. The chorus of kids crying their hearts out starts up across the neighborhood again.

I secretly congratulate myself — going to the market before the ceasefire was a wise choice. But now it’s time to go comfort and hug the kids.

### 11 January, 2008

“What’s wrong with your rooster?” my friend shouts down the phone line.

“It’s 9 pm and he’s crowing as if it’s dawn!”

“Suffering jetlag,” I explain.

“They didn’t sleep all night because of the explosions.

“They’re hungry because there’s no feed for them in the market.

“And an Apache just lit up the whole

Khan Younis skyline with their flares.

“They think it’s the morning.

“But don’t worry, they’ll go back to sleep,” I assure her.

### 13 January, 2009

Majed and I are playing the telephone game,

He takes one telephone handset and I take the other.

We change roles all the time.

Majed always wants to take the role of my friend Rana.

Maybe because we talk on the phone endlessly.

She is in Jerusalem.

And I am in Khan Younis.

I go to the kitchen for a second.

I hear Majed tell Rana: “When this shooting ends, I will not go to school.”

Majed has refused to use the word “war” since the beginning.

He continues, “They hit the schools and they kill children.”

I am shocked.

All my prevention efforts, all my efforts to protect him just blown to bits.

The kids don’t watch the news AT ALL.

We don’t talk about war in front of them AT ALL.

We try to play with them all the games that they love.

I go to Majed, I hug him.

“Not your school and not you.

They can’t, because I’m here to protect you.

They will never touch you.”

Still hugging him, he tells me that

he had a dream about his school  
being burned down. And his teacher  
becoming two teachers — one for  
math and one for English.  
He tells me that he lost his bag and  
his pencil in his dream.  
I have lost my mind.  
I hold his face in my two hands:  
"Listen, your school *is* fine and *will be*  
fine.  
You will finish your exams and we will  
go to the sea and we will play."  
I want him to believe me this time. I  
don't want him to have any doubt.  
This is why I said the sea this time...  
Because they will never be able to  
destroy the sea of Gaza.

#### 14 January, 2009

I'm in shock.  
My life is not my life.  
Only now ...  
after 16 days of war on Gaza I  
recognize that I am living someone  
else's life  
I no more have the routine I am used  
to living.  
Even if I didn't like it.  
And I was unsatisfied with it.  
Even if I love change and I run after it  
What I'm living now, what I am today  
is panic.

Waking up too early.  
Exhausted, unable to open my eyes, a  
constant headache, allergies from the  
kerosene lamp.  
The feeling of dislocation, the feeling  
of strangeness.  
I'm dizzy.  
Tired and confused.

Out of control.  
Before coffee, trying to get hold of  
Murad, my colleague who's already  
moved with his wife, children and  
parents to three different houses and  
might move to the fourth.  
Seeking safety and life.  
"Hello, Murad, are you Ok? How is  
the house? Did you sleep well? Where  
are they? In your neighborhood,"  
I respond without waiting for his  
answer.  
Who cares. I just want to know he's  
alive

#### 15 January, 2009

Every thing is always changing about  
this war. But there is one constant: it  
gets worse everyday.  
Today is *really* the worst day for us.  
I need to escape from my mother as I  
can't hide my anxiety any more.  
I decide to escape in the shower  
because we have electricity and the  
sun will help the water gets warmer.  
I jump into the shower and turn on  
the hot water. Mmmmmm, how nice  
and warm. It's really relaxing. I close  
my eyes, enjoying the nice hot water  
spraying over my body.  
Abruptly, the electricity goes off.  
The cold water sears through my  
protesting body like an electric shock.  
All the neighbors hear is my  
screaming and cursing.  
The cold water hurts in this cold  
temperature.  
I jump out of the shower and into all  
the clothes I can find.  
Summer clothes, winter clothes, my  
sister's clothes and sit as close as I can

to my mother, trying to absorb her warmth.

I'm still shivering.

"You don't listen, you just want to do it your way. Why didn't you heat the water on the kerosene stove and take a bath, like I do!"

"Mother, I don't like it, the kerosene gives me allergies and a headache and I feel I need a shower after that kind of bath. On top of that I would have to wait two hours for the process to end, before I even start my bath."

She adds: "Clothes won't warm you up. Eat something or move or go sit in the sun."

I take my small transistor radio and go to sit in the sun with my cousins in the garden.

Each one is holding a radio in his hand, supporting it with the shoulder, clamping it near his ear and listening softly.

I switch on my radio to 106 FM and hear the guy saying: "106 FM from you and for you, 24 hours a day, with the action, minute by minute." The breaking news signal – so well-known in Gaza — interrupts the ad.

The reporter, his voice shaking, announces: "The Israeli tanks are shelling the Red Crescent Hospital in Gaza, at this very moment, with phosphoric bombs."

I keep dialing all the mobile numbers of relatives and friends in Gaza city.

No coverage.

The network's dead.

I dial the landline.

Maha picks up the phone:

"How is it in Khan Younis?"

"Nothing here. Only F16s and the sound of tanks coming from far away."

We're used to it by now.

How is it in your area?"

"What's the news? What do you hear about us?" she asks me, her voice barely coming out of her throat.

"We have no electricity. We hear the bombs. But we don't see anything from the windows but smoke. What do you hear about us?"

"Nothing," I reply. "I want you to tell me."

"A missile hit our neighbor's villa by mistake."

Why by mistake, I ask myself. How does she know? Why did she decide that it was hit by mistake?

So I ask, "How?"

"You know the villa in front of the building, in front of the Gaza International Hotel? She keeps going on and on, giving me details about exactly where exactly the villa is — as if she's trying to blindfold me and take me in circles so I feel like it's really far away.

I interrupt: "You mean the one just in front of you?"

"Yes, but not exactly in front."

The villa is only a few dozen meters away from them. With no electricity, no batteries left, no mobiles and the land line connection barely operating, they're really isolated.

She keeps asking me what I know about them from the news, about their street, about the neighborhood.

"Where are *they* — exactly?"

I feel like telling her "Don't worry, Maha, you're fine, you've not been hit yet!!!!"

I hang up with her and call my friend Wafa.

It's the shortest conversation but it sums up this war on Gaza.

My first stupid sentence: "I hope I didn't wake you up."

Wafa, as usual, says it all:

"The tanks are downstairs, at our doorstep, we are five, six, maybe seven families now in the stair well of the building, we can't get inside, we can't close or open the windows because of the smoke, the smell of burning. We hear — right now — our neighbors calling for help. The tank downstairs is hitting Gaza center, the tank in front of the Red Crescent is pointed at us, I brought the phone next to me on the steps in case someone calls. We're waiting to go to school, UNRWA, any place that is safer, but we can't — they're everywhere and I have to hang up now."

We're still in this circle around the phone, when I get the weirdest phone call — from an Italian. A woman by the name of ...Cara, maybe?

The voice isn't clear at all.

After several tries she manages to get through.

I can hardly understand her.

"I heard you're working with the Italian organisation AIDOS... That you have a clinic for women... And a gynecologist. My sister-in-law is in Shifa Hospital... She's pregnant... She needs a gynecologist... Majeda, how can you help me?"

"How can I help... Cara?"

Hospitals are in a state of emergency. Patients are sharing beds and sleeping

on the floors in the corridors. Some doctors, nurses and ambulance drivers haven't slept for the past 20 days.

I'm in Khan Younis. How can I help this Italian while there is war raging through the streets of Gaza. Gaza city is 30 km away from me. Roads are cut. The road is controlled by high technology murdering machines. They work like an Atari Game: press here to kill a Gazan.

Left arrow: burn the house down.

Haircross on the moving target : miss the target, hit the villa. Of course, by mistake. Madness.

I remember a cousin whose house is not far from Shifa Hospital. He's a gynecologist. I give her the number and tell her to call him.

I hope they'll have a baby girl.

Who can look after her parents in the future.

Like all my girlfriends are doing now with their parents.

### 16 January, 2009

I didn't want my calls to be an extra burden to Wafa and her family..

So I stopped calling them.

And started following their news from two radios.

I put one ear phone on the left and the other on the right

Two FM channels, broadcasting locally not far from the scene.

One of the reporters is unable to breath.

The other is comforting.

As if they are listening to each other, the two reporters were switching roles.

One is worried, the other is comforting.

One is terrified, the other is in control.

The news is getting worse.

The battery is dead.

A forwarded text message from Wafa: "We are safe in the UNRWA school in Sheja'iyia."

I am back to dialing her mobile like crazy.

The recorded message: "out of coverage area" is shelling my ear.

Wafa's taken refuge at an UNRWA school.

With her teenager girls.

What will her young teenager girls do?

What if one of them gets her period?

What if they are sick ?

What if the Israeli hit this particular school?

What if ...

It is too cold.

Wafa and her family and thousands of displaced children, women and men at UNRWA schools... all of them are out of coverage.

The only thing that's really covering them today is WAR.

Life in Gaza, today: what does it mean?

Twenty days have passed with me and war.

The F16 is in the sky. Not one and not two. I don't know how many.

I can't count, its already 1 am and we have electricity; I need to finish some work on the computer.

I decide to work upstairs.

I miss my time and space.

The sound of the F16s is scaring me.

It goes from my toe to my knee,

from my stomach to my chest,

from my heart to my throat.

I feel suffocated.

Suspense .. it fades in and out

I feel it inside my body.

My head is full of images.

Suspense. Suspense. Suspense.

Finally it hits.

Fade out .. it returns to my toes, my

knees, up to my head.

I am full of F16s.

Hitting again.

This time I feel it inside me.

FM radios are not functioning.

Either because their broadcasting

station has been hit or because they

have no fuel to run the generator or

because they collapsed like most of

the buildings.

They've been working 24 hours non-

stop.

Giving people instructions on how to

save their lives.

Their children's lives.

They express themselves very well.

They are full of love, care,

commitment.

They left their families and houses

to be with their people at the time

they are needed, like so many other

Gazans.

They are working in the most

dangerous locations and all of them

are targeted.

They don't have to stand up like a

stewardess in the airplane corridor and

stiffly act out the safety instructions.

They just need to speak out for me

and for thousands to give us comfort.  
The F16 is hitting again and again ..

I am terrified by the last hit; it's  
rocking the house.  
After 20 days of war on Gaza, I'm still  
terrified by the F16.  
But more so from the phosphorous  
bombs being dropped on Khan Younis.

I've been thinking of her non-stop  
for 48 hours wondering how she'll  
manage at the UNRWA school.  
"We're all ok,... in Sheja'iya... we're  
with my father's relatives, sheltering at  
this house, it is safer than our flat."

No safe place in Gaza.

### **17 January, 2009**

After more than 48 hours and more  
than 48 thousand tries, finally,  
early this morning, Wafa's mobile is  
ringing.  
Its 7 am they must be sleeping, I just  
wanted to get a sign of life from them.  
I got it, they must be sleeping, I press  
the off button. It rang only once.  
More than enough for me.  
Because it's hard to sleep in Gaza, I  
decided to press the off button.  
Maybe they haven't slept for the  
last 48 hours and they've only now  
managed to sleep.  
I'm more than happy.  
I inform my mother that Wafa is  
alive.  
My mother asks millions of questions,  
I have not even one answer.  
It was only a ringing tone.  
A ringing tone means my friend  
Wafa's life to me.  
The three hour humanitarian "lull"  
just started.  
I dial Wafa's number.  
Her daughter sounds fresh, full of  
energy, full of life.  
Where did she get all this energy  
from?

## FOCUS ON GAZA

# Negotiating Survival: The Impact of Israeli Mobility Restrictions on Women in Gaza

Aitemad Muhanna & Elena Qleibo

*In April and May 2008, Gaza researchers Aitemad Muhanna and Elena Qleibo conducted extensive focus groups and in-depth interviews with Gaza housewives, young people, schoolteachers and women in micro-credit program as part of a project of the Institute of Women's Studies examining impacts of Israeli mobility restrictions on women's economic and social participation, and on gender relations, in Palestine<sup>1</sup>. Respondents were from four communities in diverse locations in the Gaza Strip: in the north, Beit Hanoun; in Gaza city, the al Zaytoun neighbourhood; in Middle Gaza, al Maghazi refugee camp and in the south, Al Seyamat neighbourhood in Rafah. Mohanna and Qleibo's report offered rich insights and nuanced and innovative analysis into how Gazan women and men, as well as male and female youth, negotiate individual and family survival in immensely difficult conditions, an analysis that is even more relevant today in the wake of Israel's war on Gaza. For reasons of length, we can offer Review readers only an excerpt of the report, including the context, the analysis of focus groups with housewives and a summary of the main findings.*

*Aitemad Muhanna is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Swansea. Elena Qleibo is a Program Officer for Oxfam-GB based in Gaza.*

## Context: Siege and the De-Development of Gaza

All Gazans have been affected in different ways and degrees by Israel's prolonged siege and closure. The Israeli restrictions on mobility for people and goods in and out of Gaza have obviously distorted class and social divisions that had historically constituted Gaza's economy, with its almost complete reliance on the Israeli

<sup>1</sup> The Institute produced a background report on the request, and supported by, the World Bank entitled, "The impact of Israeli mobility restrictions and violence on gender relations in Palestinian society, 2000-2007."

market. The vast majority of the Gaza labour force used to be engaged in wage labour in Israel before Israel enforced its policy of prevention of Gaza labourers to reach their work since the mid-1990s and finally the almost complete border closure of today.

Before the mid-1990s, wage labourers in Israel, subcontractors and traders with Israeli companies used to have a better-off standard of living, while local public and private sectors' employees and labourers were perceived as low income earners and thus worse off. The dramatic deterioration of Gaza's economy since the closure has led to a striking reversal: public employees with the government and NGOs, regardless of the amount of income they earn, but because of the regularity of the income, became the better off sector of the population in relation to livelihood security. Most skilled and semiskilled labourers in Israel became permanently unemployed and after the prolonged period of closure they have used up all their savings. Some became dependent on their close relatives who are income earners, particularly brothers. Most wage labourers in Israel had relatively low levels of education; they acquired skills in their workplace that do not necessarily mesh with the needs and practices of Gaza's traditional economy.

Former workers in Israel living in or outside refugee camps have lost all sources of livelihood. With no remaining savings, they spend most of their time doing nothing, except temporary low-income jobs offered to them by better off neighbours or by the job creation programs supported by the international community. Households have become increasingly reliant on humanitarian aid by UNRWA, WFP and other charitable associations. The situation of rural men is slightly different since many of them have a small plot of land around their homes where they can plant and also raise poultry or livestock. Many rural men asserted that their home based agricultural production does not really rescue their families from the financial crisis, but it helps them to provide food and to reduce debt. Men who own medium to large sizes plots have also been seriously affected by the continuous military incursions and land devastation. They tried to utilize their lands during the first few years of the Intifada, but they later stopped working them because of the Israeli's continuous incursions and destruction of their lands. Many are now unable to reach their lands due to Israeli military threat (especially if lands are near the extensive "buffer zones").

Men in rural communities have been forced to enter the domain of women in agriculture by supporting or/ and sharing agricultural work with their wives or mothers during the seasonal agriculture production in the small yards around the homes. Few rural men contribute in selling the agricultural products in the local market, but the majority asserted that the home based scale of agricultural production is basically used for household consumption as it is often the case in rural communities. Sale of home-based agricultural and dairy production has rapidly decreased due to the fuel crisis that increased transport difficulties and expense. Even the traditional means of mobility, the donkey or horse cart, have

become very expensive.

