The Many Faces of Feminism
Palestinian Women’s Movements Finding a Voice

Eileen Kuttab

This chapter is not only a scholarly attempt to understand the different expressions of women’s voice in Occupied Palestine, but also the record of an activist from inside the movement who has engaged with and participated in its different stages and who offers here some critical observations and conclusions that need to be shared with feminists and the current and future women’s leadership. Understanding the transformation that took place in the women’s movement and reflecting on the lessons learnt is an important task, because it contextualizes and theorizes women’s experience and voice under colonial occupation.

Palestinian women’s voices have been presented mostly by women outside the movement – researchers from local or international communities – or by men who have interpreted women’s activism through their own interests and instrumentalist framework. Rarely have women activists conveyed their own experiences directly to wider audiences. This chapter aims to reclaim this space for activist voices in the hope of reflecting a genuine but critical view of women’s activism – one which is often misrepresented or misinterpreted by those outside the experience. Although it reflects the power of the women’s movement in Palestine in resisting the colonial occupation, the chapter also clarifies the transformation of the women’s movements’ agenda and focus in different political periods – changing from purely and primarily resisting occupation and addressing gender only...
partially and in terms of practical needs, to a movement that has prioritized gender equity by challenging discrimination against women while marginalizing national resistance. I also explore the volatile encounters between popular women’s organizations and professional women’s NGOs, noting the interactions and complex ties between the two movements in terms of relations between the global and the local, as well as conflicting secular and religious or fundamental perspectives in the broad context of class and gender analysis. Finally, I address the divisive factors and risks to the women’s movement in the light of changing political realities.

**Context: positioning the Palestinian women’s movement**

Reflecting on the work of scholars and feminists, particularly from Latin America and South Asia, represents a turning point in terms of situating and positioning women’s movements on the map of international feminist scholarship. Although most of the existing literature on women’s movements has focused on experiences from West Europe and the United States (Ray and Korteweg 1999), scholarly work on women’s movements in the South, particularly the Middle East, and especially during the 1980s and 1990s, has revealed the power of the women’s movements and encouraged further research from international and local scholars, enhancing the development of transnational comparative work (*ibid.*).

The growing activism amongst Arab women at the political and scholarly level also helped to conceptualize and bring to light the uniqueness of women’s national and political activism in the region. An alternative image of women was highlighted that contested the stereotypical representation of Arab women as oppressed, passive, recipients of international aid – subjugated by their patriarchal culture and traditions. Conversely, Arab women were now seen as active agents of change and advocates of women’s rights. Jayawardena’s (1986) pioneering work, as a leading feminist and academic, focused on Third World
feminism(s), and conceptualized the various incarnations of the movement as indigenous and unique to non-Western societies, rather than mere offshoots of Western feminism(s). Her work revealed the fact that women’s movements in the South needed to be understood in the context of colonialism and national liberation struggles, as in the Palestinian context.

Mohanty’s important critique (1991) of the Western feminist view, reflecting the stereotypical image of Middle Eastern women, reinforces the new alternative image (Ray and Korteweg 1999). She argues against the distorted image of women from the South by explaining that women were seen ‘as not agents of their own destiny, but as victims’, also as ‘average Third World wom[e]n who essentially led curtailed lives, sexually constrained because of their gender; and labelled as “Third World” reflecting an image of ignorance, poverty, illiteracy, lack of education, tradition, domesticity and victimisation’ (Mohanty 1991: 56). This image contradicts the reality of women from the South, who have a long heritage of participation in resistance (Ray and Korteweg 1999; Basu 1995), and have transformed their roles according to the course and requirements of the political and social context of the national struggle. In these experiences, women’s roles have varied from participating in the national liberation struggles, democratizing authoritarian regimes, and addressing gender inequalities and human rights violations, a role that has linked them to national and social struggles.

Recent writings of scholars from the South have shed light on the circumstances that initiated the creation and development of the women’s movements, showing that women’s agency was generated in response to their own political and national contexts and addresses problems and issues relevant to their own conditions (Basu 2010; Fleischmann 2003; Jad 2000; Kuttab 1993; Jayawardena 1986). This work disproves the hypothesis that they were ‘mechanical’ products of external factors such as modernization or development programmes and projects. Although these movements were struggles against colonial oppression, they focused on gender equality and social justice,
made claims for political and economic rights based on a critique of gender-based violence, and asserted gender identity (Basu 1995; Alvarez et al. 1988; Jayawardena 1986). These issues reflect the necessity to ensure a link between social emancipation and the national liberation struggles, and an opportunity to influence the processes of change dynamically. The discussion below highlights the various aspects of the Palestinian women’s movement over time.

**Internal and external factors marginalizing women**

The emergence of the Palestinian Women’s movement within the national struggle, since the beginning of the twentieth century, has extended women’s experiences in the public sphere and expanded their political and social space (Fleischmann 2003; Jad 2000; Kuttab 1996, 1988). These experiences promoted a kind of consciousness that linked national liberation to social emancipation and provided an opening for women to raise their voices and challenge the social and political setting. Sayigh (1988) recognized that the contradictions between women’s mobilization for national struggles and the failure to recognize socio-cultural constraints – which were structural obstacles that bound them to limited kinds of action within the struggle – had become more pronounced over time. This recognition has motivated and justified the inclusion of a clearer gender agenda over the past two decades to address socio-cultural challenges from within, and to expose the overlapping components of resistance against colonial occupation and patriarchy, in the form of gender discrimination and class exploitation.

While some aspects of gender discrimination have come to the forefront, the recognition of class conflict has been continuously undermined and subdued in the different stages of the Palestinian struggle, reflecting the inevitability of elements like ‘national unity’ and social cohesion in facing the Israeli occupation (Kuttab 1999). Subsequently, as the issues of class and gender became more pronounced, they emerged as divisive elements of the resistance, especially within the so-called ‘state-building’ or Oslo
Agreement process – which eventually undermined collective solidarity and substituted it with an individualistic ethos in the make-believe ‘state-building’ stage as participants sought to position themselves within the new reality.

