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Source: *Feminist Review*, Winter, 2001, No. 69, The Realm of the Possible: Middle Eastern Women in Political and Social Spaces (Winter, 2001), pp. 21-43

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1395628>

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# Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone?

Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada

Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab

## Abstract

The authors ground their reflections on gender and the complex realities of the second Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation in the political processes unleashed by the signing of the Israeli–Palestinian rule, noting that the profound inequalities between Israel and Palestine during the interim period produced inequalities among Palestinians. The apartheid logic of the Oslo period – made explicit in Israel’s policies of separation, seige and confinement of the Palestinian population during the intifada and before it – is shown to shape the forms, sites and levels of resistance which are highly restricted by gender and age. In addition, the authors argue that the Palestinian Authority and leadership have solved the contradictions and crisis of Palestinian nationalism in this period through a form of rule that the authors term ‘authoritarian populism’, that tends to disallow democratic politics and participation. The seeming absence of women and civil society from the highly unequal and violent confrontations is contrasted with the first Palestinian intifada (1987–91), that occurred in a context of more than a decade of democratic activism and the growth of mass-based organizations, including the Palestinian women’s movement. The authors explore three linked crises in gender roles emerging from the conditions of the second intifada: a crisis in masculinity, a crisis in paternity and a crisis in maternity.

## Keywords

nationalism; national liberation; military occupation; masculinity; maternity; militarism

This article was written in January and February of 2001, as the initial phase of the second Palestinian intifada, characterized by largely unarmed Palestinian demonstrators, mostly men and boys, confronting Israeli soldiers and tanks at Israeli checkpoints, was coming to a close. The authors claim no special prescience in predicting a turn towards increased militarism in the next stages of the intifada, although Israel’s use of F-16 bombers against Palestinian cities might have defied the imagination. Despite the virtual absence of checkpoint confrontations, Palestinian children continue to be killed – now as ‘colateral damage’ rather than demonstrators. At this

writing, the escalation of Israeli force, including illegal incursions and occupations of Palestinian cities and refugee camps, Israel's punitive closure and siege against an entire people, Palestinian armed attacks to 'unsettle' the settler population in the West Bank and Gaza, and the continuing tragedy of suicide bombings are all part of the current landscape of the intifada. However, it is the underlying failures noted in this article – in politics and in protection of the Palestinian civilian population – that need to be addressed if violence is to cease. We continue to believe that the first requires the democratic participation of the Palestinian public, men and women alike, as well as fair and effective diplomatic interventions by the international community for a negotiated and just peace that implements United Nations resolutions. The need for international protection for the Palestinian civilian population perhaps does not need to be argued – the only question is why the international community does not meet its responsibility. The urgency of saving lives and making peace, in our view, does not diminish the relevance of understanding the multiple effects of the intifada in the gendered roles and responsibilities of Palestinian women, men and children – for it is in their lives, relations, daily activities and interactions that the effects of resistance, violence, victimization, militarism and 'politics' are inscribed.

Over two months after the second Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation erupted on 28 September 2000, the Israeli Chief of Staff issued an order unusual even by the military logic of excessive force that has dictated Israel's response to Palestinian rebellion. This response has included the use of attack helicopters and tank fire against a largely unarmed population, or at the most, has pitted one of the world's most powerful armies against Palestinian militants, police and security officers armed with light weapons. The order banned 'travel on West Bank roads by Palestinian men in private vehicles' (Harel and Hass, 2000: 3). Soldiers must return such 'male only' cars to their villages or towns of origin; only if a woman passenger was present would travel be permitted.

Whether the order is in fact enforceable or not, it is first of all an exemplar of the apartheid logic of the Oslo period – certainly in Israel's application of the interim agreements but also, we would argue, embedded in the agreements themselves. At the heart of the interim agreements is an avoidance of the discourse of rights for a series of arrangements based not on equality, but on difference, discrimination and unequal distribution of resources. These unequal arrangements included the division of Palestinian territory into non-contiguous areas,<sup>1</sup> Israel's continued military occupation and control of borders and a majority of Palestinian territory, the continued presence and expansion of Israeli settlements, and the non-sovereign and limited powers of the Palestinian Authority. In addition, the

return of the exiled Palestinian leadership, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, was contingent on the creation of a ‘strong police force’ (Interim Agreements 1994 and 1995) whose paramount role was conceived as safeguarding Israeli security and controlling Palestinian opposition to the peace process. As the then Deputy Chief of Staff of the Israeli army explained in a 1994 interview, ‘They [the Palestinian police force] will also have an intelligence outfit in order to control the Palestinian street’ (Lipkin-Shahak, cit. Wagner, 2000: 113). Ironically, the consequent proliferation of Palestinian security forces – and the 40,000 men under arms – have contributed to the militarization of the current intifada.

