Gendered Nationalism and Palestinian Citizenship:
Reconceptualizing the Role of Women in State Building

Tami Amanda Jacoby
Doctoral Candidate
York University
Researcher
Centre for International and Security Studies

Despite evidence of over a century of women's struggles in the region, gender has only just begun to enter as a unit of analysis into academic discussions and political discourses in the Middle East. Growing public awareness of the politics of gender has been buttressed by consolidation of women's movements since the 1970s, a rapid increase in published works on Middle Eastern women, and development of academic infrastructures for women's studies in Middle Eastern research institutes. Variously and arguably defined as "feminist", this movement has served a highly provocative intervention in the theory and politics of citizenship in Middle Eastern states, highlighting structural and ideological reproductions of power, privilege and exclusion within nationalist movements. In reaction to earlier phases of feminist theory, which approached women as a unitary category with uniform interests (particularly work on women and development), recent scholarship has attempted to draw out the struggles, debates, complexities and contradictions *within* Middle Eastern "feminisms" in order to substantiate claims about the diversity of Middle Eastern women. This project of contextualization within feminist theory can be traced to influence by the recent "post-move" deconstruction of metanarratives in the social sciences, coupled with the culmination of a long history of indigenous reaction to "Orientalist" perceptions of the Middle Eastern "woman" as exotic, repressed, victimized, passive and maternal "Other". Challenges to this image emanating from Middle Eastern feminisms developed into acknowledgment that not only have women been quintessential to the development of nationalism, but that no single Middle Eastern women's movement is exactly the same.

A diversity of feminist perspectives has been formulated on the basis of differing subnational and transnational identities of religion, ethnicity, clan, class, community and family, and different experiences of struggle within patriarchal institutions. These categories of affiliation are bound up within a plurality of contested theoretical concepts and political conflicts emanating from local and international struggles. Deniz Kandiyoti describes studies of Middle Eastern women as engaging in a "...selective incorporation of the broader agendas generated by feminist criticism alongside homegrown debates firmly grounded in local, historical and political specificities".[1] The consolidation of feminist consciousness through anticolonial and nationalist movements has served to problematize questions about gender equality within the movements themselves. Fashioned initially as subsidiary components of nationalist struggles, women's demands have often been intentionally couched in traditional terminology, or explicitly deradicalized to avoid accusations of disunity or disloyalty to the nationalist cause. However, the refusal on the part of women's groups to identify as "feminist" for fear of emulating the "Western experience"

1. Deniz Kandiyoti. "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies", *Gendering the Middle East,* Syracuse University Press: New York, 1996, P. 1.

should not obscure the degree to which they engage in a variety of transformative oriented struggles (i.e. feminist), and thus serve as central components of critical reflection on the inner dynamics and power relations of gender in Middle Eastern societies. Reconceptualizing relationships within and between categories of "nation" and "women" is one of the most pressing and immediate subjects of critical investigation in feminist agendas in the Middle East today.

The Palestinian Uprising in the Occupied Territories (*Intifada*) since 1987, coupled with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (1994), have reinvigorated practical and theoretical discussions about the nature of women and Palestinian citizenship. The mobilization of women in the national liberation movement, alongside attempts to restrict their participation to traditionally defined roles, has made women's place within these discussions illuminating, and yet highly problematic. Palestinian women have been both active mobilizers and central victims of struggles over citizenship; often their own bodies are central sites upon which cultural and national battles are waged. One of the most substantial effects of feminist consciousness has been the increased politicization of gender inequality and gender-related violence. In the context of nationalism, this has involved widespread uncovering of internal contradictions *within* Palestinian society. It has become increasingly clear that exclusive focus on sovereignty, territory, unity and state building has served to suppress questions about internal transformation and conflict. Feminists are at the forefront of this internal critique. However, the increasingly prevalent mood of feminist self-criticism has been caught up in—and often limited by—broader struggles over the rise of Western cultural imperialism, democratization, human rights and Islamic fundamentalism. Despite common concerns for women's security, prosperity and happiness, Palestinian women's groups are divided over definitions of feminism, proper terms of reference, and appropriate arenas for women's struggles in the establishment of a future Palestinian state. The most complex divisions reflect differences between secular, religious and "fundamentalist" women. These categories are neither unproblematic nor mutually exclusive, and religion does not serve as single most determinant of political struggle and identity in Palestinian society. Nevertheless, as a political point of reference, the struggle between different interpretations of Islam plays an important role in framing the political debates about women's rights, and galvanizing popular support, particularly in times of heightened conflict.

In this essay, I draw on the move to contextualize gender theory in order to set out theoretical boundaries around the study of Palestinian women and citizenship in this crucial stage of state building. By exploring the complexity, contradiction and overlap in secular and Islamist perspectives on women

in the future state structure, I hope to contribute to recognition of the diversity in the concept of "Palestinian feminism". I will begin my discussion by defining gender as an analytical concept in order to explore the different ways in which the category of "woman" has served as site of contestation in the Palestinian context. I will then use this concept as a tool with which to discuss patriarchal institutions and the diversity of reactions by Palestinian women.