On another level, the Israeli policy of mobility restrictions and siege, combined with the construction of the ‘Apartheid Wall’, have resulted in physical segregation and community fragmentation, separating different villages and households and isolating women further at the social and political level, reframing their role within fixed ‘humanitarian’ parameters, and hijacking their agency and voice \(^1\) (World Bank 2010).

By accepting a gendered electoral system designed to undermine political pluralism and gender, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has further entrenched traditional structures like the extended family and regional affiliation that further limit the representation of women through the legislative (parliamentary) elections. The minimal number of women elected to the legislative council in 2006 reflected their marginal position within both the family and the political party. Historically they are positioned at the bottom of the social and political pyramid, unrecognized as political actors and barely registered on the overall political map.

The few women candidates who were elected to the Parliament were neither the result of a general political commitment to gender equity nor an appreciative sign of women’s active role in the national struggle. The endorsement of gender equity by the Central Election Committee in 2005 included a mandatory clause within the election legislation that the first woman candidate’s name should be placed amongst the first three names on the electoral list, whilst if there were other women candidates in the list these should be listed consecutively along with the names of male candidates (a ‘zipper’ system) to ensure women’s representation. However, even with these electoral procedures and despite the achievement of women’s quota (the bare minimum) in the 2006 elections – a result of women’s struggle for greater representation as a transitional option and an expression of affirmative action – it has been difficult to attain a proportionate
number of women representatives. The explanation lies in the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the society at large, including the political parties.

Women were further marginalized as a consequence of the current internal political conflict between the Fateh movement representing the PA and the Islamic movement (Hamas), who won the 2006 legislative council elections. The conflicting political interests of the parties destabilized the coherence and harmony within the community, and threatened the continuity of the struggle against colonial occupation. This was a blow to the social and political safety net, and the absence of a coordinating will among women, who were divided on political lines, narrowed the political space for institutionalizing women’s voice. The political parties continued to frame women’s role within the ‘protectors of society’ and ‘preservers of family’ parameters, rather than seeking to view them as equal partners in the political process. Even the democratic parties of the left, which historically played an important role in democratizing the national movement in the 1980s, failed to unite or to create an alternative political space where people’s aspirations, and women’s interests and voice, could be protected.

The transformation of the Palestinian women’s movement

Since the beginning of the last century, Palestinian women’s activism has been influenced by its relation to, and identification with, the national resistance (Kuttab 1993; Jad 2000). Here I offer a historical analysis that examines the shifts and transformation of the movement from the more revolutionary democratic phase to the more globalized, state-building stage.

The late 1970s, a democratic transformation phase from a central urban-based women’s movement to more decentralized mass-based committees reaching rural areas and refugee camps, were a step towards embracing gender and class concerns within the national liberation struggle. Initiated and led by the educated middle- and lower-middle-class women, the new mass-based committees adopted a form of participatory democracy that
created new channels for representing an alternative women’s voice reflecting the interests of poorer and vulnerable women. This new voice was more radical, unlike the traditional voice of charitable organizations in urban centres, which followed a relief-and-welfare approach to service provision. The women’s committees gave the majority of women a direct voice in matters that affected their lives, making their agendas and programmes more responsive, relevant and sensitive to women’s priorities and needs (Johnson and Kuttab 2001; Kuttab 1993). Looking back at entries in the historical diary of that period one enters a golden age of women’s activism, one which succeeded in building a democratic culture with democratic tools and tactics. Spaces for expression were expanded, the interests of ordinary women were prioritized, and strategies for coping with everyday conflict and crisis were enhanced, thus enlarging women’s public roles (Kuttab 1993, 1990; Taraki 1991; Hiltermann 1991).

Although these changes brought women’s role to the centre of the national struggle (Davis 1997; Jayawardena 1986), the temporary social space that they struggled for has also exposed the gender limitations. Gender equality and women’s voice are not mechanical outcomes of participation in the struggle, as clarified in other experiences from the South (Kuttab 1993; Jayawardena 1986). They represent an entry point to a process that enhances and legitimizes women’s public role and voice. For such a voice to become powerful, prerequisites must be satisfied – like having enough time, continuous effort, and an increase of freedom for social mobility with less familial control.

**National roles expanding new social spaces**

Although the first uprising of 1987 was a consequence of continuous national resistance and democratic struggle over many years, the leadership representing different sectors like women, youth and workers created a social and political space in which women could be heard and engage. Obviously enough, when resistance becomes comprehensive and engages all sectors of the society, women’s roles expand and their voice is represented.
Positive changes, in terms of attitudes towards women, women’s activists, and their social positions become a reality if resistance continues.

Palestinian women played different roles in the struggle, ranging from being members of the united national leadership that guided the Intifada (uprising), to being political party members, community leaders, development practitioners and leaders of popular committees. These roles overlapped with their continuing roles as mothers, sisters, wives of a militant or prisoner, and at times heads of households. The public–private dichotomy, therefore, dissolved as women engaged in the struggle. Resistance was reflected in social attitudes. For example, the family’s position towards marriage, choice of partner, and bride price (once an obstacle to marriage) has changed. The Intifada period witnessed young and mixed marriages across religions and classes, a decrease in bride price, and unconventional marriages with limited ceremonies. However, this is not to say that the new practices were permanent, or have become rooted in the social system, or even had an impact on legal and religious formulations. Although women’s roles changed significantly within the Intifada, the struggle was aborted long before it could lead to any structural and long-lasting change. Evidence from other developing countries shows that women’s active involvement in national liberation struggles does not usually culminate in any fundamental transformation of women’s social status, or their fuller integration in national political systems after independence (Jamal 2001). As the Intifada did not continue long enough to make any permanent change, many positive social practices did not last. Instability opens opportunities for women to introduce changes to their lives and to their communities (Jayawardena 1986), but these cease as countries become stable. Political stability enforces gender power relations that institutionalize women’s marginalization. The question to be examined is how can changes become permanent, and what tools or dynamics are needed to make them so?