Women in rural areas have carried the bulk of the burden of such economic activities and they have shown better skills and experience, so much so that this has come to be considered a women's domain. The difference here is that rural women used to get involved in home agricultural production in rural areas as a complementary economic activity while the main source of family income was men's wage labour in Israel.

The full destruction of the local market in Gaza has also affected many of the wealthy families who were involved in medium and large scale trading with Israel. Many of them have gone bankrupt as a result of the Israeli restrictions on the mobility of goods and people. At the same time a new wealthy group has emerged via the manipulation of "illegal" channels of trading. This "merchants of war" have utilized the society's deinstitutionalization and absence of law enforcement—even at times supported by political leaders.

The regulated legal trading activities with Israel which used to absorb large number of wage labourers, particularly in the construction and food production sectors, has been largely destroyed because of the lack of raw materials entering from Israel. This has been coupled with the rising of prices of the basic goods making the middle and low-income earners hardly able to manage their livelihood as before, and the unemployed become more vulnerable and largely exposed to food insecurity. To make things worse, most local workshops like metal workers, carpenters, bakery owners and skilled construction workers have stopped their work because of the absence of raw materials needed. Many of them have gone bankrupt or have closed up. Many grocery shops owners, especially in the camps and urban areas either closed or continue working by purchasing and selling in debt. Large numbers of medium to large scale industrialists have their good stored in Karni, paying storage fees and waiting for permits from the Israeli side. As an example we have the Eskimo ice cream factory. The owners have been waiting for months to be allowed to enter ice cream wrappers and components. These entrepreneurs cannot afford to buy illegal goods since they fear Israelis will know about it and will definitely stop the entrance of their goods.

## **Housewives and Their Families**

Housewives or daughters of housewives make up around 95% of the research participants in both rural and urban areas. We will try to present how the Israeli restrictions and closure policies in Gaza have differentially affected this social group and how these effects have contributed in changing gender roles within the household and in the wider community.

We have classified housewives and their families into three main groups according to their livelihood resources, utilization of resources, headship and

other factors. The research participants helped in a participatory manner in shaping the categories by answering the question: “who do you consider the most and the least disadvantaged housewives by the Israeli closure of borders and military incursions? The categories that emerged were the better off (*mastoureen*), the worse-off, (*madyouneen*), and female-headed households. The better off and worse off are shifting and relative categories, as can be seen below.

### **Housewives in households with regular income earners *mastoureen*, the better off**

These families characterize themselves as *mastoureen* based on their ability to manage their basic needs (food, education, health, transport and other necessary house expenses) by relying on their regular sources of income and not being in serious debt to others. ‘Others’ here is also ranked in relation to kin closeness, where debt from the closest family members like brothers and sisters is more manageable than debt to other relatives, neighbours or friends. Women in particular prefer to borrow from their parents or sisters, as they think that sisters and parents will not embarrass them by asking them to repay the money at a specific time. One woman from Beit Hanoun said: *when I need money after my husband’s income is spent, I just visit one of my sisters to borrow a little money for the most urgent things. She does not deal with it as a debt if she has enough money. I most of the time go and help her with her domestic work and I take care of her children. When she has a baby, I cook for her.*

This group considers themselves better off not because the amount of the family total income, but more importantly because of the regularity of the income sources in the situation of unprecedented economic and political uncertainty. This group was considered poor and very poor before the full siege of Gaza. The range of monthly income of the participating families was from NIS 1000 to NIS 3000, which is clearly under the national poverty line considering the large size of families with a number of members ranging from 6 to 15. Most families in this category are those who have one to three government employees, many of whom are low-income employees in the various security forces. Families with low-income earners are not eligible for regular humanitarian aid, except refugees who used to receive food assistance once every three months, and this was stopped by the decrease of funds for UNRWA’s food assistance. Women with low-income earners are blamed or criticized by other women – who consider them better off, if they are seen asking for coupons or other forms of assistance

Most income earners in these families are the sons of now unemployed wage labourers who used to work in Israel who were encouraged by their parents to apply for employment in the public sector since the beginning of the Israeli border closure. Many of the sons have stopped their education and dropped out

of school or university for the sake of keeping a regular job, when it proved hopeless that their fathers could go back to their work in Israel. Large numbers of low-income earners got married early and live with their unemployed fathers in the extended family setting, becoming financially responsible for all members of the family (parents, sisters, brothers, and their own children). They also bear the responsibility for educating their brothers and sisters.

Mothers usually control their married sons' income and wives in many cases find themselves almost destitute. The wives have to accept that their husbands' income is for the whole extended family including married and unmarried brothers who are jobless. The income is distributed according to the priorities of the whole family expenses while the income earners' wives and children may get the least. This has created contestation between female members of the family (mothers in law, sisters in law and daughters in law). In certain cases, nevertheless the wives of the breadwinners are given more attention and respect as they are appreciated for their dynamism in searching sources of aid and for bearing such a situation. Some young married women put their personal security at stake and may get in conflict with family members to preserve their autonomy and live in a separate house while still respecting their husbands' responsibility towards extended family. Some other young married women, especially in the camps, have used these circumstances for their own benefit by increasing their mobility, getting involved in temporary jobs, being more active in community institutions, making social visits and taking decisions about their children.

A middle age woman from Al Maghazi presented her family situation by saying:

*My husband is a public employee who earns NIS 2500 a month and I have 10 children. We used to be comfortable before the closure. My husband's brothers used to work in Israel and we used to borrow money from them when necessary. Since my brothers in law stopped their work, my husband has been obliged to support them. So part of our income goes to pay for the families of my two brothers-in-law. If he doesn't do this, his old parents will be angry with him and we are not in need for family troubles. I have to manage with what is left sometimes by reducing my children's expenses. Two of them are in the university and everything is getting triply expensive. This forced me to go out and apply for job creation projects. I am illegible for these jobs since in principle my husband has an income, but I was able to get something anyway. I have recently become very active with the benevolent associations, attending all their activities and whenever they have food assistance they register my name.. I know that we are better off than thousands of other families who have no sources of income, and they deserve the assistance more than us. Although we live a very modest life, the income we earn is not sufficient until the mid of the month. I buy meat or chicken once a week. I don't buy fruits and clothes. I myself have not bought any new clothes for more than 4 years.*

Another group of families earn low income from labouring in small factories and companies, which still operate in Gaza, or own a taxi or donkey/horse cart for petty-trading, or a small grocery stand in the local market. Their income however helpful in providing for the basic family expenses is not regular or certain. Many of the taxi drivers for example have stopped their work since the fuel crisis. Those who have carts and use them for rides have now more advantages. Those who owned agricultural lands used to be *mastoureen* in the first few years of the Intifada, but the Israeli continuous incursions on the border areas has made agricultural land unusable and/or inaccessible. Families with small plots of land located away from the Israeli borders are better off than the big landowners.

*Unskilled labourers are in a better position than skilled labourers since unskilled ones accept any kind of job offered to them even if with low wages if they are regular. Skilled labourers are faced with the closure of most construction companies - which used to be the largest sector of employment in Gaza before the borders closure - or have largely reduced their skilled (and thus higher salaried) staff.*

The *mastoureen* families during the Intifada were mostly the families who used to be poor or very poor during the relative economic stability when the Israeli market was open for Palestinian wage labourers. The regularity of income rather than the sufficiency of income is at all times the critical element of livelihood security. Women of this group know that at the end of the month they receive an income and they adapt their needs accordingly. The first thing they do with the income is to repay either all or part of the debt, and the rest is used for the basic expenses prioritizing education. Women of this group reduce their household expenses and consumption to the minimum in order to avoid debt or to reduce debt. Food as they repeatedly say is manageable, *no one sees what we eat at home, but it is hard to have someone knocking at our door to ask for his money. We eat lentils for a week with no problem.*

Age and education are no longer determinant factors of power within family and community. The one who earns an income and contributes to the survival of the family is given more attention by the parents. This is relevant with employed women within the family. A female employee in the family is given preference at the expense of the boys as she sacrifices for her family. While daughters in these families are given more autonomy and respect by their parents and brothers, at the same time they would prefer to see them getting married. A mother from Al Maghazi said:

*My daughter since she graduated, she has been working in temporary jobs and we basically depend on her salary besides the little money we earn from a grocery shop. Although we need her income I want her to get married. She is now 24 years old and she refuses all suitors because she thinks that they want*

*her because of her salary. I don't want my daughter to be anesa (unmarried/spinster) at the end.*

One woman in her early 50's from Beit Hanoun said:

*I regret that I helped my two eldest daughters complete their university education. I struggled a lot to provide them with the money they needed. Half of my husband's salary went for their education. Both of them are now sitting at home not able to find a job. People come to ask for the younger daughter for marriage and they don't think about the eldest. If they earn an income, they may marry. I feel so sad for them, what is the benefit of their education if they get older and don't marry. Men in Beit Hanoon don't prefer educated woman.*

Families with regular income are however better off than families with no sources of income. Women in these families have taken a leading role in managing their limited income. They balance every penny of the income and the household expenses. One young woman in her mid 20's from Al Maghazi camp lives in a rented house with her husband and her 4 children because her mother in law's house is too small to accommodate them. Her husband works as a public employee with an income of NIS 1.200 and he is the sole income earner in the extended family. She pays 300 NIS for the rent, around 500 NIS goes to her husband's family who is constituted of eight members, and she has only 400 NIS to be used for all her nuclear family's expenses during the month. Since this young wife finished her *Tawjihi* she tried to earn some money by giving private lessons for children, but she had to stop because her house is too small to do so. She avoids borrowing money from anybody because she knows that if she starts to borrow, she will soon be in crisis and she will not be able to repay. She sometimes gets money from her parents and sisters to pay for her children's kindergarten or clothes. She doesn't tell her parents that her husband gives around half of his salary for his family because she does not want to embarrass him. She also does not tell her husband that she gets some money from her parents to avoid his anger. She considers what her husband does as his duty towards his natal family (parents, brothers and sisters), even though it is at the expense of his own children. She does not ask her husband to pay for his child's kindergarten in order not to make him feel guilty that he does not have money. She rather pays for it from the money she gets from her parents. Nevertheless, this woman considers herself much better off than other families who mostly live in debt without any prospect of possible repayment.

Men of this group leave willingly their income under the control of women as they admit that women are more able to manage the family expenses than men, and also to avoid any tension within the family. Some men, especially the unmarried income earners, ask only for their pocket money for their cigarettes

and transport and do not get involved in any details related to their income: *I do not need any additional headache, since I believe the income is not enough even for half a month!* They leave mothers and wives to manage the daily expenditures, as they know how to buy cheaper items and how to reduce the expenses to the minimum. This encourages the wives of low-income earners to do shopping, a practice that was not the usual in the past.

### **Second: Housewives of families in debt crisis: *madyouneen*, the worse off**

This social group has sharply increased after June 2007. They include families with small and micro businesses that were closed off after the full siege of Gaza, families of metal workers, carpenters, construction workers and small traders with Israel or/and Egypt. The families of former Israeli wage labourers (skilled and unskilled) are the largest proportion of the group. Many of these households have large number of dependent children including university students and unemployed. Many of them have spent their savings and sold their household and personal assets (money in cash, jewellery, unnecessary household furniture or equipment) in the first few years of the Intifada (2000 to 2004) thus losing all resources. Many men in this group are skilled in different sectors but they are unable to find a relatively stable job because the private sector has lost almost all capacity to absorb wage labourers, and many businesses rely on the labour of family members to survive. The only source of income this group of men receives has been the temporary jobs (the unemployment scheme of the UNRWA and other aid organisations- a three months contract cycle, sometimes only 20 days every six months) where most men mentioned they had only benefited once from one cycle since the loss of their jobs. Some of the skilled labourers tried to work as piece workers whenever neighbours or relatives needed them but with the lack of raw materials they have even lost this opportunity. They have no options to manage the fulfilment of their daily needs except by aid or borrowing. Debt is stated as ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000, excluding electric and water bills unpaid by years. Refugee families are more in debt than rural families.

These families started to borrow money from close relatives in the early years of the Intifada with no idea that the situation will get worse. They also purchased in debt from the supermarket or the grocery shops, and left the cash they have to buy vegetables and other necessities from the local market. Recently, the techniques of borrowing have changed and become part of women's responsibility. Women borrow in very small amounts like 50 NIS or 100 NIS from neighbours, friends or relatives and they try to repay it in a very short period whenever they receive money. This is a technique used by women to create trust with neighbours or friends and thus be able to borrow another time in the future. Many women

mentioned that they sold many of the coupons they received to repay the small amounts of money they borrowed from their neighbours.

Men of this group feel utterly hopeless and have left the responsibility for household management for their wives. As described by their wives, they become despondent and careless. Skilled labourers are in a worse situation than unskilled labourers because, as said before, the latter accepts any temporary job offered be it in cleaning, gardening or service delivery. The former group still considers low status jobs humiliating and not bearable. This of course places the whole burden on the women to search for survival resources.

Women of this group are the worst off because they are not only responsible for the family's livelihood but also carry the burden of the psychological effects of the closures on their husbands. Most of these women used to be better off before the closure as they repeatedly said: *we used to be in a good standard of living-musatatin- only busy with our domestic work and children.*

Women who had lands in rural areas, used to employ wage labour to help them in cultivating their land while their husbands were busy with their work in Israel. One woman from Beit Hanoun said:

*I have never thought that one day we will come to live in poverty and deprivation. Before the Intifada, I used to spend at least 100 NIS a day to buy meat and chicken to cook for my children and my husband. Today, I spend 200 NIS during a whole month. Thanks God, my husband and my children are not demanding any more. My husband accepts to eat whatever I cook. If I knew that we might face such a situation, I would have saved all the money I spent on food to buy jewellery. The jewellery of women has rescued many families from hunger, but it sure doesn't stay for ever.*

Refugee women within this category have been facing much harder life than rural women. Many women in the camp do not live close by to their close relatives (parents, brothers and sisters), which place them in serious trouble when they are in urgent need of cash money. Their lack of cash is only relieved by the sale of some items from the UNRWA food assistance or from the little financial assistance from close relatives. Very few women mentioned that they receive remittances from their relatives abroad. Rural women are slightly different because they live close by to relatives, or they can sell some of the poultry or the vegetables they produce for family consumption.

One woman from Al Maghazi said:

*I always feel afraid that any of my children will get sick and be in urgent need to go to the hospital while I am bankrupt mufalsa. The hospital asks between 20 and 30 NIS for registration and medicine. This is why I keep the money I get from my parents and brothers when I visit them once a month, just for emergency cases like sickness. I don't tell my husband about this money because I need to use it for my children's urgent needs.*

When these women were asked about their personal security, they first mentioned the huge debt they had to their relatives, some neighbours and the grocery shop. Many of the participants of the focus groups in the different communities asserted that they do not visit siblings and other relatives because neither they nor their husbands are able to repay the money. [This proves to be contradictory to the statement that to have loans from family is “lighter” than to have it from strangers, but nevertheless in the long run it is lighter since relatives will not come to force the payment of the debt]. Many family members are now in conflict because of their inability to repay debt. A woman from el Sayamat/Rafah mentioned that she changed her normal direction to the health clinic and to the local market in order to avoid the grocery shop owner. She does not want to see him and have to be reminded of her debt when she does not know when she will be able even to repay a part of it. Women in debt become socially isolated to avoid embarrassment for not being able to repay. They hardly manage with their basic needs. They are mostly between the ages of 30 and 40, wives of former Israeli labourers. They were not used to go outside the home, do shopping or communicate with strangers. They are not educated so they have no possibility of thinking about a job. They started to learn these things after the closure. Some of them were forced to apply for temporary jobs to do cleaning in UNRWA and non-government institutions. Several mentioned that they searched for a job to clean in homes without their husbands’ knowing in order to earn money to feed their children. They were very embarrassed and unconfident in the first time they left home to ask for coupons or assistance. Many women both in rural and urban areas mentioned that they made a *basta* for their young sons in order to earn some money for their basic daily expenses. Women from the camp rarely thought about doing business because their homes are very small for home-based production. Women who had trading experience before continued but at very small scale and from home.