While the Palestinian leadership believed these discriminatory arrangements were temporary – to be rectified by principled stands during final status negotiations – their effects, including the almost doubling of the Israeli settler population in the Oslo years (1993–present), are both etched on the physical and political landscape and all too clearly seen in the explosion of the second intifada. The immediate trigger for the explosion was the deliberately provocative visit of right-wing Israeli politician (and now Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon to the Al Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem and the killing of five demonstrators and worshippers there the next day by Israeli police, but the political failure of the Camp David negotiations in July 2000 was the immediate backdrop. At Camp David, the Palestinian leadership was faced with an American proposal for a final status agreement which transgressed almost all Palestinian red-lines, including sovereignty over East Jerusalem, a just solution for Palestinian refugees, the dismantling of settlements and an independent state with territorial contiguity within the June 1967 borders (Hanieh, 2000; Tamari and Hammami, 2001).

Perhaps less visible, but also important, is how these inequalities *between* Israel and the Palestinians, conditioned the relation *among* Palestinians, in particular between the emerging state and its ‘citizens’. This is perhaps clearest in the dominance of security – largely meaning Israeli security – sometimes at the expense of human rights and the rule of law. These overarching inequalities also severely limited the constitution of Palestinian citizenship and citizens’ political, social and economic rights during the interim period. Here gender issues are a good example. For example, the 1994 Women’s Charter issued by the Palestinian women’s movement as the transitional period began, asserted a range of rights for women – such as freedom of movement and the right to full nationality – that were in fact to be denied to all the population (General Union of Palestinian Women, 1994).

Israel’s confinement and siege of the Palestinian population in the current intifada is an intensification of a policy of Israeli closure that has ruled the

interim period, generally meaning that the Palestinian population may be confined at will, while Israeli settlers have complete freedom of movement, with consequent political, social and economic harm to the Palestinian population. The internal closures during the second intifada between West Bank areas and between north and south Gaza, as well as the ban on entry to Jerusalem and Israel proper, having already caused by November 2000, only two months into the intifada, the 'disemployment' of some 110,000 Palestinian workers formerly working in Israel, a 50 per cent drop in domestic productive activity, a 50 per cent increase in poverty rates and a humanitarian crisis of growing proportions (UNSCO, 2000).

### **Apartheid and gender**

It is telling that this apartheid logic finds its expression in gender. In the order cited above, gender is clearly an organizing principle of Israeli repression – the accompanying question is whether it also an organizing principle of Palestinian resistance. The endless death toll of young men – and male children – attests to both. Indeed, the order was an immediate subject for a joking but meaningful response from Palestinian women activists who quipped: 'at last a role for women'. As we will discuss below, while women have been active in a number of ways during the intifada – and have taken on increased burdens in care and coping in the household and wider community – their activities are both seemingly invisible to actual and virtual publics and widely seen by women leaders themselves as inadequate and marginalized.

This invisibility is exemplary of a larger absence of civil society in the present intifada. By this we do not mean that civil society organizations are completely inactive, but that their activities to date do not have a direct effect on the politics of the intifada. They are marginal, rather than constituting that 'public sphere of civil society' (Calhoun, 1992: 14) – to use a concept of Jürgen Habermas – where public democratic and critical discourse is translated into an authority for politics. The marginalization of women and of civil society from the public and political sphere are strongly linked. As the course of the present intifada suggests, when women are absent from the public arena, most men are excluded as well.

### **Post-Oslo governance and political culture**

While a number of relevant features of post-Oslo Palestinian political culture could be cited that affected participation and resistance (see Bishara, 1998; Giacaman, 1998; Jad *et al.*, 2000), we will focus here on one fundamental contradiction, which is between the role of the Palestinian

leadership as agents of national liberation – from which it derives its popular legitimacy – and the limited sovereignty and powers and extensive security and policing functions of the Authority in the interim period. Despite the Authority’s status as a security regime, as Hammami and Johnson argue, there are ‘multiple and contradictory faces’ of the Authority, ‘which continues to represent the national liberation movement from which it evolved and thus, despite its coercive function, it remains the political and institutional focus of the population’s national aspirations’ (Hammami and Johnson, 1999: 123).

The solution to these contradictions has tended to be a politics that could be termed ‘authoritarian populism’ which denies specific constituencies and publics in favour of ‘the people’. The people or ‘the street’ give – or potentially withhold – vital legitimacy to the government, but have weak or absent roles in political interpretation, opinion formation or, most importantly, decision making. To be sure, the contrary vein to authoritarian populism – of mobilizing active democratic publics – is also present in Palestine, most visibly in non-governmental organizations, but also in the presence and history of social movements, including an active and strategically minded women’s movement. The marginalization of these forces in the second intifada requires an explanation.

The profound political crisis of Palestinian nationalism after Oslo is the main contributor to the decline in mass political activity, as well as the transference from informal to formal politics that marks transitions to statehood. Interestingly, the women’s movement has been one of the most successful of the social movements in the occupied territories in bridging the Oslo transition for a variety of reasons, including, paradoxically, women’s marginalization from national leadership (Hammami and Johnson, 1999; Jad *et al.*, 2000). This exclusion produced the ability to act more independently than other Palestinian social movements or mass organizations. At the same time, the mass activism that marked the women’s movement’s experience in the intifada has largely been replaced by an NGO model of lobbying, advocacy and workshop-style educational and developmental activities, although the movement’s strategy and activities include protest activities as well, such as demonstrations against Israeli closure of the West Bank and Gaza and for the release of prisoners.