During national liberation struggles in the South, according to Jayawardena (1986) and Basu (2010), patriarchal control,
exerted either by the colonial power or by the national regime, is weakened. However, deep-rooted conventions, traditions and values in a society cannot be shaken simply by women’s participation in a liberation struggle — even if it is on a wide scale — especially if participation is periodic or limited, and is not embedded in an emerging social and political system. Although Palestinian women have always participated in the struggle against colonialism, the intensity and the seasonal nature of participation did not succeed in engendering a revolutionary political system, and hence did not bring any significant changes for women (Jamal 2001). The new political system that resulted has continued to be traditional, patriarchal and authoritarian; and continued to undermine women.

The second uprising — *Al Aqsa Intifada* — in 2000, being more militarized, exaggerated gender biases and affected further the gender dynamics. Women’s popular and informal roles within the struggle were hijacked, and women’s positions and roles in public life threatened (Johnson and Kuttab 2001). In this context two observations are of relevance: first, when power is institutionalized by a state or national movement, and there is an absence of gender equality as it is not internalized theoretically and practically by the constitution, women end up marginalized and their roles in political processes are weakened. This was the case in Algeria, where women engaged in the national liberation struggle against French colonialism but lost their voice and space after liberation had been achieved. Women’s economic opportunities and social space in the form of rights and entitlements, achieved as a result of their active participation in the struggle, no longer get considered (Malley 1996; Gallagher 2002). Second, when resistance takes the form of military action, the colonial state’s aggression escalates, and women become the scapegoats, as they lose their space and voice and most frequently go back to traditional roles in the domestic sphere or in the welfare and humanitarian spheres, which disempowers them further.
Obstacles to advancing women’s demands

In addition to the impact of colonial occupation on women’s livelihoods, discussed above, other internal elements played a role in blocking the enhancement of women.

The Islamic movement

The rise of the Islamic movement (Hamas) in the late 1980s was an important factor that weakened women’s voice and limited its activity in the struggle. At the peak of the first Intifada, Hamas imposed the veil on women by force, which consequently weakened the scope of women’s participation in public and political life. As Hammami (1990) observed, Hamas’s active role in the first Intifada combined with their practice of enforcing the veil (aimed at separating men and women), negatively affected women’s roles and position in political and public life. Hamas’s practice of controlling women in the streets, through threat and intimidation, weakened their visibility, participation and continuity in the struggle. This period was a turning point in the women’s movement’s history and culture of resistance, as it affected its strategic approach and nature of engagement, and left a long-lasting influence.

The secular forces

The post-Oslo period saw the takeover of the mainstream party (Fateh) and the emergence of a new political culture that focused on peace negotiations instead of resistance as the only realistic option for liberation. The weakening of the Intifada resulted in the failure to promote a powerful political dialogue. Resistance not only declined but changed its course, weakening women’s active role and voice. Forced to cope with the social pressures exerted by the imposition of the veil, at the same time as the political pressure of the new culture of peace that undermined resistance, women’s roles were destabilized. This prepared the stage for some women activists to withdraw from the national struggle, citing the weakness of the secular forces that compromised women’s
claims and prioritized the national struggle over the social. In 1991, a few years into the first Intifada, a conference held in East Jerusalem by the Women Studies Committee of Bisan Center for Research and Development addressed social issues precipitated by political conditions. The conference aimed to contextualize and legitimize the integration of ‘social issues’ in the national agenda. Although the goal was to ensure that women’s issues were legitimately adopted at the national level and gender interests promoted within the national struggle, the conference was also a demand by women engaged in popular struggle for continuous support to safeguard the women’s movement’s democratic achievements (Bisan 1991).

Although this period brought a new wave of women’s agency, where social and national issues became more linked, women activists also felt apprehension regarding the national movement’s position towards social issues, justified by the national leadership as an attempt to prevent divisions among people or a political internal conflict. Thus they asked women to wear the veil to facilitate their mobility and make their participation in the struggle more feasible – a compromise that women neither appreciated nor accepted. It seemed to them that declarations on gender equality had been betrayed, and that women’s issues had been relegated to a secondary level compared to the national interest. At the same time, the mainstream party (Fateh), which had become the main political player, was asking them to play along with a compromise on gender issues, so as to strike the balance it was seeking with the rival Islamic movement.

Other social and political issues such as early marriage, school drop-outs, women’s representation in the Palestinian political system, women’s subjugation to Islamic symbols (such as the veil), gendered patriarchal families, and women prisoners were also addressed at the conference. The aim was to force the national movement to take a clear position in terms of gender issues. Although the national movement condemned Islamic discourse and practice in undermining women’s active participation in the struggle, the conference was also pressing for a recognition
of the daily obstacles to which women at the grassroots are subjected.