Many rural women got involved in trading their agricultural produce with neighbours and relatives. This group of women is not considered old enough to go and sit in the market. It is still considered *aeb* (shameful) for women in their 20’s or 30’s to trade in the local market. Women who are still involved in petty trading are those who started their work before the closure (cross-border traders) and they are mostly in the age of 40’s and over. These women continued their work dealing with local wholesale traders, but in much smaller scale than before.

When women of this group were asked about changes in their husbands’ behaviours, they all asserted that they have changed dramatically but in two contradictory trajectories:

**a) Become tolerant, calm, cooperative and home-based:**

Many men from both camps and rural areas have changed their behaviour with their wives and daughters. They became tolerant and do not exercise restrictions on their wives' and daughters' mobility. Middle age husbands in both camps and rural areas are more tolerant than sons and brothers. Some women mentioned that they are restricted in mobility by their sons not by their husbands. Young women confirmed that they face more troubles from their brothers than from their fathers. Fathers encourage their daughters to finish their university education, and are very reluctant to impose marriage on them. The experience with closure has produced change in their attitudes towards women's education and work. In a situation of men's unemployment, men perceive women's regular income as a source of livelihood security. They encourage their daughters to find regular jobs in the public sector as nurse, teachers or social workers.

Some men became very cooperative with their wives and they share domestic work, especially those who live in nuclear families. They also have left to them the management of their household's expenses and consumption and they rarely interfere. They admit similar to the first group that women are more able and capable in household management. Many men, especially the middle aged, showed their respect and appreciation to their wives and older daughters for bearing their men's joblessness. They confirmed that women try to follow up the children demands without letting them know in order to avoid their anger and maintain peace within the family. Men also mentioned that it is only women who can find ways to meet the urgent needs for the family, as they do not hesitate to borrow and ask for assistance, which is hard to do for men.

A man from Al Maghazi said:

*One day I discovered that some of the kitchen items we had were not there any longer. I asked my wife about them. She said that she had lent them to her sister. I shouted to her and I got angry. Then she told me that the reality was that she sold them one day when she was in urgent need of money. I was very sad. I also noticed my wife asked her sisters for their children's clothes which don't fit them as they get older. My wife never cooked khubeiza (wild growing green leaf) before, she didn't like it; now she cooks anything and I don't say a word. I now often sit with her discussing and negotiating what to do to survive. I trust her opinion.*

It does not appear that there is a link between men's education and their attitudes towards their wives and daughter. Rural and refugee middle age men with less education are more tolerant than young educated men. This may be related to the more social and cultural isolation of young men as a result of the Israeli mobility restrictions. Many women in their late 20s and 30s noticed that their husbands asked them to stop bearing children because of the family livelihood crisis and encouraged them to use contraceptives.

**b) Become violent, despondent and trouble maker:**

A small number of women mentioned that their men became more violent, careless and despondent. This is noticed more amongst families of educated and skilled labourers who have been jobless for many years. Wives consider violence and carelessness as a reflection of men's feeling of hopelessness and lack of meaning while they cannot accept any low status jobs offered to them. Young married women suffer more than middle age women from their husbands' violence. This is explained by the fact that middle age women rely on their teenage sons to earn some income while young married women's children are very young and helpless. Women who have violent husbands try to protect themselves by not demanding anything from their husbands and manage their daily life by themselves. Those who live in nuclear families are less safe than those who live in an extended family. Members of the extended family, especially mothers and fathers, support young married women with violent jobless husbands. This support however does not make real change, but it gives young women spiritual support. Violent husbands appear to be careless and not responding to family intervention. Some have become drug addicts. Married men direct their violence usually towards their children and not their wives, especially those who have wives responsible for household survival (who receive coupons, trade from home, or do sewing). Women who were hit mentioned that they were hit while trying to protect their children. In many cases, women of this group justified their husbands' violence and try to cope with it in order to protect their children. They justify their husbands' violence by their joblessness. Some of the violent husbands used to be violent before and some others became violence after they lost their jobs. It is also noticed in some cases that some husbands, especially the younger and less educated, beat their wives to show their manhood and power in the family where other sources of men's power/manhood have disappeared.

A few cases mentioned that the families hardship made young married housewives face double forms of violence from her husband and her family-in-law members, especially women. A refugee 27 years old mother said:

*My husband is jobless. I have four young children and I never before went out of the house to search for coupons. I didn't finish my Tawjihi. I live a miserable life. My parents and my brothers are very poor. My mother and brothers in law live attached to us and they just survive. I was forced to go out and apply for institutions to get coupons. What else can I do? I put the neqab in order to hide myself when I go out. My mother and sisters in law always irritate my husband against me while I am out to shop or to search for coupons. I don't know if they feel jealous or what? They don't know that I would love to stay at home and not go anywhere. What I am doing is not a pleasure. I lock the door on my children while I go out and my husband is careless. Every time I go out he comes back home and beats me until he makes me shout loudly to make sure his mother and sisters know that he is the man of the house. I know this and I try because*

*of my children to shut my mouth and to bear the pain of violence. When my husband calms down, I talk with him and explain the reasons for my going out. He understands and sometimes he apologizes and excuses himself.*

Personal security for this group of jobless and resource-less men has become concentrated on the home domain, they either become calm and cooperative or violent. The first option as is expected, makes women more secure and develop further their autonomy. The violence option further victimizes women. Social and kin networks and relations have largely diminished their role in the case of families in serious debt. As a result, men have become socially isolated and depressed and women become the bearers of the economic, social and psychological effects. Many women mentioned that they do not speak to their parents and brothers when they suffer the violence of their husbands. They sort out their problems by bargaining and deception, or cope by hiding the daily troubles from relatives and neighbours. Children in these cases are the most disadvantaged.

### **Third: Housewives Who are Household Heads: *ghalbaneen*, least okay**

This social group has increased since the beginning of the Intifada because of the large number of men who died or became handicapped by the Israeli incursions and the internal Palestinian conflict between Fatah and Hamas. Another reason, which is clearly noticed during the fieldwork, is that many able bodied husbands who used to work in Israel before the border closure became physically or mentally ill by the tremendous stress they experienced after the closure. Large number of ill male-headed families has become entitled to the help of the Ministry of Social affairs and the UNRWA safety net program. According to the national social policies adopted by the Palestinian government, unemployed women who lost their male breadwinners in case of death, divorce or chronic sickness are considered the head of their households and they are entitled to regular cash or/and food assistance. Female-headed families are culturally perceived as destitute, basically because women become the sole responsible for provisioning and caring and for the overall management of their households. Although it is true that according to the national measures of poverty in Palestinian society female headship has been associated with poverty and destitution, the qualitative data for the period of closure and siege on Gaza does not prove that female-headed families are the worst off of all the families. However poor they are, following the national economic standards, they are not the poorest from the wider socio-economic and cultural perspective on poverty.

For a small group of married women, men's loss of their primary functioning role as providers is associated with a loss of social value. Nevertheless, the majority of women still believe that the physical existence of a man within the family

regardless of his “temporary” status is by itself a social value and a source of personal and social security. In spite that female heads of household are better off comparing with the worst-off group above, as they are secure about their livelihood sustenance, they are still largely perceived in the society as powerless especially in the case of women with dependent children. The main reason that legitimised them appears to be their double role as provider/male and as a mother/women at same time. Women, who lost their male breadwinners, even if they earn sufficient income from other sources, are considered *ghalbaneen* and it is thought they are always in need of compassion from others. This is a reflection of the dominant patriarchal culture reinforced perhaps by the increasing Islamization of Gaza society. The presence of men (fathers, husbands and adult sons) is still the main source of women’s personal and social security. Women confirmed these feelings by saying: *rihatt el rajel walla adamu*, meaning the smell of a man is better than his absence. Another common saying used by women from different ages *el mara bedoon rajel tetshahtat* means a woman without a man is humiliated. *Thil el rajel wa’la thil el kheta*, the shadow of a man is better than that of the wall. This reflects a static perception of women’s social identity regardless of the changing gender roles and responsibilities of material and financial provisioning.

## Summary of findings

The participants’ understanding of the effects of Israeli closure and restrictions is defined by their inability to provide for their personal security and to manage a “dignified” livelihood. The indicators used by the participants to measure peoples’ ability to manage the provision of daily needs are the availability of material resources and the possibility of disposing of these resources, and not being forced to become indebted, in particular to strangers.

All rational options undertaken by both men and women are however situational and provisional, they are all a reflection of the gender-based consciousness of both men and women accumulated across generations in rural and urban areas and amongst refugees. Here is a list of gender-based options or reactions undertaken differently by both men and women to adapt to the consequences of the Israeli prolonged restrictions since the beginning of the Intifada.

### First: Changes in mobility

Men’s loss of income sources and their inability to provide the main needs for their families, especially their children has reflected in their desire to isolate themselves from their social surroundings. Women have increased their mobility to search for basic livelihood’s resources, by participating in charitable associations

in order to receive food assistance. Men's social isolation is not their free choice, but a mechanism to hide their feeling of uselessness and powerlessness. Women's mobility does not largely however exceed the local community settings including relatives, neighbours, friends, local market, community associations, clinic and schools. Interestingly, housewives are often more mobile than women in the formal labour force (teachers, nurses and other public employees). The mobility of married middle age and old women is more than that of young women searching for livelihood sources.

## **Second: Changes in daily routine**

Among other new behaviour's described for men is to stay awake all night to guard the family from the Israeli incursions or any other form of military threat, particularly in the border areas, and to sleep during the day. Their preference to sleep during the day consciously or unconsciously reflects their intention to escape from the daily family/children's demands. Men spend their night watching TV and playing cards to kill time. Women in contrast have to intensify their daily work and have to deal with their children's demands calmly and deliberately. Husbands in most cases help their wives in home-based production, but they do not consider these tasks as "real" or valuable work. Both men and women are forced because of their families' livelihood crisis to do tasks that are not constituent of their social value. The changing of men and women's daily routine is a response to necessity and coercive, not optional.

## **Third: Changes in economic participation (formal and informal sectors)**

Women's participation in the formal labour force has been also influenced by the families' economic crisis where women are forced to search for formal jobs with associations, regardless of work conditions. The priority for women is to find a regular source of income even if the type of work is inferior and from their point of view humiliating. Job creation programs have enhanced women's participation in the formal labour force in the form of three months' temporary job contracts. On the other hand, women's participation in the informal sector and their interest to have loans for private enterprises has massively declined because of the economic structural constraints. This has pushed both educated and uneducated, housewives and unemployed women to search for regular jobs or/and humanitarian assistance.

#### **Fourth: Access to education**

Although children's education is still presented by both men and women as the most important source of sustainable livelihood, the increasing economic pressures have forced many parents to jeopardize their children's higher education. University education for girls and boys seems equally valued by all parents alike in rural, urban areas as well as in the camps. Nevertheless, in the situation of livelihood crisis, parents show their preference to have their male children drop out of schools and universities rather than their girls. This is very much related to their understanding of the newly emerged context where young graduated women have better access to socially accepted jobs with institutions than young male graduates.

#### **Fifth: Violence against women and children**

The Israeli destruction of family livelihood resources and the inability of traditional family relations and networks to cope with the changing situation has created a motivating atmosphere for male domestic violence that is often justified by women as produced by the stressful situation of loss of resources. Women's justification of husbands' violence does not imply women's loss of self-respect, but it is rather a reflection of women's emotional support to their husbands who lost their sense of manhood and power as a result of men's inability to provide for the needs of the family. This on the other hand emphasizes women's conception and practice of womanhood as subordinated to men regardless of the actual roles and responsibilities they hold as the primary provider during the family crisis. Sexual violence is however not frequently discussed. There are number of signs showing its increase, but it is still an invisible issue that needs further investigation.

#### **Sixth: Changes in marriage patterns**

Marriage patterns are influenced by the family's poverty and vulnerability and by the situation of personal insecurity. The changes are more in the rituals and procedures of marriage than in its social value for the reproduction of social and gender relations. There are differences according to geographical location and socio-economic groups with regards to the changes occurred in marriage patterns. The age of marriage increased amongst educated men and women and decreased amongst uneducated women. Marriage expenses and dowry have largely been reduced amongst couples who are kin, but very slightly amongst non-relatives. Polygamy has increased amongst unemployed married men who became interested

to marry employed women. Parents prefer to support their daughters' education as this may provide them with better opportunity of marriage.

### **Seventh: Changes in youth perception of gender and their aspirations**

The closure and the Israeli restriction contribute largely to shift youth (men and women) towards conservatism because of the absence of modern opportunities of employment and social interaction. Young men and women have become closer to the gender-bias tradition and culture as a source of social and personal protection. Even amongst highly educated women and men and those who are regularly employed, their attitudes about gender have not obviously changed and most of them do not believe in gender equity and equality. While females showed higher potential to challenge the family livelihood crisis through their formal education, male youths grow increasingly frustrated and apathetic. Female youths however prioritize marriage as determinant of their social security. They become much more concerned about high education and employment as critical elements for a better standard of marriage life.

### **Postscript: April 2009**

Two months after the war, UN agencies and NGO's have produced numerous sector surveys of the damages and losses during the Israeli war on Gaza in December 2008 - January 2009. Even a "survey of surveys" has been posted on the OCHA website providing access to all kinds of damage-related information. With Israel's ongoing closure and blockade of the entry of building materials, elements needed for the early recovery phase are nowhere to be seen.

Israel's war on Gaza has created new groups of worse off people, particularly those who have lost their houses and possessions and are displaced in host houses (at around eight thousand host families), in tent camps or living in the ruins of their lost homes. Host families are under intense pressure not only for space but also for much needed essential daily needs – needs already pressing before January 2009 due to the ongoing economic deterioration created by the economic boycott that Gaza suffers. Although aid has reached many it is never enough to heal the pain of the loss of life's work and the loss especially of family members.

Conversations with staff at Gaza's Mental Health Program, as well as UNRWA personnel indicate that family violence is becoming more visible after the war. As noted in the report, this violence is justified by the women in the family as understandably related to the loss of the role of the man as the provider.

Interference in family problems is delicate because it can work against the victims. Gaza organisations working to prevent family violence are trying to encourage men to come to them and help fight it by making clear the situation is not their fault but part of a much larger political paradigm.

All Gazans were affected by the war in one-way or another if not physically, emotionally. People are tired and in spite of their traditional resilience, hopes are fragile. Access of goods is unsure, one week salt was forbidden to enter; the next week was the turn of washing powder. At the beginning of April, both the strawberry and sardine season were threatened: there were no strawberry seedlings allowed through the crossings, and fishermen, their equipment deteriorating, cannot take their boats out to sea beyond the 3m limit set by Israel and are subject to attack. Gazans want to live and families face needs that only grow as the situation deteriorates. The passing of the time without decisive action to end the blockade and siege undermines survival in the present and hope for the future.