Theorizing gender as unit of analysis

A wealth of recently published area studies of women in the Middle East has attempted to reconceptualize the notion of gender as an analytical tool in feminist theory. Middle Eastern feminist scholarship often begins with a critique of Western feminist studies of so-called "Third World" societies in the 1950s and 1960s, which tended to approach women based on the category of sex as biological difference. By implication, these studies assumed that women constituted a universal constituency by virtue of their common anatomical features, fostering a rationale for the building of uniform women's politics and homogeneous alliances between international women's movements. In contrast, more recent Western and non-Western perspectives have challenged this notion of the "uniform women" by incorporating Joan Scott's definition of gender as the "*social* organisation of sexual difference".[2] The shift from gender as "*biologically constituted*" to gender as "*socially constructed*" revolutionized the study of women by linking the dynamics and reproduction of patriarchal institutions and gender oppressions to contextually located socio-political and historical specificities. With the attempt to historicize women came a further move to deconstruct the categories and concepts that already served as benchmarks for feminist theory and practice. The most important conceptual reformulation has been directed at the public/private divide. In their recent work on gender in the Middle East, Fatma Muge Gocek and Shiva Balaghi rely upon French feminist Simone de Beauvoire's controversial recognition early in the Western feminist movement that "the personal *is* political".[3] By advocating the potential subjugation of all social relations to criticism, they claim that this move promoted theoretical inquiry and politicization of power relations in the most intimate, private and personal arenas of human existence in the community and the family.[4] By reconceptualizing the categories of "public" and "private"—and relations between

---

2. Joan Scott quoted from, Fatma Muge Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, "Introduction: Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East through Voice and Experience", in Fatma Muge Gocek and Shiva Balaghi (eds), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: tradition, identity and power*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1994, P. 2.

3. Simone de Beauvoire quoted and discussed in Gocek and Balaghi, P. 8.

4. Gocek and Balaghi, P. 8.

them—feminist theories generated fuel for transformative oriented agendas beyond the arena of formal politics. Building on such discussions, Deniz Kandiyoti cites Judith Lorber's approach to gender as a primary mechanism for signifying relations of *power* in the major functioning of social institutions such as the economy, ideology, state and the family.[5] By encouraging studies of power outside public politics, Middle Eastern feminist theories have attempted to carve out new terrain for the "political" in areas hitherto deemed inappropriate as subjects of political theory. The predominant experiences and oppressions of women in the domains of informal gathering and unremunerated labour for example, were reformulated as *political* issues. Works on Palestinian women by Beata Lipman, Phillippa Strum and the portraits of Palestinian women by Orayb Aref Najjar and Kitty Warnock (among others) are pathbreaking monuments in this new genre of social history aimed at documenting women's lives and uncovering their experiences of struggle through a variety of methodological approaches ranging from life histories, biographies, oral testimony and poetry. Gocek and Balaghi further incorporate the contributions from so called "poststructural" works by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, whose project of mapping out dynamics in the undertheorized domain of the private—and by extension the "feminine"- opened up vast possibilities for discussing the *political* significance of women's traditional activism.

By approaching women as *actors* engaged in socio-political *struggles*, these perspectives combat the objectification of women common to many mainstream and traditional studies of the Middle East. Accompanying this move to document women's experience has been a second development attempting to "bring the state back in" to studies of Middle Eastern women. This perspective argues that women's experience can only be understood within the structural framework of institutionalized patriarchy. Works in this stream argue in favour of the "relative autonomy" of political institutions (such as the postcolonial state) in creating and confirming gendered interpretations of life.[6] The politics of gender permeate the realms of popular ideology and political practice through the day to day functioning of these institutions. The idea is to understand how structures are themselves constituted by the diversity of human actions. Women *experience* gendered *institutions* differently based on their location within the national entity. For

---

5. Judith Lorber quoted by Kandiyoti "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies", *Gendering the Middle East,* Syracuse University Press: New York, 1996, P. 6.

6. For a comprehensive discussion of the move to "bring the state back in" to Western theories of comparative politics, see James March and Johan Olson, The New Insitutionalism: Organisational Factors in Political Life, *American Political Science Review*, 78, No. 3, 1984.

this reason, one can more fully understand the notion of *struggle* within institutional contexts by combining both categories of feminist theory (experience and institution) in the study of women.

The developments outlined within Western feminist theory have been transported and adapted to the Middle Eastern context, with varying levels of applicability. The vitality of Middle Eastern feminist theory lies in formulating concepts and identifying power relations which are particular to Middle Eastern societies, and which affect women's capacity to mobilize, organise and struggle within particular socio-political contexts. In order to situate the dynamics of gender particularly within the *Palestinian* context, I identify the institutional underpinnings of the national liberation movement. I will focus on three distinct features of Palestinian nationalism in the process of state building: the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the "quasi" state structure and the patriarchal family. These structures are contested social arenas in which women struggle, negotiate, and change the boundaries of religion, state, and family through their participation in political conflict. I will begin with a brief overview of the historical development of women's activism within the nationalist movement in order to set the stage for a discussion of the divisions and contradictions that have crystallized within Palestinian "feminisms".

Historical development of the Palestinian women's movement(s)

Palestinian women's organisations originated from within the rubric of the national liberation movement. Due to this feature of their development, they have been situated in an uneasy position within the contemporary process of state building. On the one hand, nationalism provided the initial impetus for the politicization of women's activism, plus the development of consciousness around gender-related issues. On eht other hand, perceived exigencies and survival of traditional ideologies—particularly in times of conflict and reinforced with the rise of fundamentalism—have subjected women to restrictions on further institutionalization of their empowerment and mobility in Palestinian statehood.