**The professionalization of women organizations: donor-driven agendas**

A focus on women’s issues in line with the phase of state building, with attention to both post-conflict and global themes, was typical of the agendas and programmes of the new women’s professional organizations (Hammami and Kuttab 1998). As the national movement marginalized women’s issues in the process of prioritizing national ones, several women activists (especially from the left-inclined political parties) were encouraged to withdraw from party politics and reorganize in a parallel movement within professional, specialized NGOs that had mushroomed in the early 1990s. It was a positive and active response through which they sought to regain women’s voice and space – but it was also a turning point that weakened the mass-based women’s struggle. The phenomenon was timely, but it amplified the structural delinking of women’s issues from the national context, depoliticized the social, and at the same time decreased women’s capacity to mobilize and organize other women (Kuttab 2008; Hammami and Kuttab 1999) – thereby broadening the gap between women’s leadership and women at the grassroots. The issues chosen by these NGOs, and their timing, were initiated and nurtured by the donor community. Although the issues addressed a national-democratic struggle, the resulting process delinked and depoliticized these activists in national terms, and this was a strategic risk.

The outcome was to depoliticize the concept of gender, separating gender equity from the power-sharing process between state and male or female citizens (Hammami and Kuttab 1999), and from the broader pursuit of equality and social justice, concepts that had been live issues in pre-Oslo political discourse. Thus the role of the United Nations organizations like UNDP, UN Women and others, and of different UN conventions and international conferences such as Beijing 1995 – combined with the PA’s absence of political will to maintain gender priorities –...
was to transform local agendas. I argue that, in effect, local and global agendas were merged and mainstreamed (Kuttab 2008). A trickle-down approach from neo-liberal actors unified and generalized programmes at all levels, either through international conferences and workshops, or through their financing policies and conditions. In this way local agendas were realigned by co-opting global concerns. In a further outcome the shift in organizational tools and tactics, and the aborting of relations with the grassroots, created a new elite. For instance, and with considerable irony, addressing issues like violence against women or honour killings became problematic because they were delinked from the political and national context (Abdel Hadi 1998; Bisan 1991). The professionalization of women’s work did not in itself transform the women’s movement, but it added to a debilitating complication and fragmentation amidst the physical segregation and mobility restrictions caused by the occupation.

Where are we now? Women’s unfinished liberation and state formation

The political division within the women’s movement, specifically in terms of gender and governance, which has widened since the Palestinian quasi-state was formed, was an important determinant of how women’s roles were shaped in contemporary political life. The Palestinian quasi-state – the PA – was formed after the 1993 Oslo Agreement on the basis of a limited control of the Palestinian land of 1967, and the return of outside leadership in exile. The governing system created a clientelist bureaucracy within which boundaries and the separation of powers were limited and vague. This allowed for a class of beneficiaries with personal interests who viewed the national project as an economic opportunity, and thereby also limited transparency and accountability (Hilal and Khan 2004). This reality further marginalized women from political power and economic resources that started to accumulate within the government. In this context, the PA centralized
power in a non-representative political structure. It devised and expanded a bureaucratic system that limited women’s political participation and silenced their voices – until women made the most of an opportunity to step in, create their own space, and instal mechanisms to reflect their interests (Kuttab 2008, 1993; Jad 2003). The peace process created a ‘post-conflict environment’, inevitably imposing a global agenda and thereby arresting and displacing the local agenda – consequently expanded the gap between the women’s leadership and women at the grassroots.

The main questions that need to be raised now include: whose voice was represented in this political stage, and how was it represented? Did this stage represent a new movement that had gained legitimacy from and was accountable to women, or were there other actors outside the movement who had the capacity to voice women’s welfare concerns without representing their strategic gender interests?

**Mainstreaming women’s rights: an easy fix?**

Confronted by different political and cultural obstacles, reaching gender goals is not a simple process. While there have been some positive changes in the PA’s attitude towards women’s issues and women’s rights, there were two reasons for this. First, pressure from the women’s movements to create their own social and political space was what counted, rather than unprompted commitment by the PA to gender equality. Second, and more telling, was the demand from the international organizations and the donor community for the integration and mainstreaming of gender issues in the state-building stage. That donors imposed gender-sensitive agendas as a condition was most effective in imposing gender on the PA and ensuring its incorporation in the national agenda.

Consequently, different gender units were established within the different ministries, and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs was created, in parallel with experiences in other Arab countries. Establishing these units, however, was just an easy fix to indicate commitment, though this was not serious enough to make the structural impact necessary to bridge the gender gap at the
national level. Gender unit programmes were not reflected in national budgets, which revealed the marginal attention the PA actually paid to gender. Intensive efforts were initiated by UN organizations and the European community to integrate gender into planning through gender mainstreaming policies promoting issues like legal reform, action on gender-based violence, and micro-finance programmes to alleviate poverty. These programmes have been operational tools for women’s organizations and different gender units for mainstreaming gender. Furthermore, new employment opportunities based on political affiliation were created for women as the public sector expanded. Other opportunities were open to highly educated women who were technically and professionally capable of becoming local experts on gender issues – while the majority of women continued to deal with everyday grievances due to the PA’s weak performance with regard to expanding necessary services or work opportunities for unskilled and lower-class women (Kuttab 2006; Hammami 2001).

On the informal level, the Palestinian women’s committees’ insistence that women’s rights and gender equality should continue to be an integral and organic component of the national agenda has not been easy to sustain through all stages of the struggle or across the different women’s committees. This position was stronger among the left secular parties, which followed either Marxist–Leninist ideology or the social democratic approach, although their commitment to this was only partially successful. The importance of the link was realized after the Oslo Agreement, when women found themselves isolated and not represented in the new government. Women from the mainstream Fateh, who constituted the PA, and other activists from smaller political parties who accepted the Oslo Agreement as a base for a political solution, found jobs in the new government. These women became more involved in regular government work, and were co-opted by the different ministries and representative bodies of the political system. Some of them believed that being more involved with the government would enable them to integrate
gender concerns and make the claim for women’s rights within the state apparatus. The belief that instituting gender within the state’s political culture (unrefined state feminism) could bring a quick fix to gender inequality has not been borne out – and will not be, as other experiences have shown. ‘Femocrats’ have now emerged as a class within the new political culture, and they have become more inclined to implement international and donor-driven agendas in a depoliticized manner (Jad 2010; Hammami and Kuttab 1998), without linking them to the structural context that shapes women’s conditions, status and role.