This transformation has had contradictory effects on potentials for advancing gender equality in the transitional context. At the same time as it has given the women’s movement tools and resources for legal reform and lobbying initiatives, it has taken away some of its ability to mobilize – and to represent – women in various settings and strata of society and even its claims to nationalist ‘authenticity’. Both the ‘professionalization’

of women's NGOs (Hammami, 1995) and the nationalist and social history of the movement are important dynamics to consider in reflecting on the movement's potential in the coming period of Palestinian statehood.

The second intifada underlines another, more sobering, reality: whatever the success of the women's movement in developing initiatives for gender equality in the Oslo period – whether a year-long model parliament, lobbying against discrimination, media initiatives, violence against women, and so forth – these initiatives, like much of NGO and even ministerial projects that addressed social and developmental problems and processes, were in essence sequestered from the real locus of political power. Ironically, the women's movement began to use the fashionable discourse of 'empowerment' when it was in reality losing power. A comparison of the two Palestinian intifadas will offer us insight into these dynamics.

### **Comparison between intifadas**

Despite the intervening twelve years, the Palestinian uprising launched in December 1987 and the current uprising have the same essential cause, namely the continuation of the Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza and the occupation's oppressive policies. However, the new socio-political reality in the wake of the Oslo agreement both triggered the second (Al Aqsa) intifada, and shaped its distinctly different features. The new political reality includes the presence, style of rule and political culture of the Palestinian Authority, the existence of formal relations, co-operation and negotiations between the Palestine Liberation Organization (and the Authority) and Israel, new modes and mechanisms of participation and exclusion, a change in the style of Israeli military oppression and the phenomenon of Palestinian militarism. Their interaction both created a climate of profound instability and forged a new image of Palestinian political activism which marginalized much of society and women in particular.

### **Democracy, grassroots organizations and the state**

The eruption of the 1987 intifada occurred in the context of more than a decade of democratic activism led by Palestinian mass-based organizations in the West Bank and Gaza and strongly linked to the Palestinian national movement (more detailed discussion can be found in Taraki, 1991 and Kuttub, 1993). These organizations mobilized large sections of the community, including students, women, workers and professionals, who in turn became the major actors in mobilizing and sustaining the intifada. Their

programmes tried to integrate political, social and cultural features and addressed both the aspirations and the concrete needs of the population (in the case of the mass-based women's committees through income generation and day care centres, for example). In comparison, the Al Aqsa intifada erupted in a period where democratic political activism has been diminished and replaced with formal and often closed political structures, marginalizing civil society.

In the 1987 uprising, the women's movement, like other mass-based organizations, was able to respond to people's aspirations for independence with decentralized forms of organization and mobilization that integrated national and social liberation. Neighbourhood and popular committees mobilized the community to meet its own needs – teaching children after schools were closed by military order, guarding neighbourhoods, encouraging home economy and organizing food supplies to those in need. The committees also served as vehicles to promote social and political consciousness to sustain the intifada.

These forms of participatory democracy can be 'conceived broadly as a political system and culture that allows for the fullest realization of human creative potential' (Bystydzienski and Sekhon, 1999). Here, democratization is a process which supports the development of values and structures that give people a direct voice in matters that affect their lives and where the voices of ordinary people find increasingly organized expression. In turn, these organizations have the potential to mediate between people and the state, expanding public space to include space autonomous from the state (Bystydzienski and Sekhon, 1999).

The erosion of these mass-based organizations in the transitional period left an élite leadership that is not responsible to specific constituencies – but rather seeks legitimacy from 'the people' for its symbolic role as guardians of national liberation and historic role as representatives of the Palestinian cause. The fragile left-opposition parties have not been able to maintain their activity and viability, debilitated by their own internal conflicts and structural weaknesses, particularly the absence of internal democracy, as well as the growing hegemony of the Palestinian Authority. Only the Islamist opposition has succeeded in maintaining a popular base.

The embryonic 'state' has thus transformed the terrain of politics and resistance, diminishing the avenues of participation for people in general and women in particular, as formal politics largely replaced informal forms of mobilization, and the 'outside' leadership took power from the 'inside' leaders in the West Bank and Gaza. The resulting duality between strong formal political activity versus weak informal activity was the first step in marginalizing the civil society and limiting the participation of women.

The erosion of mass organizations and the failure of left political parties meant that public space in the transitional era was virtually monopolized by the Authority (and particularly by its security services), despite the occasional emergence of ‘counter-publics’ (Marshall, 1994: 144) where political and social issues were contested.

The new political terrain presented the women’s movement, and other social movements as well, with difficult dilemmas in developing a strategy that both addressed gender issues in the emerging state and linked to the very real conditions of occupation and colonialism that men and women faced as daily realities.