## FOCUS ON GAZA

# Voices from Another War: Refugee Women in Gaza Tell of War and Survival in 1948 and its Aftermath

**Rema Hammami**

“The past is not dead. It’s not even past.”  
William Faulker

*Using interviews originally conducted for her doctoral thesis, Between Heaven and Earth Transformation of Religiosity and labor among Peasant Refugee Women in South Coastal Palestine/the Gaza Strip, 1922-1992), Rema Hammami sheds light on the Gazan present through evoking parallels with the past. Women’s voices recount the horror of massive aerial bombardment, of the destruction of home and family, and of struggling to survive and “feed the children” in the 1948 nakba and its aftermath.*

*Rema Hammami is Associate Professor at the Institute of Women’s Studies.*

From November 1947 when the United Nations partition plan was announced until the final armistice agreement in February 1949 between Israel and Egypt, the population of Palestine’s southern district lived in a state of permanent flight and war. What had started out as ongoing attacks by nearby Israeli settlers on village communities evolved over the months into major battles on multiple military fronts between the Egyptian army and the newly re-named IDF. The fate of communities became tied to the evolution of the fighting – with displacement happening in stages in line with the changing fate of the Egyptian military. The Israelis finally broke through the Egyptian lines in October 1948 in what they named “Operation Yoav” – pushing the Egyptian army out of its last strongholds and into what became the Gaza Strip. By then more than 200,000 refugees had sought sanctuary there. But the war wasn’t over. In December 1948, in Operation Horav, Israel made a major offensive against the Egyptians, trying to push them out of the Gaza Strip. The refugees who had survived the earlier phases of the war but had lost everything were now once again under Israeli bombardment.

A little written-about aspect of the war of 1948 in the southern district was the use by Israel of aerial bombing. Just prior to the Partition, the Palmach had only 11 single engine light aircraft but by the end of the armistice agreements, it had built up a large fleet including Spitfires and B-17 bombers. Thus by July 1948, in only the first six days of that month, the newly formed IAF had dropped more than 48 tons of bombs in over 82 sorties – the vast majority of them in the southern district. In that same month according to Aloni, ...”IAF fighters failed to locate el Arish and attacked targets of opportunity — most likely civilians in Gaza — instead”. During Operation Yoav, they dropped more than 151 tonnes of bombs in over 230 sorties.<sup>1</sup>

During the Nakbe, Um Ahmad and Um Subhi from the villages of Huleigat and Hammama both became young widows; and in its aftermath they became refugees in Gaza. The following are excerpts from interviews undertaken with them during the late 1980s.

Um Ahmad’s village Huleigat fell during the first part of Operation Yoav in October 1948. Majdal fell in early November and Hammama, Um Subhi’s village also fell in early November in the third stage of Operation Yoav. Um Subhi and Um Ahmad probably arrived in Gaza about the same time – in November 1948.

## The Hijra

### **Um Ahmad, Huleigat village: “one by one the villages were falling”**

Me, my daughter died when we were leaving and my husband had died two months before. My daughter was killed when the airplanes bombed us, the planes first bombed us in the village, whoever had her husband took her children and fled. Me, my husband was already dead, the Jews were attacking the villages, one by one the villages were falling. Where the Jews attacked the men would go to fight them, the other villages and the fighters would gather to fight. My husband was with the fighters, carrying weapons and he died from a heart attack. That was two months before the *hijra*.

The Jews would attack at night, at one or two in the morning, whoever was awake would wake the others, people would flee to the fields, hide in the vines. And who didn’t wake up would be in his house and they’d come by and kill them, just like that, shoot them, butcher them; young men, children, the elderly, young girls – just execute them. Every night they’d be coming to the village.

The (Egyptian) forces had been in another village, then they came to ours and then they left it for Majdal. We ended up wherever they were. Once they left to Majdal we left with them. Then the Egyptians would stay and fight and the people would flee – they’d flee to Gaza or Rafah, the people left and it was left the army and the villages. The Jews would come to a village whoever they’d find they’d kill, whoever went back to get their children a handful of wheat,

they'd find and kill, and destroy the houses, destroy the village, burn it down, the village houses were from mud not concrete, they'd burn it and bulldoze the whole village. Finally I came (to Gaza) the Egyptians brought me and my son, the medical forces brought me with the army, then my parents found me.

**Um Subhi, Hammama village: “One day you're making bread and the next day there's killing and bombing.”**

The Jews kept making attacks, we'd go out into the fields and find the Jews there, they'd come and shoot at us, shoot at old people not just young men. The young men would fight back — attack their convoys, they'd come and kill two or three young men. The planes would come and bomb the houses people would flee out to the fields, under the cactus and the olives. We'd stay there all night in the dark and in the morning start going back home — we wouldn't dare until there was light. But then the attacks would start again, shooting, people would get killed, the planes would come and bomb again — we'd flee back to the fields under the olives and grape vines. We'd grab the kids and hold them tight and sit. No food no water. The whole village together, the whole of Hammama.

And then after some time people started coming from other villages, from the direction of Isdud, from Beit Daras, from Zarnuqa from Faluja all fleeing to our village; all of them in the fields, under the olives and fig trees — all of them sitting there with their families

Then the planes came and started bombing us out in the fields. One day you're making bread and the next day there's killing and bombing. We all fled towards the sea. The mukhtar comes and says we should all go back towards the village. He puts a white flag on a pole and starts walking towards the trenches where the Jews are and they shoot him. He's carrying a white shawl on a pole and they shoot him. We surrendered and they shot.

The Egyptians came, we only benefitted from them when they left Isdud. They started telling us to flee. People started leaving from the sea on small fishing boats. Me and my family we left by donkey — me and my kids, we put the kids in saddlebags on that donkey and we go to Gaza. My husband had been killed two days before. He was guarding our field of peanuts — we had grapes and that field of peanuts and he and three others went out to guard them — scared that people would take them. As he was coming back along the seashore the Jews saw him and killed him. I had just had my son a week before and my relatives found my husband and brought me his body — carried him back on a camel. I was young and ignorant with six children, three girls and three boys, I left with my parents and sisters carrying those six kids on that donkey to Gaza. We left everything behind, cheese and clothes and grain and chickens.

## First Months in Gaza

*They pack the sidewalks, take up the vacant lots and the public market, occupy barnyards, and generally seem to fill in every space... They live in churches mosques and schools.<sup>2</sup>*

### **Um Ahmad: selling pieces of her headdress to buy milk**

All I had left was my son Ahmad. When we first came we stayed in houses in Shujaiyya [village]. They used to divide their houses among us and measure out a section for each person the size of a floor tile. They'd divide it between us for 40 *qurush* a month — an area the size of your mattress for 40 *qurush* a month — and just at night. During the day, you'd go out to the fields and gather wood and try and make bread. I stayed with my family because my son was only a year old. People made bread with anything they could find. Then some small rations came. In the beginning what did they give people — they'd give one and a half *rutls* every 15 days — if they have a small family they can take that and live but with a big family they'd get it and it would be gone. Whoever had some money with them would sell and spend. If she has *riyals* on her head she takes them and sells, if she has a bit of gold she sells it, if she has a *thobe* she sells it...I sold things that I didn't need to spend on the boy. Then I began to sell from my *wuqayya* (headdress). When Ahmad was born my *wuqayya* had been covered with money — even my daughter who died had money on her *wuqayya*. I started to cut a piece off and sell it and buy milk for the boy. Every day I'd buy for him with two *qurush*. Every week I'd sell another *riyal* off my *wuqayya* for 12 *qurush*, 15 *qurush*. When he got a little older and there was his paternal aunt living with us — an old woman, God bless her — when that money finished she got up left and went to stay with her sister.

### **Um Subhi: bombing people on the beach**

We got to the seashore of Gaza and we were there three days and then the planes came again and started bombing people on the beach, so again we fled, we walked all the way until Khan Yunis because the planes were bombing people. We made a shack on the beach there in Khan Yunis, with sticks and bags and whatever we could find. Not just us, everyone, every shack had six families in them each one had their corner. Then they started distributing rations and we'd walk two hours from the beach to Khan Yunis and carry that bag on our head and beg for some wood so we could cook. We'd be making bread and it was raining.

One day I was at the ration station getting the rations and the planes came and started bombing — right into the crowd, people tried to run wherever they could, someone lost their hand, another their leg, people were killed, suddenly there's a fire and my face and hair is burnt — they thought I was dead — it took me a year to recover.

## Survival

### Um Ahmad: “all the women were working”

The first work I did was in the fields for people from Jabaliya, from Beit Hanun — for anyone who was harvesting. We people were good together and with each other — the ones who had and the one’s who didn’t. We’d go pick okra, tomatoes with the people who had — they’d give us a shilling for our pay and feed us lunch — I’d save the shilling for the boy and the food for me, and what wasn’t cooked I’d take it to my brother’s wife and give to her and say, “I need the shilling for my boy.” If we picked melons they’d give us melons, if we picked *faqqus* they’d give us *faqqus*. We’d harvest wheat and we’d get some; barley we’d get some... There were a lot of women in my position. The women had to work to get firewood, she’d go and hoe, harvest — all the women were working not just me — 50 or 60 women we’d be working in the fields. We worked for a shilling — for pay here with the Gazans — with people with land — we’d work for four *qurush* or a shilling...

I was still a young woman and ignorant I didn’t like to know people because I was young and a widow — I wouldn’t get involved with people. From my house to work — even my neighbor there’s only this wall between us but I would have never gone and sat with them. When I’d harvest, my sweat would be pouring and my face would be red, I’d get some clay spit in it and put it on my face, I was scared my face would be rosy. I didn’t mix with the people or let anyone know my name, they’d say, “Hey, girl,” or, “The girl is clever, an active girl.” Whenever I’d work they’d think I was a girl. A widow doesn’t show herself as being a girl or married and doesn’t let the people know her name. They’d say, “Girl, what’s your name so we can write you down?” And I’d say, “Hurriyeh”. Each day I’d get a *grua* of whatever we were harvesting, wheat, barley, lentils, onions. Women used to come by my house begging for a head of onion — and my house was full and my son was happy — But I never let a man in my house, I never told my brother to come and stay or never said oh father let someone stay. I was very scared of people’s gossip. There were a lot of women in my position; never anyone brought our story up in a bad way

### Um Subhi: feeding her kids and sisters

I’d go to the women in Khan Yunis and do any work they’d give me. I’d prepare brides, They’d give me some grain or lentils, I’d do laundry, what ever I could find. I’d go back and feed my kids and my sisters. All day I’d be working and coming and going and not a moment to sit. Then they started making the camps and people left to the north to Gaza.

We lived on the beach there in Khan Yunis for three years, not just us — all of Hammama was there living in the dunes. Me and my parents and my children and sisters and brother. My brother worked fishing and my oldest son who was

seven worked with him – they'd get paid in fish. My father was old, too old to work. After some time they gave us a tent, after the shack had collapsed on us from the rain. Inside the shack we slept on the sand and made pillows from guava leaves then when it rained the water would come up through the sand and soak everything. Then it rained so hard the shack collapsed. Then they started to make the camps and people went north to live in the camps . If you were six people you got a bell tent and if you were more you got a big tent. We came here (Shatti camp) because all of our relatives were here. My father died in Khan Yunis so I came here with my mother and brother. I got a bell tent and my mother got a bell tent – each one on their own.

### **Un Ahmad: a useless tent**

*The Arctic tent, called parachute by the refugees because they were made of nylon was the nemesis of our work... they didn't have ordinary an door flap permitting entry in an upright position but a round tunnel-like snout requiring the assumption of an all fours position. Made for soldiers in battle they were completely unsuitable for family life.<sup>3</sup>*

From Shujayiyya they put us down by the sea, the Agency. A big family they'd get a big tent and the small family would get a parachute tent – that was useless, impossible. Down by the sea my son started to cough. He was strong like a horse and then he got a fever and was coughing. I took him to get checked and an old man, a Bedouin, said to me – get him away from the wet air. My uncle had his family by the side of the rail tracks in Jabaliya – between the tracks and the asphalt road. I went and stayed with them for four days. And soon enough my son was out playing and was like a horse again. I said that's it – I'll never go back to the camp – I'm raising him here. I left my son with my old Aunt and my uncle helped me gather my things and the parachute. And my parents followed and we all had our tents there – near the tracks and the fields.

Then they made Jabaliya camp. We had been paying rent putting the tents in people's fields and then they made the camp. My old aunt came with me – my uncle had died so she came with me and looked after the boy while I would go out and wash laundry or do weeding, harvesting, doing and doing for a shilling on top of getting our rations.

### **Um Subhi: peddling grapes at dawn**

If Gazans were harvesting I'd go there and work for them, four qurush, a shilling that's what we made working on their land. In Hammama I'd harvest for people for outsiders — bedouins — not from our village — but here in the *hijra* this is where we got tired and this is where we still are. After this I worked peddling, I'd go out from the adan [4 a.m. call to prayer] and come back from Wadi Gaza at six in the morning and I'm carrying three boxes of grapes on my head — in a

basket they get crushed, I'd sell here in the camp market by the rutl and by the half rutl and kilos. Everyday in the heat I'd go down to Wadi Gaza, carry back boxes of grapes and stay in the market until I'd sold them all. My mother started doing laundry for people in the city. She'd never worked like that for someone before. My sister made straw tabaq's and sold them – she'd beg some straw from people and make those trays.. My brothers and sisters were young, my children were young we all had to work to feed them.

**Um Ahmad: building houses**

Then the Agency started building houses – it was us who built them. We used to carry bricks, make houses — each one of those bricks we'd carry them on our head. The Agency was building houses, they'd pay the women a shilling — we'd work with the men — the men also got a shilling. Everyone worked on that, people had nothing, there was no work, only those rations so when there was work building everyone built.

**Um Subhi: “all of them worked to live”**

We came here and lived in a tent and then the Agency said we want to build houses. I started working carrying broken shells, the first work I worked here was on houses, digging ditches in the ground then transporting water on my head, all day I'd be carrying water on my head and filling the ditch, all of the women worked in that, with 50 or 60 women with 50 men. You'd plaster, carrying clay, women carrying water on their heads. The Agency would pay you two and a half qurush — all day carrying on our heads for two qurush. Everyone they worked, men and women, all of them worked to live. Life was very hard; there was no work and no money — there wasn't enough work to get money. We worked from six to six for two and half qurush or for about a shilling and we were carrying from the sea. We built those houses. We'd carry the mud on our heads and the men would make them into bricks and then we'd carry them, I'd carry seven and the first thing was the walls — the first houses were from clay bricks that the Agency built. We built them ourselves. When we'd done each one got a room, one room for seven people, eight people in a room. 10 or 12 they'd get two rooms — the people with a big family. After we built them of clay bricks, then we women would plaster them with clay for two and a half qurush. That was women's work plastering, just like it was back in the village — we'd mix the clay with straw and plaster the roof, and put the wood beams and palm fronds and plaster over it with clay. We women, our specialty is plastering with mud, and carrying stones and we'd carry the water and put it for the men as they made the bricks all day we'd be carrying it to the men. Abu Ramadan was the foreman — the Agency told him to get workers and he would come round and say, “Who wants to work on building houses?” After we made them they gave us our room.