In this context, the women’s rights discourse, promoted by the international community, trickled down through the different United Nations agencies into local institutions. In other words this discourse was abstracted and manipulated within a political system that was under colonial occupation and had no sovereignty or control over its material and human resources – and was therefore unable to produce citizens. In the absence of ‘citizen power’ there was no political will to promote women’s rights in a situation where patriarchy still prevails as an institution and political system (Kuttab 2008). Indeed, it is difficult to understand how women’s rights can be promoted, in a situation where all human rights are violated under colonial occupation. Although Palestinian women may bear the brunt of the struggle, by defending and protecting their households, their rights as women cannot be realized without a legal environment that has the capacity to enforce rights and account for violations. The women’s rights discourse and its practical expression within the different programmes of women’s organizations is far from being concretely realized. I thus argue that the concept of women’s rights should include citizenship rights for the future state, and that discussions around human rights should not be a means to distort the current reality and make people believe that women can fully enjoy human rights under colonial occupation, when the goal of a sovereign state has not been realized.
Theoretical issues in women’s activism

Different theoretical issues become visible when one analyses the women’s movements in the contexts of a national liberation and a need for social emancipation. Some of these issues are raised in the following discussion.

**Universalism versus localism**

The call of some sociologists for less universalistic claims about women’s mobilization and organization in the South, and more attention to theorizing the local and particular, can be true only when accompanied by serious comparative work that discusses and focuses on specific movements rather than overall structural transformation (Ray and Korteweg 1999). This call for understanding the dilemma between ‘particularism and universalism’ is extremely relevant when discussing women’s movements in colonial contexts, and does not delay or obstruct the opportunity for transnational feminism. On the contrary, by reflecting on the uniqueness of the movements, one can conceptualize their relevance at the international or transnational levels, and articulate local understandings of the varying contexts. This chapter responds to this call, as it reflects on the particular nature of the Palestinian women’s movement while bringing out issues of wider interest and international relevance. Communicating the way local movements understand and express their experiences within their own contexts, and reflecting on the meanings and concepts of the local context, can unite different movements and/or struggles, as well as promoting a deeper understanding of resistance movements.

**Local accommodation and global manipulation**

Another important theme is the responsiveness and dynamism of the women’s movement within a particular context. The Palestinian women’s movement continuously responded to the needs and obligations of the struggle, either by introducing or adopting different structures or formations, or by developing...
tactics and agendas. This in itself indicates progress and maturity in the women’s movement’s experience and responsiveness to changes at the political and economic levels. Although this dynamism confirms the dialectical nature of the women’s movement, it also indicates the different changes and setbacks of the national and political struggle. For instance, the new structures devised to create change by transforming centralized urban-based structures to decentralized outlying committees was a dynamic response to women’s practical and strategic needs for outreach and mobilization. Similarly, using different tactics like political education, productive co-operatives, or nurseries to mobilize women represented a choice and application of new tools for mobilization. Yet, the disruption of this dialectic dynamism was also due to responsiveness on another front, in the unquestioning adoption of global issues on local agendas. This distorted the process of responsiveness in the Palestinian context, and worked against the advancement of the women’s movement and the development of its core agenda that could have mobilized the masses. As this disruption has become structural, there is no possibility of redirecting the work unless there is a genuine commitment to grassroots engagement. Although there are a few women’s committees and initiatives that have maintained a level of relevance to grassroots needs and have detached themselves from the mainstream movement, they seem to be marginal.

**Homogeneity and sameness versus heterogeneity and plurality**

The concepts of plurality, heterogeneity and homogeneity of the women’s movements are other conceptual issues that need to be investigated, in the context of the overlap between national and social liberation struggles. There are different points of view regarding the impact of plurality on movements, as some believe that it can offer strength and continuity, while others contest this understanding. The assumption that heterogeneity and plurality necessarily enhance a coherent movement is seriously flawed, as they can also lead to the fragmentation of the women’s leadership and the disempowerment of grassroots organizations.
Diversity can cause antagonism, manipulations, co-options and alienation. The potential for unity through diversity is often undermined by the ever-present asymmetries of power and agency (Moser 2004). Although women from differing socio-economic backgrounds can coexist in a women’s movement, the issue of power imbalances and agency, which are integral to class relations, are not overcome by simply labelling class differences as ‘heterogeneity’ (ibid.). According to Moser (2004) social movements, in general, are passing through difficult times as they are facing different challenges that require a platform for action to bring social change amidst inequality and social injustice. The same challenge confronts the Palestinian women’s movement, which requires further conceptualization and contextualization in order to understand the real conditions that put the sustainability of the movement at risk if it does not address social injustice within the society. Although plurality reflects a level of democratic space and representation of different points of view, it can develop into internal conflict that threatens the strength of the movement and causes a loss of its vitality, especially in a context of political fragmentation and national oppression. Moreover, the claim to unity and homogeneity within national liberation struggles is sometimes shallow and idealistic, in a way that masks the different levels of conflict a women’s movement may experience. Power relations among women’s organizations, and class and ideological differences, can surface and fragment social movements. Here one needs to consider not only the way the women’s leadership may impose a particular feminist approach, but also how this influences grassroots women, their discourses, resource mobilization, organization, programmes and activities.

**Inside versus outside leadership: new political culture**

A mixed political culture resulted from the merging of opposing or dissonant political cultures – the ‘inside leadership’ in the OPT, that maintained its militancy against the occupation and formed the informal national leadership, and the ‘outside leadership’ which was established in exile and became the new
PA post-Oslo. This mixed culture in turn affected the level of collective solidarity among the women’s leadership, as power relations changed, and weakened the value of resistance, limiting women’s capacity to contribute to nation building and political transformation.