### **A gender contract on hold**

National unity and cohesiveness were basic features of the first intifada and, as in other national liberation struggles, the importance of unity tended to subsume direct political expression of class and gender issues. However, at the intersection between the first intifada and the peace process, gender issues began to emerge more strongly. An achievement of this period that drew on the strength of the women’s movement during the intifada was the Women’s Charter of 1994, endorsed by the General Union of Palestinian Women and all major Palestinian women’s organizations after extended and wide participation in discussions and debates. Citing the principle of ‘equality between the sexes’ enshrined in the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence, the Charter affirmed national, political, social and economic rights for women, thus putting forward a new gender (and social) contract for Palestinian society. But this important achievement did not translate into a process of mobilization, as the grassroots women’s committees, the vanguard of women’s activism and linked to Palestinian political parties, were unable to co-ordinate due to political fragmentation in the wake of the Oslo Accords. In addition, the Charter’s demand for equal rights was vitiated by the lack of national and citizens’ rights to the whole population during the transitional period.

### **The women’s movement in transition**

The dilemma of the Palestinian women’s movement in the interim period – of addressing both gender issues in the emerging state and Israel’s continued colonial oppression and the real needs of women and men for independence – was in many ways unsolvable, despite the best efforts of some women’s movement activists to develop dual strategies. In fact, a ‘post-independence’ strategy largely dominated, with initiatives for legal reform, anti-discrimination in government regulations and practices, integration of

women into ministries, lobbying and advocacy for more schools for rural women, women's health projects and other developmental issues, democracy workshops and addressing specific social issues like domestic violence. Much good work was done, but a fundamental depoliticization of women's activism also occurred. The ever-increasing international donor community also overwhelmingly promoted gender issues in a limited context of state building and not in the context of a continued struggle for independence and genuine democracy. The nature of Palestinian governance as one of the core issues for democratic transformation was not seriously addressed (Hammami and Kuttat, 1998). As a result, the emergence of gender equality issues into public space was made much more difficult by the isolation of these issues from issues of governance and the political system. Even the potential agents of democracy, such as the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), were paralysed due to the authoritarian nature of governance. This demobilization – and consequent popular alienation – are sufficient reasons why women in particular and people in general are not actively participating in the current intifada.

### **State or societal feminisms**

The Al Aqsa intifada, as the discussion among women movement activists below indicates, also opens latent divisions within the women's movement itself, such as between those who believe that women's greater equality can be fought from within the state by pressuring policy makers, and others who fear both the loss of autonomy and the political risks of a programme of democratic transformation and emancipation. These contradictions within the structure of the women's movement may also sharpen. In particular, the General Union of Palestinian Women, like other general unions within the old Palestine Liberation Organization structure, is a state-supported organization and not an autonomous body. Its status as the representative organization for Palestinian women, despite the absence of elections for more than a decade, clearly undermines the ability to mobilize women on issues of equality, democratic governance and political participation.

On the other hand, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), a non-governmental organization that co-ordinates among Palestinian women's committees, women's research and resource NGOs, has an alternative vision of women's empowerment and participation that it has pursued without directly challenging the General Union. In the current intifada, WATC has actively engaged in candlelight marches, public relations campaigns and press conferences (on the issue of children as described below), support of families of martyrs and hosting solidarity delegations, among other activities. These are largely issues of solidarity

and social welfare, however, and are not yet successful strategies to address the core political issues or to widen greatly women's participation.

There is always a dilemma for feminists in responding to the question of whether the state can be a potential force for greater equality or an instrument for patriarchal oppression (or both) (Alvarez, 1990). In the Palestinian case, the Palestinian Authority does not have the ability or the political will to become a force for democratic transformation, hence, maintaining an autonomous body that is responsible and accountable to women is an imperative. Gender-based and class-based struggles led by social movements can and must take place both within and outside the political apparatus of the state but the Palestinian context demands more emphasis on the outside as the real force which can pressure the state and make it responsive to women's aspirations. The social and economic consequences of Israel's repression of the intifada has also differentially affected women in different settings – for example women in over half of Gazan households now living below the poverty line (40 per cent prior to the intifada) – whose needs and interests may differ from the middle-class employed women who largely head the women's movement. The recognition that all women do not have the same problems is a first step to developing programmes and frameworks that address the needs of women in specific contexts.

### **Dual political discourse: practical versus strategic**

The Al Aqsa intifada deploys a dual political discourse that also affects the level of participation. The Palestinian Authority is essentially using the intifada as pressure to change the conditions of the negotiations and achieve a final status agreement as rapidly as possible. The popular leaders of the national movement, representing to some extent more informal political structures, promote a more strategic framework by viewing the intifada as a means for liberating the land and attaining national rights through ending the Israeli occupation. Although both these goals can be in harmony at times, there is also serious conflict, as it is increasingly unlikely that the Authority can reach an agreement that addresses the core historical issues of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in a short period of time. Internal conflict and undemocratic measures by the Authority thus may loom on the horizon. In this context, broad participation conflicts with the interests of the governing élite.

### **Borders versus communities**

The sites and nature of Palestinian resistance in the two intifadas are also crucial to understanding the marginalization of women and civil society.