Historical evidence suggests that rural and peasant Palestinian women participated actively with their male counterparts in struggles against the first wave of Jewish settlers from around 1882-1903. Subsequently, the first *formal* women's organisations were established as forces of anti-colonialism during the period of the British Mandate (1918-1948). Two notable developments during this period were the first Arab Palestinian Women's Union set up in Jerusalem in 1921 (by a group of upper-middle-class, urban women interested in welfare activities but organised around national issues), followed by the first Arab Women's Congress of Palestine in 1929. The evolution of women's activism in the nationalist movement reflects structural changes resulting from the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and

addressing economic burdens accompanying the forcible transformation of over 700,000 Palestinians into stateless refugees. Institutionalization of women's organisations was marked by the appearance of over one hundred traditional charitable societies, such as the Family Rehabilitation Centre (*In'ash al-Usra*) established in 1965, and political organisations such as the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) established as the women's wing of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1964, both of which were active in dealing with the new economic, political and social problems. This mode of organisation represented the strata of urban, educated, and middle class Palestinian women whose activism reflected women's traditional activities in the home (childrearing, education and social services), although they were formulated primarily in terms of the movement's larger nationalist and socio-economic objectives.[7] During the aftermath of the 1967 War and Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which put approximately 2 million Palestinians under Israeli military regime (and a further 900,000 within territory formally annexed by the State of Israel), women were centrally involved in demonstrations and direct armed confrontations with the policies and actions of the Israeli Military Authority. An example is the demonstration in Jerusalem in February 1968, by several hundred women against the confiscation of land and deportations.[8]

The 1970s marked a new form of women's activism represented by the newly established grass-roots women's committees. These organisations, in contrast to the earlier charitable societies, are widely held as evidence of the beginnings of "feminist" activism in Palestinian society. Run by a new generation of young and newly politicized Palestinian women, these organisations returned to earlier forms of grassroots struggle by involving a broader base of women, including camp dwellers, peasants, urban poor, students and women workers.[9] To a certain degree, they also sought to encourage women's participation, work and activism in nontraditional areas. The Palestinian Union of Women's Work Committees (PUWWC) established in Ramallah in 1978, initially reflected the new sense of unity in the women's movement but then split in the early 1980s along factional lines to be succeeded by four new

---

7.   Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, "Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers", in *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances*, Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer (eds), New Society: Philadelphia, 1990, P. 132

8.   Ibid.

9.   Maria Holt, "Palestinian Women and the Intifada: an exploration of images and realities", in *Women and Politics in the Third World*, Haleh Afshar (ed), Routledge: London and New York, 1996, P. 189.

women's committees affiliated to different sectors of the broader nationalist movement.[10] The grass-roots and communal character of the women's committees are said to have been crucial in sustaining the momentum of the Palestinian Uprising (*Intifada*) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since December 1987. The extent to which the Palestinian women's movement developed social or women's oriented agendas, and thus could have been referred to as "feminist", remains a highly debated and controversial question beyond the purview of this essay.

Patriarchal institutions and the contradictions of nationalism

Recent scholarly works on Palestinian women have explored contradictions between women's liberation and national liberation. These works focus on the gendered implications of three main institutions in Palestinian nationalism: the state, the family and religion. Increased politicization of gender oppression and domestic violence in Palestinian society has demonstrated the mutual dependence of women's status in the state and the family. As a result, it is important to explore the ways in which gendered ideology and practice not only traverse the realms of the public and the private, but also act as constitutive elements of the boundaries between them. In this section, I will review some of the recent scholarly contributions in the study of institutionalized patriarchy in Palestinian society.

In his work on the Palestinian nationalist movement, Joseph Massad explores the process through which notions of "masculinity" and "femininity" have been discursively constructed through the gendered narratives of Palestinian nationalist texts.[11] Massad studies the vocabulary and meanings inherent in the founding documents of the nationalist movement: the Declaration of Independence, the Palestinian National Charter and Communiques of the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). He finds that these documents differentiate ideological images of Palestinian men and women on the basis of traditionally construed social and biological roles. In communique No. 5 of the UNLU for example, Massad discovers gendered references to women as "the soil producing manhood, respect, and dignity", or in communique No. 29 which salutes "the mother of the martyr and her celebratory ululations, for

---

10. The four women's committees are: (1) the Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (associated with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine—DFLP), (2) the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees (associated with the former Communist Party, renamed the People's Party), (3) Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—PFLP), and (4) Women's Committee for Social Work (associated with Fatah). All are represented in the Higher Women's Council established in 1988.

11. Joseph Massad, "Conceiving the Masculine: Gender and Palestinian Nationalism", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 3, Summer, 1995, P. 467.

she has ululated twice, the day her son went to fight and was martyred, and the day the state was declared".[12] Massad notes the static image of women outlined in the Declaration of Independence's reference to the "courageous" Palestinian woman in her role as "the guardian of our survival and our lives, the guardian of our perennial flame".[13] Although women are referred to in these documents as biological reproducers of the *nation*, men are assigned responsibility for reproducing *national citizenship*. While reference to women is restricted to their reproductive capacities as martyrs and mothers of present and future generations of Palestinian soldiers—an image glorified when the sacrifice of sons and husbands is to be worn by women as a badge of honour—the definition of Palestinian identity in Article No. 4 of the Palestinian National Charter as "a genuine, inherent and eternal trait transmitted from fathers to sons", signifies that the *actual* reproduction of citizens is channeled through paternity.[14] The theoretical distinction between the making of soldiers and citizens signals the crucial difference between gender roles in the nationalist struggle and the institution of statehood.

The restriction of women's role to sustaining cultural survival and ethnic continuity, compared to men's role in the legal and more practical requirements of citizenship problematizes the actual translation of women's struggles into legislation of their rights in the process of state building. Aziz Al-Azmeh articulates this issue well in his own work on Muslim culture in Europe. Al-Azmeh claims that the *symbolic* equation of women with nation often leads to the subordination of *actual* women through calls to preserve the traditional family and code of ethics, implicitly translating into a move to assume greater control over women's lives.[15] Women's exclusion from the domain of formal politics is often legitimized by the translation of men's interests as "universal" (relating to state, citizenship and nationalism) as opposed to the identification of women's interests as "sectional" (childrearing). This has tended to both absolve men of familial responsibility and obscure the connection between women and broader issues of democratization. In her work on gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Simona Sharoni argues that the "narrow definition of women's issues has been used to justify women's exclusion from domains that men have sought to maintain as their own primary positions of social and political power".[16] Instead of confining women's issues to resolution by women, Sharoni argues that *all* issues are women's issues

---

12. Massad, P. 474.

13. Ibid.

14. Massad, P. 472.

15. Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, Verso: London, 1993, P. 6.