The local Palestinian community, particularly the activists from the historical revolutionary cadres, were exposed to a new culture of bureaucratic governance that estranged and interrupted their culture of resistance and confused women’s capacity to view the new context critically. Women had played an active role in the struggle and their work with the grassroots had been effective in mobilizing and organizing women to campaign on different national and social issues (Hiltermann 1991; Taraki 1991), ensuring the sustainability and continuity of the struggle. The new culture of governance of the ‘outside’ leadership undermined resistance as an everyday way of life, and expanded the public sector to become the service provider and the large employer of the young fighters. This has resulted in the political co-option of these activists and their adoption of new consumption patterns and lifestyles, causing a shift in attitudes in regard to the value of steadfastness and resistance. A new type of leadership that was accountable to the donor community was created, adopting neo-liberal policies and weakening self-reliance, public legitimacy and accountability.

This process created new social groups, namely technocrats and bureaucrats, who became more powerful than the earlier activists, whose legitimacy and accountability were derived from the masses. This period marked a critical transition in the political process, as the PA was transformed into a technical and professional administration rather than a representative body accountable to people and their aspirations for independence (Jamal 2001). At the same time, it broadened the gap between the political leadership and the constituency. One consequence was the creation of an unvoiced class conflict that was also profoundly gendered and liable to play a deeply fragmenting role in the future – if undemocratic and unrepresentative governance continues, and
social injustice becomes more entrenched. Women’s voice had been shattered and transformed, from being a powerful collective voice that represented women’s interests, to individual voices of professionals who represented global agendas and narrow professional and bureaucratic interests, promoting the benefits of the few.

**Shifting contexts: professionalization and institutionalization of women’s activism**

The Palestinian women’s movement, one of the most organized and dynamic of the social movements, reorganized and shifted its discourse to adapt to the new reality and engage in lobbying for a greater involvement and representation of women in decision making after the peace accord (Jamal 2001). Consequently, when the PA came to power, different technical committees were formed to prepare the ground for establishing the PA’s political infrastructure. Women activists (both independents and Fateh cadres) who were outside the state-building process initiated their own technical committee to position themselves on the new political map and take their rightful space.

The Women’s Technical Committee was established in 1993 as a quasi-governmental structure to address women’s issues. It managed to get some external grants to help create its own mandate and programme. Although it was a brave move by women to announce their existence within the new reality, it raised a controversy with the opposition parties who were against the peace process and the formation of technical committees, which were considered to be a creation of the Oslo Agreement. This initiated a debate on the concept of ‘state feminism’, and the value of autonomy in the women’s movement, which resulted in the formation two years later of an independent umbrella organization – the Women’s Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), to integrate all the different women’s committees, including the opposition parties and professional institutions, to advocate collectively for women’s rights and gender equality in the Palestinian context.
It was at this juncture that some of us from the Institute of Women Studies at Birzeit University exposed the shortcomings of state feminism in a conference held in Ramallah in 1994 and critiqued the women’s agenda, which was overloaded with depoliticized women issues. We set out to build an agenda that addresses national issues in a gender perspective, and to represent the concerns of all women rather than only those that stand out for the elite (Hammami and Kuttab 1998).

**Representation versus exclusion**

While the WATC co-ordinated women’s programmes and activities to empower women at the grassroots, the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), being the historic women’s representative body, has transformed itself to adapt to the new political phase. It was started by Palestinian women in the diaspora and later opened a branch in the Occupied Territories with a structure adapted to the security conditions of the Israeli occupation, which had banned it. GUPW in the West Bank worked through charitable women’s organizations, which at different stages of the struggle had been harassed or shut down by the Israeli forces, which placed some women leaders under house arrest (Jad 2010). Post-Oslo, GUPW, which represented different political parties and women’s charitable organizations, has been revived by women leaders from the diaspora who returned and tried to direct the union to work within the parameters of the Oslo Agreement, and under their control. This created a conflict with the local ‘inside’ leadership, mainly the women’s committees. One major conflict was the issue of GUPW’s autonomy. Although it was formally announced as independent of the PA, real practice suggested otherwise: its staff were paid by the PA, and their agenda was controlled by it. This broadened the conflict between women’s committees and the GUPW, who saw themselves as an extension of the PA to ensure their power and political affiliation (Jad 2010; Kuttab 1999). This deepened the fragmentation of the women’s movement and caused further deterioration in its effectiveness.
Unique experience and diverse voice

The Palestinian women’s movement has emerged through a unique experience in confronting a settler-colonial occupation, and its different voices have been heard even at the national level. How this heterogeneity of the unique Palestinian movement was voiced politically, and reflected gender concerns, is a complicated topic because women have been mobilized at different levels: as an occupied population and women oppressed by colonialism and patriarchy; as ‘citizens’, albeit with no rights; and as workers, peasants, mothers and wives, discriminated against by ascribed gender roles. Hence gender identity integrates the national, social and class identities reflecting the different feminisms, voices and streams of thought that make this a heterogeneous women’s movement. For instance, the GUPW, as a political body representative of all women living in the OPT, has been a platform for women in the political parties that represent the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the sole representative of the Palestinian people, excluding Hamas. This structure, only elected once since 1967, represents Fateh, the ruling class, and the different democratic secular political forces. While some of them have maintained their Marxist–Leninist ideology, others adopted more social democratic or liberal approaches, reflecting the pluralistic nature of the left.

How the GUPW voiced women’s concerns was problematic, as they did not have the same authority on women’s issues, nor were they agreed on women’s priorities. The question of whose voice was being represented within this body was of concern, when observing relations of voice and power as well as how the women’s agenda reveals the different schools of thought – including neo-liberal, radical and Islamic. Even when secular women elected the Islamic movement to power to condemn the ruling party, others saw them as rescuers and protectors of national issues, particularly due to their militancy and their critical voice on corruption and alienation. Others criticized the opportunistic nature of the Islamic movement, using religion for political goals.