In the first intifada, the site of struggle was the community, its streets, neighbourhoods and homes, the ‘stone’ was the main weapon in defending the dignity of the community, and women participated in direct confrontations with the Israeli army, whether as demonstrators, stone-throwers or protectors and rescuers of young men. Home and community environments were daily sites of conflict with the Israeli soldiers: as Yuval-Davis notes, ‘clear sexual division in war, however, usually disappears when there is no clear difference between “battlefront” and the “homefront” . . .’ (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 85).

In the current uprising, the confrontations take place at border and crossing points between areas in the Oslo checkerboard. These checkpoints are at the limits of Palestinian ‘sovereignty’ (such as the borders of Palestinian towns) and controlled by the Israeli army. At these sites, Israel has exercised authority over the years to deny Palestinians access to livelihoods, social contact and national unity. In this context, women’s roles in direct resistance are minimal, given the absence of community context, the militarized environment and the differential impact of restrictions on mobility on women. The greater the level of militarization and militarized violence, the less participation from women and the wider community.

As in other societies, the construction of combatants versus non-combatants is also gendered, resting on ideological constructs of femininity and masculinity in society, rather than actual combat ability (Yuval-Davis, 1997). The extension of women’s roles in the first intifada was possible because the division between combatants and non-combatants was very fluid. In the second intifada, as we will discuss below, ‘combatants’ are highly defined by gender and age. As a result, women’s reproductive role as bearers of the fighters, a politicized role already present in Palestinian political culture, is heightened, and the mothers of the martyr become symbols of resistance (Peteet, 2001), while actual mothers, as we explore below, face acute and agonizing dilemmas. Indeed, we will be exploring three related crises generated or brought to light by the levels, forms and sites of Israeli excessive force and Palestinian resistance in the second intifada: a crisis in masculinity, a paternity crisis, particularly in paternal roles of protection and provision for families and a crisis in maternity, as mothers face painful contradictions in their maternal responsibilities towards children.

## Scope of violence

The first four months of the second intifada have seen as many violent deaths and considerably more injury than in several years of the first intifada. By mid-February 2001, at least 354 Palestinians<sup>2</sup> had been killed

by Israeli security forces or civilians, the overwhelming majority civilians and at least 102 under the age of 18. Palestinian injuries were estimated at almost 11,000. Almost fifty Israelis had also been killed by Palestinian security forces or civilians, of whom nineteen were members of the Israeli security forces, and the rest settlers or, to a lesser extent, civilians inside Israel, including one minor of 16. While Israeli lawyers ponder the status of the conflict, partially in order to free Israeli soldiers to use force and destroy property without any requisite of investigation or claims of legal compensation, the second intifada is not a war, conventionally or legally. It is, however, closer to war, albeit an uneven one in a condition of belligerent occupation, than it is to the 'low-intensity conflict' of the first intifada. As one veteran war correspondent put it: 'In the real world, this is called civil war' (Fisk, 2000).

### **Attitudes of women and men**

Palestinian men and women do not have significantly different attitudes towards the violent nature of this war on the face of it. Reviewing sex-disaggregated data from a public opinion poll released in January 2000,<sup>3</sup> 70 per cent of women and 74 per cent of men approve of Palestinian military operations as suitable response to Israeli aggression, and 48 per cent of women and 52 per cent of men approve of suicide operations – a gender gap of only 4 per cent. The much larger and significant gap is with almost any poll before the current intifada, where at most a quarter of Palestinians approved of military operations (26 per cent in a JMCC poll in March 1999). An even wider gap exists in Palestinian optimism about the future – once relatively high and now abysmally low. Israel's profound failure to make peace in the transitional years, coupled with its excessive force at present, are much of the explanation, although, as mentioned below, a near majority of Palestinians still supports the peace process.

With a slightly widening gender gap, a minority of both – 16 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men – see military resistance as the only path and a majority believe in a combination of popular and military struggle. This slight difference between women and men gets stronger when asked about ways to reach a mutually acceptable agreement, with 27 per cent of women favouring negotiations only as opposed to 16 per cent of men, 22 per cent of women favouring confrontations only as opposed to 29 per cent of men and 34 per cent of women favouring a combination as opposed to 38 per cent of men (13 per cent of women and 15 per cent of men thought it impossible to reach an agreement).

This difference is also reflected in support for the 'peace process', itself a somewhat slippery concept. However, women's greater support for the

peace process has been consistent: in a review of polls over time, an analyst noted that ‘on average over three years, 73.4% of female respondents said that they support the peace process as compared with only 65% of male respondents’ (Daheels, 2001: 27). We found roughly the same gender gap in our December 2000 poll, although support for the peace process has significantly eroded, with 50 per cent of women supporting (or strongly supporting) the process as opposed to 42 per cent of men. While this might be explained by a greater preference for the status quo (and thus stability) among women, also reflected in their greater choice of President Yasser Arafat as their most respected figure, it is also true that overall attitudes between women and men towards Palestinian use of violence are more similar than different. The assertion that ‘men have been constructed as naturally linked to war, women have been constructed as naturally linked to peace’ (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 94) is perhaps truer in gender roles than in attitudes and beliefs.