**Um Ahmad: walking to work**

Thank God the boy was clever, he was clever in school. I started to work for a woman in Gaza, I'd do her laundry, clean her house, make her bread. — she'd give me 10 or 20 *qurush* from her pay. At the *adan* at four in the morning I'd go walking to Shifa [hospital] walking so I could save those coins. I'd go walking and come back walking. I worked for an Egyptian nurse, cleaning her house, doing her laundry. Her husband was crazy about me — he used to say, "why can't you do this like Um Ahmad?" On top of my pay she'd give me things, some soap or shampoo, some clothes.

**Um Subhi: always running**

I stopped working in agriculture and started fixing brides or doing laundry for the city people in Gaza — people from Rimal from the morning until the late afternoon and all the day I'd be rubbing with my hands — there weren't machines and I'd rub them until they were white — I'd go home and the skin of my fingers would be gone

I'd fix up brides, lighten and beautify them and then I'd go back home and there'd be a woman standing there who'd brought me lime so I could lime her house for her. The clay that the Agency brought for the houses was black, it was dark. After a while women would go and get lime they'd buy it and they'd come and say, "Mariam please come and lime my house." I'd whitewash their house for them — two rooms for 10 *qurush*. That was in the 1950s. I also would sew fishing nets, thobes. A thobe was two and a half *qurush* — for my children to feed them. I'd go to a wedding and do the bride so I could feed my children. I was always running and doing this bit or that bit — I was tired, exhausted, I'd do mattresses for five *qurush* — everything I did...

**Gaza Living on its Capital**

Seven years into the refugee experience, in 1955 a UN observer described the situation of refugees in Gaza. Despite the efforts of UNRWA and the international community, James Baster from the United Nations Secretariat visited the Strip and gave this description of "post-war" Gaza:

*The Gaza community is living on its capital — clothing is worn out, livestock is killed for food, the need for firewood has de-forested the area, railroad ties are stolen for building and carpentry...merchants selling three eggplants and five tomatoes, farmers cultivating small fragments of sandy soil, men and women bartering manual services for a fragment of a ration — these are the symbols of a struggle for life in which there can be little thought for the future.<sup>4</sup>*

**Endnotes**

- 1 See: Shlomo Aloni.2001. *Arab-Israeli Air Wars 1947-82*.Osprey Publishing: Oxford.
- 2 Confidential memorandum from John Devine to Ambassador Stanton Griffiths (Cairo), 13 December 1948 (in Morris 1990, 241).
- 3 Ruth Van Auker, "Tent report, Gaza, October 1949-January 1950. American Friends service Committee Archives Philadelphia. (Quoted in Beryl Cheal) Refugees in the Gaza Strip, December 1948-May 1950 *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Special Issue: Palestine 1948 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 138-157.
- 4 See James Baster, 1955, "Economic Problems in the Gaza Strip, *The Middle East Journal* 9(3), p. 326.

## Osama's Daughters: Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11

Nadine Naber

*In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attack in New York City, Arab and Muslim Americans found themselves both the target of U.S. government suspicion and repression and also, on occasion, community harassment and violence. In a new book edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Subjects to Visible Subjects (Syracuse University Press 2008), contributors explore the political and cultural dynamics in the construction of an imagined "Muslim other/enemy within" and the consequences of, and reactions to, Arab-American and other communities. In an excerpt from her chapter in the volume, Nadine Naber explores the inter-section of race, gender and class in oppressions of, and resistance to, Arab-Americans. Of particular interest to readers of the Review of Women's Studies, Naber explores how gender operates in the context of this racialized oppression, noting that "federal government policies disproportionately targeted men while hate crimes and incidents of harassment in the public sphere disproportionately targeted women." Whether the wearing of the hijab, having an Arabic name (Osama's daughters) or displaying Palestinian symbols, women are both targeted and resist such harassment. Readers are directed to the full chapter in Race and Arab-Americans – entitled "Look Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming!" – for Naber's analysis of the historical context, anti-immigration and other discriminatory government legislation and an detailed exploration of cultural racism in the construction of "Muslim masculinities." In the excerpt below, we include Naber's summary of the overall argument of her chapter, with several excerpts focusing on "names and naming," where names operate as signifiers of Arab/Muslim identity, "unveiling the terrorist's daughter," which explores the intersection of race and gender in the harassment of women who wear the hijab, and "nation of origin and the silencing of political dissent," which focuses on harassment of Palestinian activists.*

*Nadine Naber is Assistant Professor in the American Culture Program and Women's Studies Program at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Along with researchers from the Institute, she is a member of the Arab Families Working Group. We thank Nadine and Syracuse University Press for permission to publish this article.*

In an October 2006 speech to the National Endowment for Democracy, George Bush used the phrase “Islamofascism” in defining “the enemy of the nation” in “the war on terror.” He argued that “These extremists distort the idea of jihad into a call for terrorist murder against Christians and Jews and Hindus and also against Muslims from other traditions, who they regard as heretics. The murderous ideology of the Islamic radicals is the great challenge of our new century. These militants are not just the enemies of America, or the enemies of Iraq, they are the enemies of Islam and the enemies of humanity” (Bush 2005). Bush’s spokesman, Tony Snow, explained that Bush uses the term “Islamofascists” in order to clarify that the war on terror does not apply to all or most Muslims, but to tiny factions (Nir 2006). Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush has repeatedly claimed that “this is not a war against Islam” and that the “war on terror” is a confrontation with a particularly militant Islamic ideology. Yet federal government discourses coupled with the local and global implementation of the “war on terror” tell a different story, a story of an open-ended arbitrary war against a wide range of individuals and communities.

This chapter provides a historically situated, ethnographic account of the ways in which “the war on terror” took on local form within the particular “anthropological location” of Arab immigrant communities in the San Francisco Bay Area of California within the first two years following September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> I will first explore the ways in which dominant United States discourses on “terrorism” and “Islamic fundamentalism” were reproduced within 9/11-related immigration policies in California.<sup>2</sup>

I argue that official federal government policies such as special registration, detentions, and deportations have constituted particular subjects as potential enemies within the nation, specifically working-class nonresident Muslim immigrant men from Muslim majority countries. In this sense, a set of solid and fixed signifiers have come to demarcate the “Muslim Other/enemy within” (e.g., masculinity, foreignness, and Islam). Yet at the same time, a wide range of subject positions have been drawn into the “war on terror” through federal government policies, including Arab Christians, Iranian Jews, Latinos/as, and Filipinos/as, women, and queer people, among others, illustrating that dominant U.S. discourses on “Islam” and “Muslims” are not only malleable and fluid but are arbitrary, fictional, and imaginary at best.<sup>3</sup> Here I draw upon Althusser’s (2003, 51; 1971, 121) definition of “the hailed individual.” He argues that capitalism

constitutes us as subjects by “interpellating” us, calling out to us in the way a policeman calls out to someone in the street. Althusser writes, “the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversation, he becomes a subject” (1971, 164). As Althusser’s policeman creates a subject from the solitary walker in the street, one answerable to the law and to the state and system behind it, post-September 11 federal government and media discourses have created an arbitrary “potential terrorist” subject intrinsically connected to “Islamic fundamentalism” and “terrorism.”<sup>4</sup> I use the term “dominant U.S. discourses” to refer to systems of meaning about the “war on terror” produced among the federal government’s policy makers, the defense industry, the corporate media, and neoconservative think tanks (Said 2001, 2002; Doumani 2006). In the demarcation of boundaries between good versus evil and between “those who are with us” and “those who are with the terrorists,” dominant U.S. discourses on “terrorism” and “Islamic fundamentalism” have provided “definitions of patriotism, loyalty, boundaries and...belonging” (Said 2002, 578). They have also sparked nationalist sentiments that articulate subjects associated with “us” as those who are to be protected and those associated with “them” as those who are to be disciplined and punished.

I also explore the ways in which dominant U.S. discourses on terrorism were reproduced within the context of the post-9/11 backlash in the public sphere or in cases of harassment and hate crimes at school, at work, on the bus, and in the streets. I argue that the arbitrary, open-ended scope of the domestic “war on terror” emerged through the association between a wide range of signifiers such as particular names (e.g., Mohammed), dark skin, particular forms of dress (e.g., a headscarf or a beard) and particular nations of origin (e.g., Iraq or Pakistan) as signifiers of an imagined “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” enemy. In this sense, the category “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” operated as a constructed category that lumps together several incongruous subcategories (such as Arabs and Iranians, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and all Muslims from Muslim-majority countries, as well as persons who are perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim, such as South Asians, including Sikhs and Hindus.<sup>5</sup> Persons perceived to be “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” were targeted by harassment or violence based on the assumption “they” embody a potential for terrorism and are thus threats to U.S. national security and deserving of discipline and punishment. Although these markers (name, skin color, dress, and nation of origin) were not the only signifiers that hailed individuals into associations with “Islamic fundamentalism” or “terrorism,” they were among those most prevalent within my research participants’ encounters with the post-9/11 backlash. While these signifiers were not mutually exclusive and operated relationally, particular signifiers were more salient than others, depending on the person or the situation. For example, in some contexts, a name such as Mohammed coupled with a beard signified the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” identity and in other contexts, it was nation of

origin coupled with dark skin and a form of dress that signified the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim.”

I further argue that the post-9/11 backlash has been constituted by an interplay between two racial logics, cultural racism and nation-based racism. I refer to “cultural racism” as a process of othering that constructs perceived cultural (e.g., Arab), religious (e.g., Muslim), or civilizational (e.g., Arab and/or Muslim) differences as natural and insurmountable.<sup>6</sup> Here, I build upon Mino Moallem’s analysis of contexts in which religion may be considered “as a key determinant in the discourse of racial inferiority” (2005, 10) and Balibar’s argument that “race,” when coded as culture, can be constituted by a process that makes no reference to claims of biological superiority, but instead associates difference and inferiority with spiritual inheritance (1992, 25). In such instances, “culture can also function like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin” (Balibar 1992, 22). As in European histories of anti-Semitism, histories of Islamophobia have deployed biological features in the racialization process. In this analysis, as in European histories of anti-Semitism, biological features are deployed, but “within the framework of cultural racism” (Balibar 1992, 22).<sup>7</sup> In other words, bodily stigmata become signifiers of a spiritual inheritance as opposed to a biological heredity (Balibar 1992, 22). In the context of my research, the term “cultural racism” refers to cases in which violence or harassment was justified on the basis that persons who were perceived to be “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” were rendered as inherently connected to a backward, inferior, and potentially threatening Arab culture, Muslim religion, or Arab Muslim civilization.

I use the term “nation-based racism” to refer to the construction of particular immigrants as different than and inferior to whites based on the conception that “they” are foreign and therefore embody a potentiality for criminality and/or immorality and must be “evicted, eliminated, or controlled.”<sup>8</sup> In the context of the “war on terror,” the interplay between culture-based racism and nation-based racism has articulated subjects perceived to be “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” not only as a moral, cultural, and civilizational threat to the “American” nation, but also as a security threat. The mapping of cultural racism onto nation-based racism has been critical in generating support for the idea that going to war “over there” and enacting racism and immigrant exclusion “over here” are essential to the project of protecting national security. Under the guise of a “war on terror,” cultural and nation-based racism have operated transnationally to justify U.S. imperialist ambitions and practices as well as the targeting and profiling of persons perceived to be “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” in the diaspora.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout my field sites, “racism” did not operate as a separate, mutually exclusive, axis of power. Rather, it intersected with multiple axes of oppression, such as class, gender, and sexuality. According to Linda Burnham, the idea of

a simultaneity of oppressions “emerged among women of color feminists in fierce contention with the notion that racial identity trumps all other identities and that the struggle against racism should take precedence over all other forms of resistance to inequity” (2001, 9). My research illustrates that intersections between race, class, gender, and sexuality produced a range of engagements with “racism” among my research participants, depending on their social positioning. For example, the reproduction of government policies and media discourses in day-to-day interactions at work, on the bus, or on the streets were more violent and life threatening in working class urban locations than in upper-middle-class locations (Naber 2006). Because of their class privilege and the longer duration in which they had been in the United States, middle to upper-class research participants had access to social, cultural, and economic privileges that allowed them to distance themselves from proximity to the “potential terrorists” compared to their working-class counterparts. Alternately, working-class immigrants were often perceived to be in closer proximity to “geographies of terror” (i.e., Muslim-majority nations) and were therefore perceived to be in closer proximity to the “potential terrorists” than their middle-class counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout my field site, socioeconomic class intersected with race and gender in that dominant discourses tended to construct working-class masculinities as agents of terrorism and working-class femininities as passive victims of “the terrorists.” I use the term “internment of the psyche” to refer to the ways in which engagements with racialization produced a sense of internal incarceration among my research participants that was emotive and manifested in the fear that at any moment, one could be harassed, beaten up, picked up, locked up, or disappeared (Naber 2006).

## Research Methods

This essay is based on ethnographic research among Arab immigrants and Arab Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area between September 2002 and September 2003. Most of the research took place among two Arab/Arab American community networks, one that includes recent Arab Muslim immigrants and refugees from Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, and North Africa living in poverty and the other, middle and upper-class professionals who are predominantly first and second generation and include Muslims and Christians from the Levant. The research entailed intensive interviews and participant observation with thirty board members representing eight religious, civil rights, and community-based organizations that serve Arabs/Arab Americans among their constituencies.<sup>11</sup> I conducted intensive interviews with six lawyers whose work was vital to community-based efforts in response to the anti-Arab/South Asian/Muslim backlash in the San Francisco Bay Area in the aftermath of September 11.<sup>12</sup> I also conducted intensive interviews

and participant observation among fifty community members from various class, generational, and religious backgrounds and various countries of origin in the Arab world.

### **Names and Naming: “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!”**

Repeatedly throughout my research, participants’ narratives on harassment in the public sphere were stories in which particular names operated as signifiers of an “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” identity. Teachers and youth group leaders agreed that boys with names such as Mohammed or Osama were disproportionately harassed at school. Consider the following stories. Nayla, a Muslim American youth group leader, recalled an incident where school kids would frequently shout, “Look, Mohammed the terrorist is coming!” when a young boy named Mohammed would enter the playground. Amira, a college student, recalled reading the words, “I hate Mohammed. All Mohammeds should die,” on a wall outside the Recreation and Sports Facilities Building at the University of California, Berkeley. Reflecting on difficulties that he and his wife faced in deciding whether or not to name their son Mohammed, Saleh, a small business owner, explained: “After September 11 no one would have thought about naming their son Mohammed in this country if they wanted him to be treated like a normal person. We thought about what would happen to our son in school, and how he would be discriminated against growing up. But we felt that this is our religion and our culture, and long before September 11 we decided that if we had a second son, we would name him Mohammed. We decided not to change what we stood for, but imagine what happens when your neighbor says, ‘what is that cute little boy’s name?’ You say ‘Mohammed’ and they say, ‘Oh...’ This is how September 11 impacted even the relationship between you and your neighbor.”

Several Christian Arabs and Arab Americans with whom I interacted were similarly targeted based on associations between their name and the notion of a “potential enemy of the nation.” In such cases, Christians were perceived to be Muslim because they had Arabic names, illustrating the ways that federal government and corporate media discourses that conflate the categories “Arab” and “Muslim” take on local form in the public sphere. A youth group leader at a Roman Catholic Arab American church reported that after their son Osama was repeatedly called “Muslim terrorist,” his parents changed his name to “Sam.” Recurring throughout the period of my research were similar stories of individuals who changed their Arabic names to anglicized names, including an Arab American Christian who changed his name from Fouad to Freddy after facing 9/11-related harassment. Misidentifications of Arab Christians as Muslims reify the absurd generalizations and misconceptions underlying hegemonic

constructions of the category “Arab” or “Muslim.” They also reify that encounters with racism are informed by fiction and comprise a wide variety of complexities and contradictions. As Amitava Kumar puts it, “In those dark chambers, what is revealed always hides something else” (2000, 74). In the cases of misidentified Arab Christians, the simple reality that not all Arabs are Muslim and not all Muslims are Arabs is hidden and erased from history.