The nature of the women’s agenda was also a subject for
disagreement. It represented a post-conflict agenda for some whereas it was still a conflict agenda for others, reflecting different voices and concerns. In the post-conflict agenda, gender issues were reflected in a narrow framework representing the interests of the elite within a neo-liberal rationale. The conflict agenda represented the voices and issues of the radicals and the poor which, although more relevant and legitimate, could not be as effectively pursued within the constraints of their limited resources.

The diversity of women’s voice has been produced and reproduced at different stages reflecting the priorities of the political stage and the nature of the ideological and practical commitment the women’s committees had towards class- and gender-specific concerns. This diversity cannot produce unity within the women’s movement. But, as with other social movements, it stands on common ground in relation to a range of national and gender issues, each of which must be addressed at a strategic time. We also had different political positions and voices in regard to such matters as the peace process, future political solutions, future visions of the state, or the tools and dynamics of resistance. For instance, the issue of armed struggle as one of the legitimate tools for resistance has also been a dividing factor in the new political context and in view of the PA approach to political resolution.

In a seminar organized by the Institute of Women Studies at Birzeit University on 20 March 1995, four major women’s committees representing the PLO reflected their views on critical political and gender issues, after the peace agreement was signed. Issues addressed included the institutionalization and professionalization of women’s activism; the relationship of feminism and nationalism; attitudes and positions towards the PA and the peace agreement; their view of the post-Oslo stage, and their position on resistance and its role within the national movement. The positions of the committees varied and reflected their different political views. For instance, regarding the relation between nationalism and feminism, the secular opposition parties Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the
Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) – Marxist-Leninist parties who opposed the Oslo Agreement – insisted that the peace agreement did not solve the conflict situation, and that the national liberation struggle should continue, especially since core issues remained such as self-determination, right of return of refugees, and the achievement of a sovereign independent state. The other women’s streams of Fateh and Fida (originally a leftist party which split from DFLP) and the People’s Party (the erstwhile Communist Party) accepted that the Oslo Agreement was critical but were more pragmatic, claiming that they had entered a state-building stage requiring integration to maintain effectiveness and influence for the sake of women’s interests in the future state.

With regard to women’s representation in political parties or the PA, the women’s committees explicitly exposed the patriarchal nature of the PLO and PA, which continuously undermined women and excluded them from the decision-making process. This became a priority issue and a future task for all, hence imposing on the opposition a kind of engagement with the new reality to assure movement towards gender equality. Some saw it as entering a reconciliation stage, arguing that the Oslo Agreement should not be a dividing factor but could be viewed as an opportunity for political empowerment and more coordination. Although this argument is legitimate, it was clear that their pragmatic position delinked and depoliticized women’s issues, especially since the PA emphasized state building or developing its political and legal infrastructure, rather than nation building or the empowerment of people through participation and resistance.

It has become clear, however, that women’s opposition has been unable to achieve much progress in advocating women’s issues, including representation and resistance. Neither opposition nor mainstream campaigners were able to promote gender issues forcefully or effectively within the Palestinian national agenda.

In relation to the issue of institutionalization and professionalization of women’s activism, the women’s committees also held...
divergent positions. Women in the opposition insisted that the post-Oslo stage is still a national liberation stage—and hence the work at the decentralized grassroots, sustaining resistance and maintaining relevance and responsiveness to the masses, is still legitimate. Other committees felt that the institutionalization of the PA could be countered by a parallel institutionalization of women’s activism, which could develop women’s issues further through a more technical and specialized approach. This would enable women to present their issues effectively within the international arena and achieve autonomy from the parties to create and expand a more transformative space. The trend of institutionalization that the women’s movement underwent—registering as societies based on the PA’s requirement; limiting their work to the PA’s agenda (dictated by major donors like the World Bank and the UN)—alienated women activists, depoliticized their issues, and disrupted the development of grassroots democratic work (Hammami and Kuttab 1999; Jamal 2001).

Finally, the issue of defining the post-Oslo stage was discussed in the light of the different positions of the mainstream and opposition parties. The mainstream identified it as a state-building stage, adopting a new agenda and programme relevant to the political phase. For the opposition it remained a national liberation phase, requiring strategies of resistance—although the hegemony of the global agenda limits the ability of the opposition to reflect their position.

This diversity of the women’s movement did not prevent activists from coordinating or unifying their positions on some critical national and gender issues, exemplified in the formation of the Higher Council of Palestinian Women—a coordinating body of the different women’s committees formed in 1988 during the Intifada to ensure collective planning and coordination of activities. Yet, although there was unity on the ground, diversity and internal disharmony with regard to the inclusion of independent women (not party-affiliated) within the decision-making structure created difference. However, coordination across the different women’s committees had always been strong...
and continuous compared to other social movements, reflecting the urgent needs of the struggle and women’s commitment to bring change.

Conclusions

In contextualizing the tension between the radical grassroots movement and the new more liberal movement, it is necessary to focus on internal and external factors, and on the forces that manipulated the cultural and political heritage of women’s organizations.

First, one must consider the issue of ‘associational linkages’ (Molyneux 2001) or relationships between the women’s movement and the national movement within a colonial context. Palestinian women face three levels of oppression and subjugation:

- the national level – due to the colonial occupation that structurally transformed state structural violence to other forms of public and domestic violence within the society.
- the social level – representing the patriarchal system and institutions which manifested in different forms within the hierarchical, patriarchal Palestinian family and society, including the informal and formal political system, the political parties, and the PA.
- the class level – affecting both genders due to the exploitative colonial economy and neo-liberal economic practice. However, from a gender perspective, class oppression can be seen through limited resources and economic opportunities, and the exploitation of women within the market economy.