### **Masculinity in crisis**

Women and men’s differential participation in violent confrontations is of course another story – although in fact most Palestinian men over 25 are also not participants. The nature of the popular violent confrontations that dominated the first months of the intifada was strongly gendered and restricted by age. If war is the ‘most direct’ site for the construction and reproduction of masculinity (Morgan, 1994: 165), particular wars or conflicts do so in highly specific ways, reminding us that ‘patriarchy is reproduced both within and between genders’ and thus ‘requires much closer attention to those institutions which are crucially responsible for the production of masculine identity’ (Kandiyoti, 1994: 199). In the confrontations we are examining, the high level of death and injury of Palestinian demonstrators and militants, and the location, form and consequence of violent confrontation, expose a crisis of masculinity that deserves careful attention.

### **Destabilized male roles: a crisis in paternity?**

The sacrifice and struggle of Palestinian young men and children in demonstrations at Israeli checkpoints placed at the borders of Palestinian towns and areas cannot be reduced to a crisis of masculine identity – certainly crises in national, class and ethnic identity are deeply entwined. However, the point is in fact the opposite, the crisis in gender identities is produced by a series of related crises, both in Palestinian nationalism after Oslo on the political level, and the multiple economic, social and humiliating effects of the Oslo apartheid system (as well as the long-term effects of occupation

on the economy) which has marginalized some groups of men as providers and breadwinners, and destabilized male roles as heads of households. The vast majority of the heads of poor households are both male and labour force participants, (National Commission for Poverty Alleviation in Palestine, 1998: 43) but unemployment, underemployment and low wages as compared to prices mean that male breadwinners may not be able to provide truly for their families. For many young males, entry into the labour force and establishing a household are difficult challenges. At the same time, young male roles as heroes and agents of national resistance have also been destabilized by the humiliating conditions of Oslo.

In an earlier context, the gender crisis described by Thompson in Syria and Lebanon in the wake of the ravages of World War I and consequent colonial systems is relevant. Thompson notes:

the profound dislocation suffered by family households during and after World War I, second, the creation of new, theoretically, national states; and third the imposition of French rule. In their combination, these three conditions encouraged linked reactions to the microlevel stress of shifting household economies and gender roles within the family and to the macrolevel reorganization of community and polity.

(Thompson, 2000: 6)

Thompson calls the linked reactions to stress in household, community and polity a 'crisis in paternity' (Thompson, 2000: 6). Palestinian dislocations at these three levels – in households coping with shocks and in community and polity living in the tension between a weakened national authority and a dominant Israeli colonialism – also produce stress in gender roles that have been highly accentuated in the current intifada.

In this second intifada, young men coming to the checkpoints are first and foremost protesting the confined conditions of their lives and futures, whether unemployed workers, refugee children who have never left Gaza, or even security and police personnel who have been patrolling these borders while they cannot themselves leave them. But they confront there a power that has defined them as marginal and constrained them as lesser beings. And they confront as well an absence of a national government that is theoretically present, but practically powerless and unable to lead. It is enormously telling that the President of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat (who is widely known as 'al waaed', the father, and who has long exercised patriarchal, or 'neopatrimonial' (Hilal, 1998), authority over the national movement) has only once during the first four months of the intifada directly addressed his people. He has rather played an elusive role between adhering to the Oslo process – to which he is bound by power and treaty – and tacitly riding the wave of rebellion. The political and

cultural resources available to the young men in rebellion in many ways allow their resistance but not a resolution.

### Rites of passage or a closed circle?

Writing on the violence perpetrated on Palestinian young men by Israeli soldiers both on the street and in prisons during the first intifada, Peteet believes that ‘the beatings (and detentions) are framed as rites of passage that become central in the construction of an adult, gendered (male) self with critical consequences for political consciousness and agency’ (Peteet, 2000: 103). Young men who are recipients of Israeli violence pass through an initial phase of separation from the community, then through a dangerous liminal stage ‘outside of social time’ where physical violence is applied and withstood and a final stage of re-entry into normal social life, often verified by community telling of the experience and accompanied by heightened ‘masculine and revolutionary credentials and capital, which the young man often utilizes by moving into cadre roles in political organization’ (Peteet, 2000: 112).

More empirical investigation is needed to contrast the ‘rites’ of the second intifada, but we would suggest that there are significant differences. First, there is the much greater presence of death and injury at the relatively stationary ‘flashpoints’ where demonstrators in effect expose themselves to Israeli fire. The ground of confrontation thus expresses the harsh political realities of the post-Oslo years. It is this, more than the religious cast of the intifada, that produces the emphasis on martyrdom. Although the first intifada also honoured its martyrs, its images were guerilla in character, where protestors and stone-throwers emerged from the community, hurled their messages and missiles, and then returned to the community, living for another day. In the confrontations of the second intifada, the community is not a sustaining and protecting environment, but rather, eerily, an audience, both literally at the checkpoint and virtually whereby national and satellite television bring live minute-by-minute coverage into the home.