16. Simona Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Syracuse University Press: New York, 1995, P. 78.

and by extension, the reproduction of women's oppressions is linked to oppressions in society as a whole. In the Palestinian context, gender-activist consciousness has been linked to the fight for a democratic state structure. Islah Jad, a professor at Birzeit University, stresses "we cannot defend women's rights without defending democratic rights".[17]

Sheila Hannah Katz contributes to the study of patriarchal institutions in her analysis of the centrality of women and gender in the construction of Palestinian nationalism before 1950. Katz regards "feminization of land" as the symbol of national survival creating images of women as passive and erotic objects of male love and sacrifice. Reference to the Zionist conquest of Palestine as a "rape of the land"[18] and visions of Palestinian independence as the "birth of the *Intifada*"[19], demonstrate that sexual terminology is used to associate women with the control of nature. The identification of nationalism with manhood embodied in the Palestinian Arab patriarch's defence of his *ard* and *ird* (land and honour), make the land symbolic of women's sexual integrity and the struggle dependent upon women's practical and moral support for men by giving birth to new generations of loyal fighters. This image of women as "passive objects" in need of "male protection" is transferred from the discursive realm to the practical arena of political conflict and struggle when women's movement and freedom is restricted by men. By identifying women as powerless, Palestinian nationalism deprives them of their agency and autonomy as political actors.

The socialization and nationalization of women into the public sphere through their traditional roles has also created dilemmas in the process of their integration into state and citizenship. Several authors have discussed the contradictions between the reality of women's activism in the *Intifada* and popular ideologies of the "traditional woman". In his study of Palestinian women's organisations during the *Intifada*, Souad Dajani claims that national liberation is not necessarily synonymous with social liberation because of these contradictory approaches to women in the nationalist struggle. Dajani documents the necessity of women's participation in the *Intifada* through establishing food collection and storage facilities, acting in guard units to warn the community in the event of approaching Israeli soldiers and settlers, setting up of home economies to alleviate the economic burdens of Occupation, and

---

17. Islah Jad quoted from Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, "Searching for Strategies: the Palestinian women's movement in the new era", *Middle East Report*, January/February, 1994, P. 25.

18. Massad, P. 470.

19. Massad, P. 477.

participating in demonstrations and stone throwing alongside the *shabab* (Palestinian youth).[20] Despite the increased participation of "women warriors" as fighters, nationalists and economic providers during the *Intifada*, Dajani argues that the survival of traditional social norms and images of "proper" gender roles have prevented women from projecting their challenge onto the more difficult arenas of gender relations, family law and the organisation of household labour between the sexes. The discursive confines of women's activism remain linked to the politicization of a glorified image of the Palestinian mother, represented by the projection of sacrifice and childbearing as women's highest form of national service. Dajani concludes that the strategy of expanding the boundaries of women's struggles within patriarchal structures—rather than challenging the restrictive norms of Palestinian society—can problematically lead to reproducing the very system of oppression which limits these struggles to begin with.

Joost Hiltermann also contrasts the achievements of women in the first years of the *Intifada* with official disregard for gender issues. Hiltermann explores the nature of women's independent action through the activities of women's production cooperatives. Production of foodstuffs (fruit juices, pickled vegetables, canned goods and jams), clothing, embroidery and other items for sale on the local market, played a key role in overcoming food shortages resulting from army curfews and the boycott of Israeli products.[21] The cooperative movement was characterized by women's extensive degree of control over all stages of the production process and the sharing of surplus value.[22] Despite evidence of women's independent labour, Hiltermann argues that the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising's (UNLU) sole reference to women as "mothers", its categorization of women with children and old men and all people who are "suffering", and its call for women to work "side by side with men", undervalues the central role women were *already* playing in the building of the national economy.[23] By identifying women solely as victims of oppression, the UNLU ignored the struggles of women and their centrality in the nationalist movement.

---

20. Souad Dajani, "Between National and Social Liberation: the Palestinian women's movement in the Israeli Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip", in *Women and the Israeli Occupation: The Politics of Change*, Tamar Mayer (ed), Routledge: London, 1994, P. 43.

21. Joost R. Hiltermann, "The Women's Movement During the Uprising", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XX, No. 3, Spring, 1991, P. 52.

22. Ibid.

23. Hiltermann, P. 54.

In their discussion of women's activism in the *Intifada*, Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson add to this discussion the contradiction between women's leadership roles in the *Intifada* and their absence from national leadership positions. They argue that despite the centrality of women as grass-roots political leaders in the neighborhood committees, women's presence within established nationalist institutions such as universities, the press, UNLU, or diplomatic forums, has been highly unrepresentative.[24] For example, Maria Holt reminds us that the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), established in the wake of the May 1994 Cairo Agreement included only one woman, Intisar Al-Wazir, Minister of Social Affairs, out of a total of nineteen (eventually increased to twenty four).[25] The transition from *Intifada* to peace negotiations has involved a transfer of power from the grass-roots to the national level. Because women are more represented in the grass-roots movement, the move to diplomacy and peace cannot be seen as unproblematically beneficial to women. On this basis, the Palestinian national leadership has been widely criticized by gender activists for its lack of democratic procedure and insufficient representation of women.

Increased attention to the issue of women's reproductive rights in a conservative society in prolonged conditions of war has led feminist scholars to look at the relationship between state policy, ideology of family, and the status of women in the Middle East. The struggle for demographic superiority and territorial sovereignty in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, signified by the struggle *within* Palestinian society over the control of women's bodies and sexuality, demonstrates the degree to which the family is a problematic arena of struggle for women. Although women are said to gain power within the family through seniority and bearing male heirs, Samira Haj explains that because of the inseparable nature of sexual purity, lineage honour and national identity, Palestinian women are confined by the fact that their sexuality is the permanent property of the *hamula* (family).[26] As such, women are expected to contribute to the family through dedication to reproduction and childrearing. However, emphasis on the patriarchal family has come into confrontation with the reality of a variety of family forms plus increasingly large

---

24. Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson (1990), P. 140.