Like federal government legislation, harassment against “potential terrorist men” in the public sphere operated within the logic of nation-based racism that considers discipline and punishment the “proper mechanism to set the tide of criminality intrinsic to them” (Ono and Sloop 2002, 33). Nation-based racism is not specific to the post-9/11 environment, but it has been critical to the justification of many cases of immigrant exclusion by the idea that citizens should be protected against “others” who are “potentially or already criminal” (33), or in this case, terrorists. Ono and Sloop argue that the post-Cold War period has witnessed a proliferation of the notion of the enemy of the nation and that discourse is constituted by the idea that “enemies threaten the moral, cultural, and political fabric of the nation state and must be evicted, eliminated, or controlled....The production and proliferation of new enemies to blame, to oppose, and to conquer is part of a distinct contemporary culture” (35). Referring to histories of Asian immigrant exclusion, Lisa Lowe (1994, 55) writes that nation-based racism has operated through the construction of a binary opposition between patriot and enemy. After 9/11, in the process of legitimizing imperialist ambitions through appeals to nationalist narratives about protecting national security, dominant U.S. discourses have refashioned post-Cold War binaries from patriot versus enemy to those who are with us versus those who are with the terrorists.<sup>13</sup> Names signifying an “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” identity rendered particular men and boys at once foreign, or alien, to the nation, but at the same time connected, in the most familial and instinctive terms, to “the terrorists.” In this sense, nation-based racism conflates “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” masculinities with an inherent potential for violence and terrorism and legitimizes the discipline and punishment of “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” masculinities “over there” (in the countries the United States is invading) and “over here” (within the geographic borders of the U.S.). Moreover, that Saleh, in the narrative above, reconsidered whether to name his son Mohammed indicates that he came to understand that he was required to engage with the hegemonic conflation of names such as Mohammed with Muslim masculinity and terrorism. In this sense, the interpellation of subjects through hegemonic discourses produced disciplinary effects in them. While the conflation of the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” and “terrorism” brought into play dualistic mechanisms of exclusion (patriot vs. enemy/with us or against us), it simultaneously induced within individuals a state of consciousness that I refer to as “internment of the psyche” (Naber 2006).

Although gender permeated nation-based racism through the conflation of

particular names with Muslim masculinity and terrorism, a mapping of nation-based racism onto cultural racism also operated to articulate “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” masculinity as inherently violent toward women. One cab driver told a story of his passengers’ reaction to him after they read that his name was Mohammed: “Once, a woman got in my car. She looked at me, then read my name, then asked me if I was Muslim. When I said ‘yes’ she replied, ‘how many girls have you killed today?’” In this case, a form of cultural racism that essentializes Muslimness as if the association between violence against women and Muslim masculinity is natural and insurmountable constitutes the articulation of Muslim masculinity as intrinsically connected to misogynist savagery. The woman’s reaction to the cab driver reifies what Moallem refers to as “representations of Islamic fundamentalism in the West” that are “deeply influenced by the general racialization of Muslims in a neo-racist idiom which has its roots in cultural essentialism and a conventional Eurocentric notion of people without history.”

Here, “religion” functions like a nature (Balibar 1999, 22), as “Mohammed,” like the Osama and Fouad references above, becomes monstrously subversive, a metonymic source of sedition and danger within the nation, as well as to U.S. “interests” and to “American” bodies, white and nonwhite.

## Unveiling the Terrorist’s Daughter

The intersection of race and gender was also apparent in the harassment of women who wore a headscarf. A general consensus among community leaders was that federal government policies disproportionately targeted men while hate crimes and incidents of harassment in the public sphere disproportionately targeted women. As Farah, a Muslim American woman community activist put it, “Women who wear *hijab* were more of a target because they’re more visible than Muslim men in public. The awareness that they were in more danger and were more impacted than men could be seen by all of the events that were organized in solidarity with veiled women in response to the backlash. There were days of solidarity organized across the nation.” Several cases in which employers fired women from their jobs for wearing headscarves instilled a sense of apprehension about the acceptability of discrimination against Muslim women in the public sphere among several of my research participants. As Manal, a university student explained, “We felt supported, but at the same time, there was a concern for our safety. I had never carried pepper spray. I started carrying pepper spray after 9/11 and was really being mindful of my surroundings. I remember the Muslim Student Association meetings; afterwards everyone would make sure that no one was walking alone to their cars.” Several Muslim American community leaders recalled cases in which women debated whether they should remove their scarves. As Amal, another university student put it, “I knew I had to prepare for at least

some kind of backlash because I was visually identifiable. My mother, who doesn't cover, specifically told me 'Don't go outside for a month or two. Wait till things die down.' I was like, 'I shouldn't hide. I shouldn't be scared or restrain my lifestyle because of ignorance.'" In this sense, considerations of whether and to what extent one should wear or remove a headscarf or go out in public generated an "internment of the psyche" or the awareness that one must become habitually concerned about hegemonic misinterpretations and mistranslations.

While "Arab Muslim" masculinities were produced as the subjects of discourses that construct their primary and stable identity as violent agents of terrorism and/or misogyny, or the "true" enemy of the nation, "Arab Muslim" femininities, signified by the headscarf, were articulated as extensions of those practices.<sup>14</sup> In several cases, that headscarves signified an identification that transformed particular women into daughters or sisters of terrorists in general, or Osama or Saddam in particular, exemplifies one of the ways in which gender permeated nation-based racism in the context of the "war on terror." Lamia, a community activist summarized what she witnessed through her work among Arab Muslim youth in the Tenderloin, "After September 11, girls who wear *hijab* received lots of harassment on the bus, at school and on the street. People would try and pull their *hijab* off." The following excerpt from a group interview with Iraqi youth elucidates Lamia's point:

Maha: "My sister was coming home from school one day and people were calling her, 'Osama's daughter.'"

Salma: "At school, kids take off their shirts and put them on their heads and say, 'We look like Osama's daughter now. We look like you now.' Some kids would come up to us and say, 'Why don't you take it off? Are you still representing Osama?'"

In this narrative, young Arab Muslim girls are constructed as though patriarchal kinship ties are the sole determinants of their identities. Reduced to "daughters of Osama," they are transformed into the "property," "the harmonious extension" (Shohat and Stam 1994) of the enemy of the nation within, or symbols that connect others to the "real actors" or "terrorists" but who do not stand on their own (and lack agency). The "daughter of a terrorist" metaphor also articulates a condemnation of Muslim women for veiling.<sup>15</sup> Reifying the logic of nation-based racism that constructs a binary between us versus them and good, or moral Americans versus bad immoral potential criminal terrorists, Salma's peer not only asks her to "unveil" but also reduces her realm of possibilities to either "taking off her veil" or "representing Osama." For Salma's peer, either she is unveiled/with us, or she is with terrorism. In this sense, the "veil" serves as a boundary marker between "us" and "them," and as long as women remain "veiled" they remain intrinsically connected to "potential terrorists."

## Nation of Origin and the Silencing of Political Dissent

My research indicated that emblems signifying particular nations of origin also placed persons into associations with the “potential terrorist” enemy of the nation. This process was based upon a logic that conflated particular nations with “Arabness,” “Islam,” and a potentiality for “terrorism.” The signifier “nation of origin” often intersected with other emblems signifying the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” (such as name, skin color, facial hair, or headscarf). In particular, emblems representing “geographies of terror,” or the nations that the Bush administration has referred to as terrorist-harboring countries or terrorist training grounds (e.g., Palestine or Iraq), tended to operate as signifiers of the enemy of the nation. Moreover, the potential for encountering harassment was often exacerbated when one was perceived to be an “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” simultaneously expressed solidarity with one or more of these nations. For example, Zainab, a Palestinian woman who wore a *kuffiyah* (a scarf representing Palestinian resistance) on a daily basis and posted a sticker of a Palestinian flag on a window near the front door of her home encountered some of the most severe forms of harassment I learned of throughout the period of my research. Zainab lived in the Mission District of San Francisco. She described her experience as follows: “I walked out [our door] and saw all this graffiti. I didn’t know....Should I be afraid? angry? Then I looked at the sidewalk and saw ‘Kill Arabs’ in big blocks right in front of our house.”<sup>16</sup>

For Zainab, the “war on terror” took on local form in that her public expression of Palestinian identity and political solidarity with Palestinian people put her in close proximity with the “terrorists.” The perpetrator’s articulation of violence against Zainab paralleled the Bush administration’s rhetoric that violence is essential to patriotism, Americanness, and the protection of national security in the context of the “war on terror.” In the ongoing hate crimes that took place in the two-year period following 9/11, vandalism and death threats emerged as critical venues for the articulation of nation-based racism against persons who were perceived to be intrinsically associated with “Islamic fundamentalism” and “terrorism” in the public sphere. Perpetrators deployed tactics “officially” banned by the state that simultaneously supported government discourses on militarized patriotism and war against the enemies of the nation in this case, Palestinian Arabs.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I seek to bring new questions to bear on the study of race and racism within U.S. racial and ethnic studies: What are the implications of continually reevaluating our understanding of racialized-gendered identities in light of new

and changing historical moments? What are the possibilities for envisioning U.S. racial and ethnic studies in ways that remain connected to the 1960s student and civil rights struggles through which they were produced while becoming more attentive to current gendered racialization processes? How might becoming attentive to the gendered racialization of Arabs, South Asians, and/or Muslims contribute to explorations of the relationship between race, gender, sexuality, and empire or the structures of racism, sexism, and homophobia that operate against immigrants with whose homelands the United States is at war?

This chapter has reinforced existing theoretical approaches that tend to define U.S. race and ethnic studies that contend that “race” is malleable and shifting, that racial categories are socially and historically constructed, and that the construction of racial categories is a continuous process that takes on new and different form within different historical moments. It has also affirmed existing women of color feminist approaches that have called attention to differences within racialized groups (such as those of class, gender, sexuality, and religion) and contended that experiences of oppression that are shaped by both racism and sexism simultaneously cannot be subsumed within either a feminist framework that critiques sexism or an antiracist framework that is only critical of racism (Crenshaw 1991).<sup>17</sup> It has also illustrated that research on the gendered racialization of the “Middle Eastern/Muslim” or the “Arab/Muslim/South Asian” “enemy within” can generate important new questions, such as: To what extent does the rhetoric of an endless, fluid “war or terror” that “knows no boundaries” produce new forms of gendered racialization that are similarly arbitrary, open-ended, and transgress borders and particular geographic places?

### Endnotes

- 1 Here I use Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s term “anthropological locations.” They define such “location work” as “an attentiveness to social, cultural, and political *location* and a willingness to work self-consciously at shifting or realigning our own location while building epistemological and political links with other locations” (1997).
- 2 Here I build upon Andrea Smith’s notion of “racial logics.” She argues against the assumption that all communities have been impacted by white supremacy in the same way. Instead, white supremacy operates through separate yet still related racial logics. Multiple logics operate depending on the context: “This framework does not assume that racism and white supremacy is enacted in a singular fashion; rather, white supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated, logics (2006, 67).
- 3 See Moallem (2002) for further analysis of discourses on “Islamic fundamentalism.” She argues, for example, that discourses on “Islamic fundamentalism...[reduce] all Muslims to fundamentalists, and all fundamentalists to fanatical anti-modern traditionalists and terrorists, even as it attributes a culturally aggressive and oppressive nature to all fundamentalist men, and a passive, ignorant, and submissive nature to all fundamentalist women.
- 4 Here I use Kent Ono’s term, “potential terrorists.” Ono argues that “potential terrorists” serves as a useful concept to begin to address political and media discourses that produce a creative, if fictional, ‘network’ or interconnection along racial, gender, national, sexual, political, and ideological lines. Hate crimes, surveillance by the repressive apparatus of the state, and surveillance and disciplining technologies have erected a powerful discursive barrier to full

- participation in society by those marked as ‘potential terrorist’” (2005, 443).
- 5 The category “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” as a signifier of the “enemy of the nation” was not produced after 9/11 but has permeated government and corporate media discourses for decades. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the subcategory “South Asian” has been encompassed within dominant U.S. discourses on the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” enemy (Rana and Rosas 2006; Maira and Shihade 2006). Federal government policies, for example, tended particularly to target Arabs and South Asians, and hate crime incidents following 9/11 throughout the U.S. disproportionately targeted Arabs and South Asians, illustrating that Arabs and South Asians have been similarly associated with “Islamic fundamentalism,” “terrorism,” and the “enemy of the nation” in the context of the “war on terror.” Because my research did not include a focus on South Asian communities, I will focus specifically on how Arab and Arab American research participants were perceived to be associated with the notion of an “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” enemy, even though this term has taken on different form in other contexts.
  - 6 See Moallem (2005), Balibar (1991), and Goldberg (1993).
  - 7 See Stockton (1994), Rana and Rosas (2006), and Moallem (2005) for further analysis of cultural racism and the relationship between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Moallem, for example, argues that “this imputation of an intrinsic nature to a cultural or religious system has roots in European race theory, in particular, in the discourse of anti-Semitism” (10).
  - 8 Although the construction of an Arab Muslim Other has permeated dominant U.S. national discourses for decades, it became increasingly pronounced and expanded in scope in the aftermath of September 11 (Ono and Sloop 2002, 35). See Abraham (1989), Joseph (1999), Saliba (1999), and Suleiman (1989) for analyses of the history of Arab American marginalization.
  - 9 See Robert Young for further analysis of the concept of “imperialism” (2001, 25-24). Also see Harvey (2003), who maintains that the New Imperialism represents U.S. efforts to resort to military power in the process of controlling the world’s oil resources and to ensure continued U.S. dominance in the global arena. Also see Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire* for a historical analysis of Western intervention and empire in the Middle East (2004).
  - 10 Here I build upon Tadiar’s theorization of racism in the context of the “war on terror.” She argues, “from the dominant cultural logic of the U.S. state, terrorism embodies an other relation to death, and it is on this basis that racism operates against other peoples who are deemed close to this other relation to death epitomized by the would be suicide bomber” (2005).
  - 11 I selected organizations that have played key roles in responding to the post-September 11 backlash, attracted the most members, and have the greatest membership size. I also selected organizations that were diverse, focusing on a range of issues that were educational, religious, cultural, and political and serving persons from various generations, socioeconomic class backgrounds, and countries or origin within the Arab world.
  - 12 The lawyers who participated in this research worked on a wide range of issues and projects in solidarity with Arab and Muslim immigrant communities on a day-to-day basis. One lawyer, for example, was the co-chair of the Bay Area Arab American Attorneys Association and served via mayoral appointment on the San Francisco Human Rights Commission. The program director at the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of the National Lawyers Guild also participated in this research and helped to develop a “Know Your Rights” campaign. Several lawyers worked closely with special registration cases. Another lawyer helped organize a project that documented and organized project that monitored INS abuses in the city of San Francisco. A lawyer who was appointed as the Human Rights Commissioner of the city of San Francisco and participated in this research also organized a series of hearings where individuals targeted by the post-9/11 backlash narrated and recorded their stories.
  - 13 See Howell and Shryock (2003) for further analysis on the implications of the binary “those who are with us and those who are with terrorists” on Arab American identities and experiences.
  - 14 For further analysis on representations of femininity as extensions of masculinity, “abject beings,” or the construction of the feminine as objects that supply the site through which the phallus penetrates, see Butler (1993). Also see Tadiar (2002, 5) for a discussion of the ways

that women within a colonialist, patriarchal society are not only imprisoned within particular ideals about gender, but also function as useful objects that serve patriarchal, national, and international structures and processes.