There also may be an important difference in the re-entry into the community and masculine credentials and political capital acquired, given that for most of the young demonstrators, there is not forward movement into cadre roles or wider community leadership. Here, the system of rule that we have termed ‘authoritarian populism’ comes into play, a system which depends on ‘the people’ or ‘the street’ for legitimation, but constrains democratic politics and democratic participation. Whether the Authority itself, or Fateh, the dominant political party which is both the leading force in the intifada and the Government, political leaders both use and are

hostage to the power of insurgent young men – but without changing the relations between them. There is much to explore here, including a resonance with the degradation of the public sphere noted by Habermas in quite a different cultural context, where ‘the public responds by acclamation, or the withholding of acclamation, rather than critical discourse’ (Calhoun, 1992: 26).

Because of this dynamic, we would argue that the crisis in masculinity is not resolved through popular resistance – and indeed increased militarism is perhaps the only ‘solution’ that is offered. As the intifada continues, and popular confrontations are overshadowed by military activities undertaken by small groups of young men, the crisis becomes more militarized and even more restricted in its participation, except as recipients of increased Israeli violence. While militia activity may allow some access to power for young male participants, this power is fragmented and disassociated with the community – more apt to turn to power struggles than the exercise of political power in a democratic context.

### **Two boys, contradictory symbols**

It is also telling to consider the two most popular images of the second intifada. The first is well-known worldwide: a young father in Gaza futilely attempts to shelter his son, 12-year-old Mohammed Durra, as repeated Israeli fire takes his young life. Among the many ways this image, repeated in all Palestinian media, resonates is as a drastic, and tragic, image of a ‘crisis in paternity’ (Thompson, 2000: 284), denoting not simply a failure in paternal authority, but in paternal protection. The second image is of another slender young boy, Fares Odeh, also in Gaza, looking perhaps 12 but actually two years older, standing defiantly in front of an enormous Israeli tank, stone in hand, a picture that is ubiquitous in Palestinian shops, offices and homes. In an examination of these ‘two poignant pictures [which] have dominated the visuals of Palestinians over the last three months’, Zakariyya Muhamed writes that ‘Mohammed Durra gave us our symbol in his death; Odeh gave us our symbol in his challenging stand’ (Muhamed, 2000: 10).

Mohammed’s view is in fact more nuanced – he notes that 12-year-old boys still conceive of war as play and refuses to call them martyrs because this assumes ‘the victim is aware of the meaning of war and knows what it means to die for a cause’ (Muhamed, 2000: 9). However, the fact that the young boy in front of the tank is in a hopeless situation is not consciously acknowledged in his analysis, or indeed in popular responses to this image, although there is additional poignancy, given that Fares Odeh was shot in the neck by Israeli soldiers in another demonstration ten days later and

bled to death at the Karni crossing. The contradictory significance of the poster begs for an exploration – a ‘challenging stance’ to be sure, but one which seems doomed to failure, and where a highly vulnerable male child is the symbol of a national struggle. While youth – particularly the ‘children of stones’ – were symbols of the first intifada, they tended to stand for hope in the future and a realization of independence. Here both images graphically both demonstrate Israel’s brutal and unchecked power through an exposed and unprotected child, and resonate with a failure of adult politics and resistance. Indeed, the symbol of Fares Odeh dissolves into Mohammed Durra – two children whose ‘fathers’ are unable to protect them – both their actual fathers and the community and polity as well. These linked failures in protection, we suggest, produce a crisis of paternity of the first order.

### Women’s activism and a crisis in maternity

An exploration of women’s activism during the intifada could perhaps begin with women’s participation in a range of informal activities, from directly assisting the shabab (young men) in demonstrations, to widespread participation in funeral marches, to support for families and the injured. Another place to begin, however, is with the mother of Fares Odeh, the boy who defied the Israeli tank. Amna Odeh, according to newspaper reports, was deeply worried about her son, who had sworn to avenge the Israeli army’s killing of his cousin. His mother not only talked to Fares, but attempted to find him at the checkpoints: ‘I must have gone looking for him 50 times’, she told a reporter from the *Washington Post*. Indeed, she was such a familiar sight at the Karni crossing that boys teased Fares saying ‘Hey, Fares, what’s that SWAT team after you?’ (Hockstader, 2000: 2).

In both intifadas, informal women’s activism has taken the form of an extension of women’s roles, particularly ‘mother activism’, most visible in the first intifada when older women sheltered youth and defied soldiers. In the second intifada, this ‘maternal’ protection is almost completely inadequate, and it is symptomatic of a less visible ‘maternity crisis’ that accompanies the paternity crisis described above. While media images tend to focus on mothers’ blessing their sons’ martyrdom, the case of Amna Odeh suggests that the real dilemma of mothers is much more agonizing and that maternal blessings are also a way of coming to terms with terrible grief and unsolvable contradictions. If, as Ruddick notes, maternal practices are governed by ‘the three interests of preservation, growth and acceptability of the child’ (Ruddick, 1997: 589), these interests can be in painful contradiction, as preservation conflicts with growth (political

understanding and involvement) and most particularly with acceptance when 'state' and society – or social group – honour resistance even at impossible odds. The relative powerlessness of mothers to resolve these contradictions in their own terms adds to the dilemma.