25. Maria Holt, P. 200.

26. Samira Haj, "Palestinian Women and Patriarchal Relations", *Signs*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Summer, 1992, P. 764.

numbers of female-headed households in the Occupied Territories[27] due to male death, deportation, foreign labour, or imprisonment.

Rita Giacaman *et al*, address the implications for women of official "pro-natalism" in the Palestinian Authority. They argue that official state policy reinforcing popular "pro-natalist" attitudes makes the advancement and independence of women in the public sphere very difficult. In their study of the PLO's "General Program for National Economic Development", they demonstrate that the linkage of development with family-based social entitlements and revival of traditional forms of clan-based leadership (witnessed by the appointment of a presidential consultant on clan affairs), has negative implications for the independence of women in the family and community. The definition of "social citizenship" in the document makes women's rights and social benefits synonymous with those of family and clan, thereby restricting women's autonomy as citizens. Rema Hammami argues that the handling of internal disputes in Gaza by *sulha*, (mediation between families by a respected political or religious figure), for example, reinforces traditional conceptions of women as representing honour and family property rather than political individuals.[28] Cases of domestic violence, and the more extreme examples of "honour killings" (the murder of a sister, wife or daughter suspected of dishonouring the family name) are indications of some of the more negative consequences for women of rigidity of the family unit.

Finally, the unity of state and religion is a further cause for inquiry into discussions about women's citizenship. Despite ideological differences between the PLO and Islamic fundamentalist groups, calculations of political legitimacy and electoral strategy have led to accusations of collusion between the national leadership and religious groups for purposes of legitimacy and political expediency.[29] Regardless of the actual penetration of fundamentalist groups in the state, the embeddedness of religion within state policy has had crucial implications for the status of women in Palestinian society. Marilyn Safir *et al*. discuss the jurisdiction of religious courts (*Shari'a*) in all matters of personal status law. They argue that

---

27. The report on Palestinian women presented at the 39th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women maintains that the number of female-headed households is 36.6% in the West Bank compared to 17.9% in the Gaza Strip (these do not include de facto female headship where male heads of household have migrated for long periods of time). See Status of Palestinian Women, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. IV, Issue. 43, July, 1995, P. 13.

28. Rema Hammami, "Women, the Hijab and the Intifada", *Middle East Report*, May/August, 1990, P. 27.

29. It has been argued that while the smaller and more violent Islamic Jihad has received rough treatment from the Palestinian Authority, the Islamic Resistance Movement (*Hamas*) has been transformed into something like a "loyal opposition". For explanation of this position see "Women in an Islamic Palestine", *Economist*, September 17, 1994.

through the idea of sexually segregated roles, the Jordanian interpretation of *Shari'a* (Islamic canon law) used in the West Bank, and the Egyptian interpretation of *Shari'a* used in Gaza, work to disempower women, not only in political representation, but also in cases of domestic litigation (divorce, inheritance, and child custody).[30] The most extreme example of the negative effects of religion on women has been the violence, intimidation and militancy witnessed in the Islamic fundamentalist campaign in the Gaza Strip since the 1990s to restrict women's dress and freedom of movement in order to "return" to Islamic tradition and cultural authenticity. That the PLO has been accused of leniency and foot-dragging in issues relating to the punishment of Islamist perpetrators of gender-related violence, demonstrates an "official" ambiguous attitude towards women's security.

Divisions of Palestinian women—strategy and experience in women's struggles

"Feminism" has come to embody a variety of contested meanings in the Palestinian context. Despite common concerns for gendered violence and inequality, three main categories of women's groups in Palestinian society can be distinguished which advocate very different strategies and terms of reference in the struggle for women's political and legal rights: (1) secular feminists, (2) committed Islamic women (either religious or "fundamentalist") who fully endorse the dictates of the *Shari'a*[31] and (3) women's groups attempting to reinterpret the Islamic framework in favour of indigenous forms of gender activism.[32] The following section will explore the three categories and debates between them.

Despite the derogatory label of "feminism" in the Middle East, a movement of secular feminists has taken root out of the particular experience and politicization of women's issues through participation in the *Intifada*. Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis define secularism as a phenomenon linked to Enlightenment philosophy whose basic premise is to promote "a separation between a non-religious public sphere and a private sphere in which individuals, families and communities have the right to

---

30. Marilyn P. Safir, Jessica Nevo, and Barbara Swirsky, The Interface of Feminism and Women's Studies in Israel, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 3/4, Fall/Winter, 1994, P. 118.

31. Shirin Rai, Women and the State in the Third World, *Women and Politics in the Third World*, Haleh Afshar (ed), Routledge: London and New York, 1996, P. 8.

32. Palestinian women are divided on the basis of a variety of other categories, for example: urban versus rural, class location, residence in Israel versus residence in Occupied territories (cities and refugee camps), position on the peace process etc... I argue that religious affiliation is only one sphere of identity, but its importance in the Palestinian context is undeniable.

practice the religion of their choice".[33] The secular feminist agenda is based on the struggle for gender equality with issues ranging from: women's access to employment, education, representation in national and local government, economic development, establishment of daycare facilities, peace activism and struggles against domestic violence. Pressures for the increased power of women in the public sphere is at the heart of the secular agenda. The two most controversial points of contention however, and which differentiate secular agendas from more religious ones, are the attack on the *Shari'a* personal status laws and the appeal to universal human rights.