- 15 See Shohat and Stam for an analysis of colonialist discourses on “veiling.” Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, in their critique of colonialist Hollywood films write, “The orient is...sexualized through the recurrent figure of the veiled woman, whose mysterious inaccessibility, mirroring that of the orient itself, requires Western unveiling to be understood” (1994, 149).
- 16 With very little assistance from the local police, Zainab and her friend discovered who the perpetrator was by tape recording him in action. She discovered he lived a block away from her home. She continued to face resistance from the local police to put a restraining order on him or assist her with the case.
- 17 I draw from Kimberly Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality. She argues that women of color often have to choose between participation in an antiracist movement or a feminist movement, yet the experiences of women of color mark intersections that cannot be captured only by a gender or race analysis that stand separate from each other. Crenshaw’s work on the intersectionality transgresses this limitation by opening up a space for intersectional organizing/resistance (1991).

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# Palestinian Women's Organizations: Global Cooption & Local Contradiction

**Eileen Kuttab**

*Eileen Kuttab places the dilemmas of the Palestinian women's movement in global and local contexts in this excerpt from her article of the same title published in Cultural Dynamics, (220:2, autumn 2008). The full article is available at the Institute of Women's Studies library and includes a more extended discussion of the regional context, global versus local women's agendas, and challenges for the future. This issue of Cultural Dynamics, edited by Martina Rieker, features a number of papers from two seminars hosted by the American University of Cairo under the rubric of Gender and Empire. Another Institute associate, Penny Johnson, contributed an article to the same issue entitled "Violence all around us: Dilemmas of Global and Local Agendas Addressing Violence against Palestinian Women, an Initial Intervention."*

*Eileen Kuttab is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and the former Director of the Institute of Women's Studies.*

## **Introduction**

For the last two decades, it has become more difficult or even unrealistic to de-link the global setting from the political, economic and social conditions of the Middle East in general and the occupied Palestinian Territories in particular. The recent changes and challenges that face the Middle East can only be viewed in the context of globalization or what some call the "Empire." As Petras stated, the concept of Empire is "the process that encapsulates the world of multi-nationals, the global military apparatus and international financial institutions linked structurally to the "Imperial state" (Petras, 1997). Reviewing the political and economic changes in the past decades, one can say safely that the Empire's hegemony over the regional or local contexts cannot happen in a vacuum or without the support of internal local or national forces as we observe in different areas of the Middle East.

At the same time, Hardt and Negri emphasizes the hegemonic nature of the Empire but characterized it as borderless and eternal, which gives the impression that it has been created to stay and hence assumes coping as a necessity and resistance as meaningless. They describe it as:

“fundamentally lacking boundaries, where its rule has no limits and where it posits a regime that effectively encompasses the spatial totality, or really that rules over the entire “civilized” world... In other words, Empire presents its rule not as a transitory moment in the movement of history, but as a regime with no temporal boundaries and in this sense outside of history or at the end of history. It operates on all registers of the social order extending down to the depths of the social world. Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits.” (Hardt, Negi, 2001).

It is difficult to ignore the effect of such a political paradigm, where unchecked military supremacy and economic power creates a culture of submission and fear that national and local regimes cannot compete with or challenge, hence choose to cooperate and be co-opted as the only way to cope and share its economic benefits.

However, on another level, such a hegemonic position can create a kind of challenge where the oppressed and anti-imperial activists develop new modes of coping and resistance. What kind of resistance has developed, if any, is not the subject of this article, but would be an inspiring analysis to renounce the eternity of the Empire

### **Non-Military Tools: Peace Initiatives and Aid**

New conditions emerged in Palestine at the beginning of the nineties when peace negotiations started between Israelis and Palestinians, and opened the way for the domination of neo-liberal paradigms, where, most strikingly, the Israeli colonial occupation on Palestinian territories used “peace” initiatives or negotiations as a tool for subjugation. In addition, multinational corporations and other actors acted to regulate the future economies of the Middle East and in particular the Palestinian territories. For example, the World Bank conducted their first overall study on the different sectors of the society like economy, education, the private sector and so on to be able to design a comprehensive plan for financing the “peace” initiative. This in itself initiated the process of linking structurally global markets with the local markets in an uneven, incompatible and exploitive relationship.

Nevertheless, as was previously mentioned, these global political and economic schemes cannot sustain or succeed without the help and support of the internal forces of the national regimes and/or the local elite being an integral part, or an extension of the new ideological liberal frameworks. The Palestinian local elite, like other Arab counterparts, represents interests of small groups of nationals who employed political space to develop their personal agendas and portfolios that does not in any way include or reflect people’s aspirations, or achieve people’s democratic

and national rights. These conditions have been created in the early nineties, after the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles of 1993<sup>1</sup> and the 1995 Interim Agreement (the Oslo agreements), which were the “Israelization” of a global model which became the framework for all political and economic negotiations and practices. It is after, a few years of translating the agreements into practice that they became exposed and consequences felt. These practices became more tangible when further restrictions were put on mobility of people and goods, and new re-invasions of the territories by the Israeli army was carried out which in turn impacted the economic life of citizens, increased the levels of unemployment and poverty, and deepened the fragmentation of people and regions in addition to exposing the Palestinian Authority which could not declare or claim any sovereignty or control over the territories.

## **A New Style of Dependency and Hegemony**

Currently, the different partners<sup>2</sup> in the new “Empire” have come together under the slogan of democratic reform and economic prosperity in the Middle East, but choosing wars and devastation as the main mechanisms. These physical wars did not only invade the economies, markets and territories or lands, but also raided and assaulted homes, families, schools, national libraries and museums destroying civilization, heritage, culture, memory, and hope. The wars in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon illustrate a real expression of this new Empire and hegemony on the region, where a “New Middle East”<sup>3</sup> is being re-shaped, A Middle East that is subjugated to oppression, humiliation and alienation, with the support and coverage of the national political regimes. A region where the global economies substitutes the local genuine initiatives in development, where resistance against colonial occupation becomes illegitimate, and where state terrorism becomes justifiable and praised by the international community and considered as a legitimate tool for security and democracy.

Although the “Empire” has promised the nations to end poverty, unemployment, famine, and gender inequality, through economic and political reform and structural adjustment policies, to empower the poor and the women, and to enhance human and sustainable development, they have failed to do so as their promises have not been genuine, and their real agendas rest on further deprivation, dependency and added control over resources. The neo-liberals have not invaded the Middle East to bring democracy but to cause chaos, destruction fragmentation, cantonization and despair. They have limited the social democratic movements’ capacity to challenge their model, they have subverted and diffused their efforts through creating and cushioning the NGOs to substitute and promote a community in a human face (Petras, 1993), transforming class politics to community development, depoliticizing active sectors of the population and undermining the commitment to public good

through creating technocrats and co-opting potential leaders. They have developed programs that provide limited services to narrow groups of communities, programs that have become accountable to overseas donors instead of their own people and transformed internal solidarity and unity into collaboration and subordination to the macro-economy of neo-liberalism through exploitation of the local human and material resources.

It is difficult to de-link the current situation in the Palestinian territories from all the above emerging issues. This evolution has developed due to several internal factors including the political vacuum created by the post-Oslo weakening of the democratic parties and mass-based organization; partisan politics and the short-sighted vision and dogmatic culture which existed in both the weak “Left” political parties and the fragmented and self-centered “Right” parties, all occurring within deteriorating economic conditions and poverty. All this has generated a new style of organizations that have drifted away from a genuine developmental women’s agenda.

### **Transformation of Palestinian Women’s Organizations**

The Palestinian women’s movement in general and women organizations in particular have evolved within the different historical stages of the national struggle to express people’s aspirations and respond to national needs. Since the beginning of the last century, Palestinian women’s activism has been influenced by its relation to and identification with the national resistance struggle. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus briefly on the seventies and eighties as a background section in order to situate the current changes in perspective.

Characterizing the contemporary women’s movement, one can talk about two distinct periods: the first is pre-Oslo period characterized by a revolutionary style in the seventies and eighties that featured a genuine democratic movement emerging in its decentralized structures to respond to the needs of the national struggle and to promote women’s consciousness around national and women’s issues.

In the mid-seventies, the Palestinian national leadership initiated a process of democratization of the national movement in order to mobilize and organize people of different social categories including the youth, women, workers and peasants, to face the Israeli occupation policies. They believed that resistance should take a new form, decentralized mass-based structures that enable the national movement to organize the masses, in order to challenge the series of economic and political measures implemented by the Israeli occupation intending to destroy the cultural and socio-economic infrastructure of the Palestinian society. (Kuttab, 1996) It is in this context that the “new” women’s movement represented by women’s decentralized outreach committees rather than women’s urban societies were created and a new

platform was put forward. The buildup of such democratic activism prepared the grounds for a democratic Intifada launched in 1987 which has been characterized as one of the major popular uprisings in the recent Palestinian history.

### **The First Intifada, 1987-1993**

After a decade of mobilization and democratization, the women's movement through its continuous work with women in villages and refugee camps represented the backbone of the resistance movement in the first Intifada in 1987, when they, together with other mass based organizations, acted as the local authority by offering their services and support to the people to sustain the community in crisis.

A new platform was formed that combined different dimensions, most importantly national, social, cultural and economic aspects including women's issues. The women's committees adopted a comprehensive development paradigm that not only addressed the national issues, but also all other issues of the community. Although the gender discourse was not yet adopted, the committees focused on women's rights and defined them specifically as the right to struggle, to work, to be educated and to be represented equally in political decision-making. These rights have been and are still legitimate rights that are still part of the women's agenda today. Yet, the content of these rights, their definitions and their meanings differed from how these are defined today due to the changing political context and the hampering of the donor community and international organizations, which replaced the original discourse with a modernizing liberal discourse that targeted individual women rather than the collective. The women's committees played a major role in the first Intifada; they have raised political consciousness of women through mobilization, organization, and participation in the struggle, they have enhanced national production to substitute and boycott Israeli products in an effort to enhance national identity. They have created an alternative space for popular education to replace regular schools which have been closed by the Occupation forces for long periods of time during the Intifada. They have provided services for the community in order to sustain the Intifada and support women's role in public life. All these activities have been crucial for the continuity of the Intifada and the empowerment of women. (Kuttab 1996).

### **Post Oslo 1993-2000**

The signing of the Oslo agreement created on one hand an initial political environment of euphoria and optimism among the Palestinians and a new mode of thinking that assumed liberation and independence. Yet, on the other hand, it caused a deep split within the national movement which was unified against the

occupation. This new mindset, where people felt less pressured by the daily presence of the occupiers, created more space to focus on the internal affairs. In this context, the women's movement also found itself urged to look strategically at women's issues and overlook the national issues. Consequently, the mass based organizations have become confused and their roles weakened which resulted in their gradual erosion. The erosion of these organizations in the transitional period left an elite leadership that is not accountable to any constituency — but rather sought legitimacy from “the people” through its symbolic and historic role as guardians and representatives of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, the fragile left opposition parties have not been able to maintain their activity and viability, incapacitated by their own internal conflicts and structural weaknesses, particularly the absence of internal democracy, as well as the growing hegemony of the Palestinian Authority. Only the Islamist opposition has succeeded in maintaining a popular base (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001) and the last elections of 2006 which resulted in the victory of Hamas the Islamic movement indicate this fact.

The nascent “state” has thus transformed the terrain of politics and resistance, diminishing the avenues of participation of people in general and women in particular, as informal and popular networks of resistance collapsed and were substituted with formal politics, and the “inside leadership” of the West Bank and Gaza marginalized by “outside” leadership coming from Tunis which resulted in a duality between strong formal political activity versus weak informal activity as a first step in alienating the civil society and limiting the participation of women. (ibid. 2001) This has resulted in the monopoly of the public space by the Authority and particularly by its security forces, despite the occasional emergence of “counter-publics” (Marshall 1994, 144) where political and social issues were contested.

Consequently, a more liberal feminist fragmented movement has been shaped compromising on national issues, co-opting neo-liberal paradigms, outward looking—using global frameworks as reference to formulate their own agendas, and detached, losing their organic structural ties with the national movement and grass-roots. Hence losing its original national, and class identity, internal homogeneity and genuine dynamism. A movement that became keener to reproduce the international alienating agenda instead of a responsive relevant local agenda.

### **Al Aqsa Intifada, 2000-**

In every stage of the struggle women in general and the women's movement in particular faces new challenges, some of them have been directly related to the national conflict and the prolonged occupation, while the others have been a result of the patriarchal authority and culture of both the national movement and the Palestinian society. As the second Intifada was more of a militant nature and women did not play an important role in it, the women's movement has lost its connection

with the grassroots due to their limited access to mobility as a result of the closure policy that the Occupation enforced, and as a consequence of its irrelevant agenda in regard to the real conditions that emerged as a result of the Intifada. We witness separation between the regions: Gaza and West Bank, with a duality in commitment to the national issue. We observe a gap between the women's leadership and grassroots, the government was inserted between the mass of the population and the occupation, and a corrupt system that is accountable to itself and not to the population at large has become the rule. (Hammami and Kuttab, 1999).

All this new political terrain presented the women's movement and other social movements as well, with difficult dilemmas in developing a strategy that addressed both gender issues in the emerging state, linked to the very real conditions of Israeli colonial oppression and the real needs of women for independence. In fact, a post independence strategy largely dominated with initiatives for legal reform, anti-discrimination in government regulations and practices, integration of women into ministries, democracy workshops and addressing specific issues like domestic violence. (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001).

## **Professionalization of the Women's Movement**

The new phenomenon of feminist NGOs in the early nineties came to play a prominent and highly controversial role in sustaining the feminist organizations as a movement. These NGOs have come to denote particular kinds of groups with orientations and practices distinct from those of the historic women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Growing numbers of specialized and professional feminist NGOs have dedicated themselves to intervening in national and international policy processes.

The expansion of the number of women's professional organizations (NGOs) in the early nineties which advocated for women's rights has become one of the dominant trends in the evolution of the Arab women's movements as well as the Palestinian. Such an increase indicated on one hand the failure of the Arab regimes in promoting women's rights, (Jad 2003), and the failure of the civil society organizations to sustain its activity and protect its achievements due to their inability to balance between national and gender rights even though they promoted equality and social justice as two principles and slogans within the national program and as part of their ideological framework and program. (Sabbagh, 1996). In addition, although the Palestinian Authority supported women's rights to a certain level, it did not in any way bypass the conditions of Islamic *shari'a* law, a compromise that was made against the Women's Bill of Rights of 1993 which has declared gender equality as one of its main principles. (ibid.) Hence, the inception of these organizations was directly an outcome of the absence of internal democracy and indifference of the national movement regarding gender issues on one hand, and the political process

and peace agreements which created a suitable political environment. In addition to the limited space that gender issues were given on the national agenda.