Thus a gender perspective that combines all levels of oppression – including national oppression, political marginalization and social and economic exclusion caused by the Israeli policies and the PA’s development paradigm – is needed to expose all levels of gender discrimination, particularly for poor women. It is important to emphasize here that the notion of gender has been
actively deployed in anti-colonial struggles, as shown by different experiences, such as in Algeria, when women’s interests were left to become separate and subsidiary to national interests, and were subsequently excluded from the benefits of independence (Gallagher 2002).

Another level of complexity expressed in the women’s movement was the rise of religious nationalism, or the Islamic movement (Hamas) in 1987, which represented a liberation movement and a populist reaction to neo-liberal policies and what was perceived as Western domination. The PA’s weak political and administrative performance (one reason why it was defeated in the 2006 Legislative Council election) has promoted Hamas’s success, indicating the failure of the nationalist project (including the left parties) which could not cater for the poor and lower-middle classes, whose support later fuelled the fundamentalist movements. How the rise of religious fundamentalism and the gradual growth of Islamic feminism will affect the women’s movement further is still to be seen. Yet some argue that, when compared to other Arab countries such as Egypt for example (Ray 1999; Badran 1994), the rise of Islamism in Palestine has generated a new brand of pragmatic gender activism practised by both secular and Islamist feminists, which advocates for a public role for women (Ray 1999).

In Palestine, there are calls from some feminists who argue that there is a common thread between secular feminism and Islamic feminism that should be explored and used as a stepping stone for collective mobilization and the realization of women’s rights. Hamas, which is undergoing changes to accommodate itself within the global parameters, has also claimed that Islamists should change, anticipate Islamic reform, and take the lead in promoting women’s rights which they see as competitive with other more secular parties. In addition, they have taken a stand regarding liberation of women by women, which enhances the role of women in public life. Like the leftist secular parties, the Islamists have questioned the legitimacy of the women’s rights discourse that in their view is individualistic and Western,
and does not reflect the national context (Jad 2005). Hence, in the absence of a coherent and clear gender discourse of the secular parties, or a clear agenda by the women’s movement, the Islamists, with their discipline and commitment, will be able to subvert the ‘complementarity’ attributed to women in Islam and portray it as total equality (Jad 2005).

At the same time, there are other voices which have not yet articulated their argument, but view the scenario of coordinating and emphasizing commonalities as risky, and perhaps an incompatible and conflict-prone alliance for feminism in general, and the Palestinian women’s movement in particular. Although there are similar and common national anxieties and concerns over which secular groups and Islamists can work together, there is still a threshold regarding the social issues that secular groups would like to cross in order to explore these issues further.

Considering the current political and economic conditions of the region and the country in general, as well as the weakness of the secular left parties, it could be argued that such an approach may not be appropriate. It could dissolve the identity of secular feminism and put it at high risk, especially as it is more closely correlated with Western feminism and non-traditional, cosmopolitan culture. In an effort to endorse a Palestinian legislation that guarantees equality and human rights, the experience of the Model Parliament (which was launched by the Women’s Center for Legal Aid and Counselling in 1988) shows that the stage was not ready for negotiating power between secular activists and Islamists. The Islamists attacked the project as they saw it as donor-driven and set against Shari’a law for Muslims. They also saw women as intruders who had no legitimacy to talk about issues on which the clergy has the sole agency to rule (Jad 2010; Hammami and Johnson 1999). The secular groups were alienated within the process and were bitter, disappointed and distrustful as the objective had changed from legislative reform to freedom of expression (Jad 2010). This experience made some secular groups believe that there could be no way of negotiating power between them and the Islamists, or having a functional

relationship. However, this remains to be tested within the current conditions flowing from the Arab Spring.

How one views the future of Palestine and what it means to be committed to a democratic secular state where people coexist under a framework that offers equal representation based on equal citizenship, and not on sect or religion, is still a strategic choice that we as women have to make and for which we continue to struggle. Any kind of fundamentalism can be a threat and an obstacle towards realizing such a vision. At the same time, secular feminism is not homogeneous. There is a more radical stream of secularists who believe that a common ground between Islamism and secularism is not possible as the issue is not only national liberation, which has united classes and genders together, but also the social, class and future vision of the state and society. Other secularists still see the social vision as part of the national identity that needs to be realized.

It may also be possible to combine national and social struggles by integrating women’s interests as part of the national struggle (counter to the Islamist view) in order to ensure women’s rights after independence. All these issues should be taken into consideration when the women’s movement and women’s voice are discussed in undertaking future reorganization and mobilization.

Palestine is facing an acute and risky transition, with the new politics of recognition of the Palestinian state as a member in the United Nations, and with the escalating violence of the colonial occupation in response to that. The national movement, including the women’s movement, has to regain its power of organization and mobilization to face the future threats that the new political era will generate. This could be another opportunity for the women’s movement to reorganize and re-mobilize its forces.

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Notes

1 The peace talks between PLO members and Israeli officials began in Oslo in 1993, when the path of bilateral negotiations to bring about a permanent solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was outlined.

2 A study conducted by the Institute of Women Studies at Birzeit University for the World Bank has investigated the impact of restrictions of mobility caused by the Israeli occupation policies on gender relations and violence, and exposed the gendered impact of political violence on gender roles and women’s conditions, particularly increasing women’s social isolation and vulnerability in terms of early marriage, school drop-outs, and education in general.

3 The uprising (Intifada) erupted on 9 December 1987 in Gaza, when four Palestinians were killed as an Israeli truck collided with two vans carrying Palestinian workers; clashes ensued which spread rapidly to the rest of the OPT.

References