The "application" of *Shari'a* laws through the jurisdiction of religious courts in all matters of personal status has been challenged by secular feminists attempting to extricate religious influence from state policy. Maha Abu Dayyeh Shammas of the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling in Jerusalem has engaged in reviewing and recommending changes to laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody contained in the Jordanian personal status legislation. According to Shammas, the solution lies in the replacement of *Shari'a* with a civil code applicable to all Muslims, Christians and Jews living in territories under control of the Palestinian Authority.[34] Indeed, the central element of the secular feminist agenda has revolved around the controversial inclusion of a Women's Bill of Rights in the Palestinian Constitution.

Secular feminists have looked for legitimacy to established principles of women's equality in the body of international law on human rights. For example, the Charter of the United Nations, the International Bill of Human Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out the fundamental definition of human rights as the dignity and worth of the human person, and the equal rights of all men and women before the law.[35] Palestinian women have used these forums through which to express their concerns. A report on the status of Palestinian women was presented at the 39th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women outlining the situation of women in the fields of violence, governance, health, education and employment, with emphasis on issues of development and

33. Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Refusing Holy Orders*, Virgo Press: London, 1992, P. 7.

34. Andrea Barron, "Palestinian women aim to get their due", *Jerusalem Post*, January 28, 1994.

35. "Discrimination Against Women", *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. IV, Issue 45, September, 1995, P. 10. International laws on women's rights are subsumed within the Commission on the Status of Women, originally established in 1946 as a subcommission of the Commission on Human Rights, and the Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination against Women drafted by a committee selected from within the Commission on the Status of Women and adopted as law by the U.N. General Assembly on November 7, 1967.

participation of women in areas of political decision-making.[36] These components of Palestinian women's struggles fit neatly within the Western liberal-democratic model of feminism with its market based, individualist notion of citizenship.

A further feature distinguishing the secular feminist movement has been alliances forged with international movements of women in the area of women's rights and peace activism. An example of this form are the collaborative efforts of the Jerusalem Link, established in 1995 as a joint Palestinian-Israeli coordinating body for two women's centres in promoting dialogue, conciliation and joint conferences between the two feminist movements.[37] By promoting women as political individuals in a global secular community, and by legitimizing their place in the public sphere, the activities of secular Palestinian feminism have served as an important, yet controversial, framework for the struggle around women's emancipation.

By following perceived "western" models of struggle, Palestinian secular feminists have set themselves up for sharp internal critique, the most serious of which stems from the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism. Opponents of the Islamist movement are in turn, severely weakened by popular perceptions of secularism as an anti-Islamic ideology.[38] Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis define fundamentalism as a religious movement claiming its version of religion to be the only true one, that feels threatened by pluralist systems of thought, and that uses political means to impose its version of the truth on all members of its religion.[39] This definition clarifies the need to distinguish between fundamentalist and militant Islam from the more moderate religious streams. Partly a response to Western neocolonialism, and partly a reaction to the power vacuum engendered by the bankruptcy of secular nationalism, Islamic fundamentalists advocate a more "authentic" assertion of cultural identity based on strict adherence to an Orthodox interpretation of *Qu'ranic* texts and religious law.[40] In the Palestinian context, Islamic fundamentalism is represented by militant groups such as the *Hamas* (the Islamic

---

36. Status of Palestinian Women, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. IV, Issue, 43, July, 1995, P. 8.

37. Greer Fay Cashman, "Women forge the links for peace at pre/post Oslo dialogue", *Jerusalem Post*, January 13, 1995.

38. Abdullahi An-Na'im, "The Dichotomy between Religious and Secular Discourse in Islamic Societies", *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*, Mahnaz Afkhami (ed), Syracuse University Press: New York, 1995, P. 55.

39. Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis, P. 4.

40. Ibid., P. 5.

Resistance Movement) and the smaller Islamic *Jihad* whose most politicized form of activism was witnessed in the violent *Hijab* Campaign in the Gaza Strip in the 1990s (and less so in the West Bank), where women became central targets of efforts to re-impose spatial segregation and a strict dress code. The sharpest edges of the fundamentalist attack have been directed against secular women accused not only of disloyalty to Islamic tradition, but also of collaborating with Israel, and displaying so-called acts of "licentiousness and dissoluteness".[41] Feminist organisations such as *Al Fanar* (The Lighthouse), an association of Israeli Arab feminists based in Haifa (which fights socially sanctioned violence against women in Palestinian society), have been threatened by anonymous phone callers accusing them of being prostitutes and advocates of promiscuity who should be "eliminated".[42]

The Islamic fundamentalist model of social organisation is based on the notion of "returning" to follow a faithful imitation of life in 7th Century Arabia where men and women are said to have coexisted in harmony, each occupying a clearly defined and separate space.[43] Fundamentalist womanhood is a characteristic of behaviour and activity restricted to the private sphere. In the Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (*Hamas*) of Palestine, the Islamic woman is to have "the most important role in taking care of the home and raising children of ethical character and understanding that comes from Islam" and of training her children to perform the religious obligations in preparation for the *Jihadic* role that awaits them". The return of women to the home is seen by fundamentalists as a method for coping with the contradictions of women's place in a society torn by the opposing influences of modernization and cultural survival, and a way of demonstrating a pious and religiously sanctioned model of social behaviour.

The most interesting aspect of the fundamentalist campaign is its support by substantial numbers of women[44] who legitimize their support by arguing that the *Hijab* garners respect, allows women greater

---

41. Quote from article in Al-Fanar's quarterly newsletter entitled "About Our Feminism" taken from Joel Greenberg, "Honor Thy Sister", *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, January 3, 1992.