Hence, during the early nineties, more feminist professional NGO institutions have mushroomed and developed and started to play a prominent role in transforming the local women's agenda. The vision and practices of these NGOs are distinct from those of the historic women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s that were decentralized formations of the national movement. Growing numbers of specialized and professional feminist NGOs have dedicated themselves to intervening in national and international policy processes. It became obvious that the women's movement leadership sought to use this opportunity and space to impact new national policies through specialized and professional work. Consequently, they became more noticeable on the national map through receiving funds from bilateral and multilateral agencies. They have adopted a new agenda more oriented to policy and advocacy and provided expertise for international and national organizations for preparation of official preparatory documents and assessment reports.

This structural transformation of institutionalizing women activism in a new form of professional organizations marginalized the grass-root input in the making of the transition and weakened the historic women's committees, further de-linking women's issues from the national issues and depoliticizing women's rights from political concerns. (Hammami and Kuttub, 1996). This was often justified through an argument of decreasing control and hegemony of the different political factions on women's agendas. This was in addition to the erosion of mass movements and the weakening capacity for mass mobilization and democratic representation in face of formal political power and peace negotiations or diplomatic processes. All this collectively affected negatively the women's movement's role, credibility and legitimacy. The emergence of political duality within the women's movement separating the public and private; to this de-politicization of gender meant isolating the "public" implying to the "national and political"; from the "private" meaning "gender" which resulted in the process of de-politicization of women activism. Even until now, these challenges have not been tackled or resolved therefore deepening further the structural imbalance between women's rights vis-a-vis women's practical and strategic needs, versus requirements for national liberation struggle.

### **Political Culture and the "Global Office"**

Another realization that affected the work of the social movements and in particular the women's movement and distorted it from its historical political culture is the process of cooption of qualified political and women's cadres of the social movements into NGOs leaving political factions, social movements and public institutions deficient from qualified and experienced cadres. Furthermore, these cadres who have left political movements and parties have also shifted and

changed their style of living, work and expertise losing their historic attribute for resistance, steadfastness and tolerance and developing new norms and values, new style of dress, new skills specially tailored for writing proposals, reports, documents for workshops, international conferences or assessment reports that are not only produced in a random and speedy way that cannot capture the reality of the situation of women, but also adopting a set format that does not permit for any creativity or reflection which in turn result in the loss of the local heritage and reality expression. In addition, as most of these organizations focus on projects rather than programs, cadres loose their strategic vision, their analytical abilities and become technical instruments for the international and donor community.

It is worth noting that certain skills that were useful, necessary, and historically relevant for grassroots work like organization and mobilization (Jad 2003) have lost their functional value and instead technical skills were promoted which were more directly linked to the new areas and style of work where presentation and formats, or "form" and not "content" became important. All these skills have become more important traits for competition among the elite, and at the same time have enlarged the gap between the elite women's leadership and the grass-roots isolating further the women's elite from the masses.

In addition, through professional work, women's organizations have divided and fragmented the women's sector into different professional groups according to the agenda of the organization and the nature of the service available. Providing partial and scattered services compartmentalize women's struggle and experience and limit their ability to see the larger scene. Exaggerated professionalization fragments the comprehensive understanding of women's issues and separates practical and strategic gender needs without linking them together. Whereas unifying women and mobilizing them against the occupation and patriarchal manifestations in its different components would be a more powerful strategy to transform society and exert drastic changes on women's conditions. Dividing confrontation weakens women from unifying their efforts in attaining social and political rights.

Looking at the situation of women in general, we find that their conditions have deteriorated especially in the aftermath of the second Intifada, and their pressing problems like poverty due to unemployment, or imprisonment, or death of their husband or sons as breadwinners have not been resolved, their participation in the labor market has stayed minimal, their voice in affecting the political process has stayed unattended to, and their equal rights at different levels have not been achieved. Why this has not been achieved is in my view due to two factors the occupation and its destructive consequences on economic, political and social levels and the transformation of the social movements including the women's movements into specialized organizations which caters for the global agendas that does not include priorities of the majority of ordinary women.

## **Rethinking the Women's Movement: Concluding Remarks**

Currently, the Palestinian society continues to suffer not only from a colonial occupation but also from a fragmented political system, erosion of civil life, profound disintegration of social networks, and class polarization.

Indeed, the growing demand and competition of NGOs and especially women NGOs over funding to sustain their continuity, further deepens relations of dependency with the donor community and imposes a global agenda which conforms with available funding agenda of the donor community. In addition, the continuous and vicious circle where organizations must meet the requirements of the donor organizations in terms of conditions, deadlines (which are not realistic) and set issues, prohibit them from finding the space and time to rethink or readjust their agendas to include or integrate some of the priorities of the masses, which are issues that don't find any funding. Moreover, due to the political vacuum that these organizations exist within, and due to the weakness of the democratic political parties, there is no pressure exerted on them to re-evaluate their work, or make structural adjustments. Finally, due to the structural and cultural changes of women's organizations to adapt to the new model of global organization and style of work, it is very difficult to regain the genuine culture of women's experiences in mobilization and organization of masses.

It is worth noting that although most of the women's organizations have integrated empowerment as a theme in their programs, it is important to remind them that women's empowerment may only be achieved in a context of sovereignty and freedom, where human rights and the rule of law are observed within a sovereign state and not under colonial occupation. This means that as long as Palestinian society remains under a colonial occupation which targets the land and the people, violates the human rights of men and women, and deprives the people from self-determination and the right to build a state, it will be impossible to talk about real empowerment of women. However, the community and women's efforts in the political struggle which feed into continuous resistance, steadfastness and coping should be the new framework to measure Palestinian women's empowerment. When national liberation is linked to social liberation, it will undoubtedly contribute to the empowerment process.

As Palestinian women are involved in a national struggle for liberation and self-determination, they are also engaged in a democratic struggle against patriarchy and undemocratic governance and practices that prohibit the realization of social justice and gender equality. Moreover, it is difficult to separate individual and structural equality as both can play a role in empowering women and at the same time democratize the system of governance which can ensure gender equality. A balance between structural and individual equality is necessary to ensure democratic transformation. In this respect, empowerment would also include individual self-

determination where individual rights meet with collective women's rights to result in a democratic system that can treat all women and men equally.

Furthermore, it should be noted that empowerment can never be reached when a patriarchal system is still the ideological and practical framework where gender relations are defined and where women's subordination and exploitation prevails both at the private and public spheres. Hence a women's movement that can confront the system through an organized program and mobilize women against patriarchy is a pre-condition to self liberation of women.

In this context, real empowerment of women must be translated into political power that is geared to effective change in existing gender power relations, rather than struggling within their current limitations and frameworks. Empowerment must not be confined to the empowerment of the individual but must make individual aspirations compatible and integral to collective aspirations.

Finally, if women's organizations continue to speak of equality and empowerment in the abstract and in isolation from national liberation issues, it will continue to be distant from the masses and the needs of the masses. To make women's issues societal issues, the women's movement and women's organizations should go back to their original agenda of balancing the national and the social in a workable formula that can bridge the gap between the requirements and needs of the elite and the masses.

### Endnotes

- 1 Signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, and resulted in a peace agreement that committed both parties to a series of actions and interim measures including partial Israeli territorial withdrawal and limited Palestinian self-government.
- 2 Neo-liberal regimes, multinational corporations and national regimes have all come.
- 3 "New Middle East" is the concept that was used by Condoleezza Rice to describe the American plan for the region.

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# REVIEW

## RETHINKING AGENCY

### Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*

**Lena Meari**

*In her book Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton University Press 2005), Saba Mahmood poses a series of conceptual challenges to feminist theory in particular, and secular-liberal thought in general. These challenges emerge from her careful attention to how Egyptian women in the mosque movement – as teachers and learners – view themselves as actively constructing meaningful and virtuous lives, including taking on roles in public life, while adhering to “norms” of female behavior such as modesty, humility and service. In this review, Meari probes the significance of Mahmood’s rethinking of critical feminist concepts such as women’s agency and its relation to resistance and subordination.*

*Lena Meari is a doctoral student in Anthropology at the University of California-Davis and faculty member at the Institute of Women’s Studies.*

*Politics of Piety* is a masterpiece of writing against naturalized theories and assumptions. Through ethnographic work with the women’s mosque movement in urban Egypt, Saba Mahmood questions well established assumptions in feminist theory and secular-liberal thought concerning the ideal of human and political agency.

One of the main goals of the book is to challenge the binary opposition between resistance and subordination that is characteristic of secular liberal thought and liberal and poststructuralist feminism. Mahmood analyzes the conceptions of self, moral agency, and politics that undergird the practices of the Egyptian women’s mosque movement, a movement in which women provide lessons to one another on Islamic doctrine in order to cultivate an ideal virtuous self. Mahmood considers the dilemma that women’s active support of socio-religious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses for feminist analysts. She refuses to use the term false-consciousness to resolve the dilemma of women’s subordination to feminine virtues, such as shyness and modesty. Moreover, she does not try to portray women’s resistance to the dominant male order and their

subversion of the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices, the focus of the work of a number of other feminist scholars. Rather, she explores how the focus on agency and the assumptions underlying this focus can constitute a barrier to the exploration of movements such as the one she addresses.

Mahmood argues that human agency is not limited to acts that challenge social norms. By claiming that agentival capacity is “entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood 2005, 15), Mahmood defies the normative liberal assumptions about human nature, the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom and autonomy, and that human agency consists of acts that challenge social norms.

Mahmood begins her argumentation on agency and resistance by reviewing the works of well-known anthropologists such as Janice Boddy and Lila Abu-Lughod about the multiple forms of women’s agency. While she recognizes the “crucial role” scholarly attention to women’s agency played in “complicating and expanding debates about gender in non-Western societies,” (Mahmood 2005, 6), Mahmood also critiques the failure to “problematize the universality of the desire - central to liberal and progressive thought and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes - to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination” (Mahmood 2005,10). Mahmood criticizes the use of the term resistance to describe a whole range of human actions including those which may be socially, ethically, or politically indifferent to the goal of opposing hegemonic norms. She argues that feminist assumptions reflect a deep tension within feminism caused by its dual character as both an analytical and a politically prescriptive project. She states that according to the humanist and feminist tradition, in order for an individual to be free, his actions must be the consequence of his own will rather than of custom, tradition, and norms. Consequently, agency is coupled with resistance and subversion of external imposed norms and relations of domination. Instead, Mahmood invites her readers to rethink resistance and agency.

Following Foucault, Butler and other thinkers, Mahmood conceptualizes agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable. In contrast to the tradition of feminist scholarship that treated norms as an external social imposition that constrain the individual, Mahmood accepts the theoretical frame that challenge the external-internal opposition by arguing that social norms are the necessary ground through which the subject is realized and comes to enact her agency. Mahmood also accepts Butler’s notion that “to the degree that the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment, agency is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be re-signified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms”. (Mahmood 2005). Nevertheless, Mahmood also criticizes Butler’s notion of agency, which tends to

focus only on the operations of power that resignify and subvert norms.

Drawing on her work with the women's mosque movement, Mahmood argues that norms "are not only consolidated and/or subverted... but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (Mahmood 2005, 22). Furthermore, Mahmood calls for uncoupling the analytical notion of agency from the politically prescriptive project of feminism, because feminist scholarship's emphasis on the politically subversive forms of agency ignores other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse (Mahmood 2005, 153). For example, the mosque participants' attachment to patriarchal forms of life provides the necessary conditions for both their subordination and their agency. This idea can be illustrated through the life of a group of women that Mahmood describes in her ethnography. These women aspire to maintain a pious lifestyle and cultivate the virtue of shyness or modesty (*al-haya*). To achieve their goal the women need to struggle against the secular ethos that surround them in addition to the internal struggle within themselves.

Mahmood proceeds to explore the issue of manifest norms and ethical formation. Unlike the work of Pierre Bourdieu and other scholars, Mahmood is not interested in the question of what a particular ethical theory means, but in what it does. In dealing with the mosque participant's ethics she draws on Foucault's notion about "virtue ethics" and his argument that ethics are always local and particular and pertain to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed. Mahmood perceives the women's mosque movement as a moral reform movement. At the same time, she stresses the relationship between the ethical and the political within such movements.

Driven by her theoretical frame, Mahmood tries through her ethnography to capture the experiences and concerns of the participants in the women's mosque movement. For instance, she explores: the diverse pedagogical styles of the "da'iyat"; the women's concerns for learning to organize their daily life according to Islamic standards of virtuous conduct in a world increasingly ordered by a logic of secular rationality; as well as the relationship between bodily behavior and the pious self. In order to investigate the relationship between bodily behavior and the pious self, Mahmood (2001, 2005) employs some Foucauldian conceptions of the self and the ethical subject formation in order to analyze how the women's mosque movement in Egypt cultivate the virtue of shyness as essential to their piety. Mahmood writes: "Although piety was achievable through practices that were both devotional as well as worldly in character, it required more than the simple performance of acts: piety also entailed the inculcation of entire dispositions through a simultaneous training of the body, emotions, and reason as sites of discipline until the religious virtues acquired the status of embodied habits" (Mahmood 2001: 212). Mahmood elaborates on the relationship

between memory, bodily acts, and the constitution of the self by destabilizing the distinction between innate human desires and outward forms of conduct or at least problematizing the direction of these desires: “Instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions... it is through repeated *bodily acts* that one trains one’s memory, desire and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct” (Mahmood 2001: 214). For instance Mahmood introduces the narrative of Amal who wants to cultivate the virtue of shyness while she does not actually feel it inside herself. Amal describes how she realized that she can make herself shy even if it means to create it until the sense of shyness imprints itself on her interior being.

Mahmood’s conceptualization of agency constitutes a theoretical shift away from treating resistance and human agency as universal and inherent characteristics of subjects’ practices. Further, Mahmood’s illustration of how the embodied practices and actions of the pious women determine their desires and emotions is provocative. These notions could shed light on some aspects of the experiences, motivations and desires of Palestinian pious women in general and Palestinian women members in Islamic parties in particular. Those women are perceived by most International and local feminist scholars and activists (influenced by the liberal-secular conceptions) as victims of false consciousness and lacking of any kind of agency.

Nevertheless, I think that Mahmood’s theoretical focus on the ways in which Egyptian pious women inhabit norms limits the comprehensive understanding of the women’s mosque movement as part of the complex phenomena of the Islamic revival and its ethical, social, economic, class and political intersected aspects. In addition, Mahmood’s work does not consider the singularity of the women and their diverse motivations and practices and treats the participants of the mosque movement as a homogenous group. By treating the participants of the mosque movement as a homogenous group, Mahmood neglects class differences and the diverse and contradicted thoughts and emotions of these women.

The focus of the work on the ethical formation of the Muslim subject does not take into consideration the postcolonial or neo-colonial context of Egypt: the ethnographic site, and how this context affects the movement. Additionally, Mahmood’s focus on the conception of agency as upholding rather than resisting norms is compelling, though partial (as she herself states). Focusing on other aspects of women’s lives and experiences might reveal other modalities of their agency; modalities that might include more than inhabiting and upholding norms, and there might be complex ways of intersection between the different modalities of agency. Some aspects of the women’s pious practices that Mahmood interprets in her ethnography as inhabiting norms might be interpreted in a more complex way as simultaneously inhabiting and subverting norms through providing new significations to these norms.

Finally, Mahmood's portrayal of the Egyptian pious women as the "Radical Other" of the liberal feminists and their conceptions of women fixes both groups of women and overlooks the complications and contradictions within each group.

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