42. Joel Greenberg, "Honor They Sister", *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, January 3, 1992.

43. Maria Holt, P. 187.

44. In their study of support for Islamic fundamentalist, Mark Tessler and Jolene Jesse find no significant difference between the proportion of women and men supporting Islamist movements. In a Palestinian survey conducted in April 1994, they find that 15% of women surveyed—as opposed to 17% of men—supported Islamist groups.

public appearance without cultural stigma, and acts as a preventive barrier from sexual advance.[45] Fundamentalist women have formulated their images of womanhood in contrast to perceived images of western women as exploited sexual objects, irresponsible mothers and victims of capitalist advertising. In these terms, moral affiliation with the norms of Islamic fundamentalism is seen as a force of emancipation for women within the framework of their traditional roles. In the national liberation context, the Hijab has taken on new "national" connotations and secular women have often volunteered to don the *Hijab* to express anti-Western sentiment.

The nature of fundamentalist attacks on secular women can be understood in this context of conflict with "the West". Deniz Kandiyoti argues that the notion of universal human rights championed by secular feminism has been identified as evidence of the penetration of Western imperialism in Islamic societies, and of the pollution of indigenous culture.[46] The promotion of human rights and individualism is perceived as an outright attack on traditional group affiliations and Middle Eastern Arab cultures. It is in this context that Islamic fundamentalism is most convincing. It is precisely as a populist movement catering to popular fears and ideologies that Islamic fundamentalism has gained widespread support. Indeed, Western contempt for the covering of women in Islamic societies for example, was long perceived as an effort to vilify Arabic and Islamic cultures, and to consolidate Western power in the region. Islamic fundamentalism expresses a yearning to reinstate the glory and value of traditional culture. However, the most damaging challenge to fundamentalism comes from "within". Recent Muslim scholars have attempted to articulate an indigenous feminism from within a *reinterpreted* Islam, thus constructing the boundaries for a most interesting and progressive—although highly controversial—Islamic feminist agenda in the Middle East.

Muslim feminists argue that while Islamic fundamentalism offers a powerful critique of secular government and western hegemony, it remains implicated in the logic of Enlightenment metanarrative. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that "...the universalism of the Enlightenment, denounced as an imperial project, may be pitted against an Islamic universalism based on principles of an immutable divine order".[47]

---

45. Aymen Khalifa, "Patriarchy Reexamined", *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. V, Issue. 51, March, 1996, PP. 23-24.

46. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Reflections on the Politics of Gender in Muslim Societies", *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. V, Issue. 52, May, 1996, P. 6.

47. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies", *Gendering the Middle East*, Deniz Kandiyoti (ed), Syracuse University Press: New York, 1996, PP. 16-17.

Islamic fundamentalists have been criticized for approaching Islam as an exclusive, homogenous and totalitarian claim to represent what is perceived as an unchanging global "Islamic community".[48] Aziz Al-Azmeh argues "the discourse of political Islamism shares many features with the category of Islam in Western segregationist and racist imagery".[49] By defining itself as a cohesive and static negation of "the West", Islamic fundamentalism merely reinforces the "othering" of Islamic people common to neo-Orientalist thought. This static image of Islam is mirrored by the static image of women relegated to a secluded and predetermined life in the private sphere. Therefore, Western "Orientalist" perceptions of the unchanging women resurface in the cloak of Islamic fundamentalism.

In an attempt to distance themselves from both the more militant Islamic fundamentalist movement and from collusion with Western influence, Muslim feminists have attempted to construct an alternative feminist agenda from within a reinterpreted Islamic framework. Muslim feminists have argued that the relationship between Islam and women's rights is politically contingent and thus Islam is not *necessarily* the source of women's oppression, and not *necessarily* incompatible with democracy and women's liberation.[50] This conclusion is significant in refuting Western readings of Muslim women which deny that women's liberation can result without a total abandonment of Islam. In her work on Muslim women and ideology, Haleh Afshar looks at Islam as a potentially positive model for women's struggles. She deconstructs religious textual reference to demonstrate a wealth of rights bestowed on women in the *Qu'ran* in areas of marriage, divorce and inheritance, as opposed to the restrictive customs practiced in Muslim countries.[51] Afshar demonstrates that the precepts of Islam are conducted differently in different historical contexts. Therefore, women's status is dependent upon interpretation and implementation of personal status laws. Gundrun Kramer also attempts to dispel the widespread notion that there is one single political doctrine of Islam by analysing the distinction in Islamic legal theory between the *ibadat* (issues of individual faith and worship) and the *mu'amalat* (issues of economic, political and family life).[52] Kramer argues that while the *ibadat* are eternal and immutable, the *mu'amalat* are adaptable to changing circumstances of time and place, and are thus potentially compatible with a variety of forms of

---

48. Aziz Al-Azmeh, P. 22.

49. Aziz Al-Azmeh, P. 23.

50. Shirin Rai, P. 7.

51. Haleh Afshar, "Muslim Women and the Burden of Ideology", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1984, PP. 247-249.

52. Gundrun Kramer, "Islamist Notions of Democracy", *Middle East Report*, July-August, 1993, PP. 2-4.

governance. As a sacred text, the *Qu'ran* is distinguished from the body of legal precedents, cases and general principles which make up Islamic law. On this basis, Aziz Al-Azmeh reminds us that contrary to political pretensions, "...the historical reality of the practice of Islamic law has been one of wide latitude and selectivity in opinions over specific points of law with a highly skeptical view of the finality of judgment.[53] The implications of these views for the construction of feminist agendas in the Middle East are important for encouraging continued discussion about the relationship between Islam and women's status, and for supplementing critiques of Islam with critiques of state policy.

In the Palestinian context, these debates about religion have been significantly incorporated into feminist discussions about the future of *Shari'a* laws. In contrast to Maha Abu Dayyeh Shammas's aforementioned call to replace the *Shari'a* with a civil code, Hanan Bakri's experience from the same work in the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling in Jerusalem has led her to different conclusions. Bakri argues "...the problem is not so much with *Shari'a* as with the religious officials who interpret and reinforce it. *Shari'a* gives a woman lots of rights."[54] To dispose with the *Shari'a* laws completely would deprive women of certain key rights that were intended for their protection, for example, the minimum age of marriage which is often ignored. For Muslim feminists intent upon upholding *Shari'a*—albeit with certain amendments—the struggle is to ensure proper implementation of laws, adequate levels of education so that women are aware of their legal rights, adaptation of laws to changing historical circumstances, and importantly, continued dialogue about the relationship between women's personal status and religious practice. Through this struggle, Muslim feminists have been at the forefront of the move to question, not only the institutionalization of religious authority, but also the democratic credentials of elitist governments. A central critique has been directed against the Palestinian Authority and its representation of women.

The boundaries of gender and nation are presently being reconstructed and renegotiated in novel ways in Palestine, although with inadequate representation and input from women. Recognizing the divisions between secular feminists, Muslim feminists and Islamic fundamentalist women as legitimate is particularly significant at a time when the notion of difference is seen as cause for celebration in contemporary social sciences. However, division is problematic to some degree in the practice of Middle Eastern politics. In contrast to the discourses of identity politics and postmodernism, two concepts used

53. Aziz Al-Azmeh, P. 11.

54. Andrea Barron, "Palestinian women aim to get their due", *Jerusalem Post*, January 28, 1994.

to capture the diversity accompanying internal fragmentation of advanced capitalist societies in the West, the Middle East is characterized by societies based on deeply grounded group affiliations, many of which are established out of prolonged conditions of war. The requirements of nationalism have implicitly meant the subordination of the individual to the needs of the larger group for construction of unity in conflict. As a result, women from all three categories are engaged in very difficult processes of alliance building with their malestream counterparts in the nationalist movement. Whether with the Palestinian national leadership or *Hamas*, women have had to both struggle—and often sacrifice their interests—*as women* for the "larger good". Indeed, as demonstrated, their participation in nationalism has at times been a cause for widespread repression and gender-related violence. In my view, the task of a feminist approach is to determine criteria specific to the Middle East which capture the degree to which different women's struggles actually contribute to ameliorating their lives. The most important task for Palestinian feminism today is to analyse the gendered nature of the transition from nationalism to statehood. This transition alters relations in both the public and private spheres, and holds crucial implications for the legislation of women's rights in the future Palestinian state. For this reason, continued dialogue and debate between the groups is an important aspect of the struggle to empower women in Palestinian statehood.

Works Cited

Afshar, Haleh. "Muslim Women and the Burden of Ideology", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1984.

Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Islams and Modernities*, Verso: London, 1993.

An-Na'im, Abdullahi. "The Dichotomy between Religious and Secular Discourse in Islamic Societies", *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*, Mahnaz Afkhami (ed), Syracuse University Press: New York, 1995.

Barron, Andrea. "Palestinian women aim to get their due", *Jerusalem Post*, January 28, 1994.

Cashman, Greer Fay. "Women forge the links for peace at pre/post Oslo dialogue", *Jerusalem Post*, January 13, 1995.

Dajani, Souad. "Between National and Social Liberation: the Palestinian women's movement in the Israeli Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip", in *Women and the Israeli Occupation: the Politics of Change*, Tamar Mayer (ed), Routledge: London, 1994.

Giacaman, Rita and Johnson, Penny. "Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers", *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances*, Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer (eds), New Society: Philadelphia, 1990.

Giacaman, Rita and Johnson, Penny. "Searching for Strategies: the Palestinian women's movement in the new era", *Middle East Report*, January/February, 1994.

Gocek, Fatma Muge, and Balaghi, Shiva. *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: tradition, identity and power*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1994.

Greenberg, Joel. "Honor They Sister", *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, January 3, 1992.

Haj, Samira. "Palestinian Women and Patriarchal Relations", *Signs*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Summer, 1992.

Hammami, Rema. "Women, the Hijab and the Intifada", *Middle East Report*, May/August, 1990

Hiltermann, Joost R. "The Women's Movement During the Uprising", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XX, No. 3, Spring, 1991.

Holt, Maria. "Palestinian Women and the Intifada: an exploration of images and realities", *Women and Politics in the Third World*, Haleh Afshar (ed), Routledge: London and New York, 1996.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies, *Gendering the Middle East*, Vol. V, Issues 52, May 1996.

---------------------. "Reflections on the Politics of Gender in Muslim Societies", *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. V, Issue. 52, May, 1996.

Katz, Sheila Hannah. "Adam and Adama, Ird and Ard: En-gendering Political Conflict and Identity in Early Jewish and Palestinian Nationalisms", in *Gendering the Middle East*, Syracuse University Press: New York, 1996.

Khalifa, Aymen. "Patriarchy Reexamined", *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. V, Issue. 51, March, 1996.

Kramer, Gundrun. "Islamist Notions of Democracy", *Middle East Report*, July-August, 1993

Massad, Joseph. "Conceiving the Masculine: Gender and Palestinian Nationalism", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 3, Summer, 1995.

Rai, Shirin. "Women and the State in the Third World", *Women and Politics in the Third World*, Haleh Afshar (ed), Routledge: London and New York, 1996.

Safir, Marilyn P., Nevo, Jessica and Swirsky, Barbara. "The Interface of Feminism and Women's Studies in Israel, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 3/4, Fall/Winter, 1994.

Sahgal, Gita and Yuval-Davis, Nira. *Refusing Holy Orders*, Virgo Press: London, 1992.

Sharoni, Simona. *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,* Syracuse University Press: New York, 1995.

Tessler, Mark and Jesse, Jolene. "Gender and Support for Islamist Movements: Evidence from Egypt, Kuwait and Palestine", *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 2, April, 1996.