In this framework, it makes sense that one of the most sustained initiatives of the Palestinian women's movement has been to counter allegations that Palestinian mothers are sending their children to die at the checkpoints – one of the more blatant cases of the aggressor (Israel) blaming the victim for their deaths. In a 29 October 2000 'Appeal for the Protection of Palestinian Children', issued by the women's movement, Palestinian mothers living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza addressed their 'most urgent concern – the protection of our children and their right to live a life free of fear, harm and humiliation' (Women's Affairs Technical Committee, 2000). The letter pointed out that:

Our children are not dispatched to the 'front lines,' the points of danger and confrontation are all around them, near to their homes and schools. For most of our children, the streets of their communities are their playgrounds; we cannot protect our children with the secure facilities for play and learning that we only dream of. We also note that the Israeli army comes to Palestinian land to confront our children, not the other way around.

(Women's Affairs Technical Committee, 2000)

While many women activists also express concern that the Palestinian Authority did not take sufficient measures to prevent children from participation at checkpoints, the movement effectively organized meetings, letter-writing and a press conference featuring mothers of martyred youth to counter the deep racism in the portrayal of Palestinian mothers. Indeed, Queen Sylvia of Sweden, whose words at a New York meeting had been used in Israeli propaganda campaigns and to whom the appeal above was addressed, eventually issued both a clarification and an apology.

The Palestinian women's movement in fact organized almost the only public demonstrations in the first months of the intifada that were neither funeral marches nor militarist displays by political factions, but these well-attended demonstrations, several candlelight vigils in Ramallah and Gaza and another public demonstration in Jerusalem, both received little publicity and were geographically and temporally limited. Nonetheless, the fact that men, as well as women and children, flocked to attend them signalled that much of the public needed, and mostly did not have, an address for political and community expression. Here the women's movement served as a venue for civil society as a whole, albeit in a limited form. In the largest vigil in Ramallah in mid-October 2000, several groups of young men headed for the checkpoint mingled with the crowd. The young men

were highly charged for the coming confrontation; some were pleased by the crowd while others scoffed at the candles and encouraged all the crowd to go to the checkpoint. Initially, the young men clearly were enclosed in their own revolutionary world with its own peer-centred ethics. The youths occasionally attempted their own slogans – both more fiery and less political than those of the crowd. Interestingly, women tried successfully to quiet the young men in the name of democracy – perhaps one of the few public discussions between the combatants and the public in an intifada where the ‘public sphere’ has been more evident in the virtual space of satellite television than on the streets of Ramallah and other Palestinian towns.

### Strategies of women’s activism

Many activists in the women’s movement are deeply aware of the contrasts in women’s roles in the two Palestinian intifadas – and clearly articulate the urgent need to develop new strategies that link their gender agendas to national goals and struggle. In a 16 December 2000 meeting, activists from most women’s organizations took part in an initial forum in Ramallah aptly titled *The Women’s Movement and the Current Situation: Towards Integrating Nationalism and Feminist Agendas*.

A number of discussants stressed the difference between the two intifadas, particularly in relation to the visibility of women’s participation in the first intifada, given that the ‘occupation was everywhere’, and its widespread grassroots participation. In the second intifada, the burden of women has increased – due for example to the higher human cost, including thousands of permanently disabled persons needing care – but this form of participation is hidden in the household.

A speaker with a leading role in the first intifada termed its leadership a ‘civil leadership rooted in society and responsive to its needs, a framework in which women fitted and could participate’. While recognizing that the devolution of these responsibilities, including welfare responsibilities once partly the province of women, to the Palestinian Authority was part of state-building, activists were deeply troubled that women’s roles had been ‘taken away’. Interestingly, a number of women, mostly returnees (PLO cadre and families returning in the framework of the Oslo agreement) from the General Union of Palestinian Women, contested the validity of the comparison between the two intifadas and also challenged the view of women’s limited participation. In their view, the participation of women cadre in official municipal co-ordinating committees and in their own political parties, as well as women’s role in ‘encouraging their children’ to resist, were valid and important forms of participation. A related line of thought led several participants to advocate a strategy of encouraging

young women to participate in checkpoint demonstrations. This argument follows logically from a view that defines the mode of nationalist participation as already given – and, we would argue, highlights a line of thought that is a strategic dead-end for the women's movement.

A concept paper from an activist in an NGO deeply involved in legal reform initiatives and legal aid to women during the Oslo period, strongly argued that nationalist and feminist issues were deeply interlinked and urged the movement not to close windows that have been opened in the transitional period where issues of women's rights, children's rights and human rights have been brought into the Palestinian arena. While her argument rang true in many ways, another leading activist reminded the audience of a central failing of much of non-governmental work during the Oslo period – which lay in the failure to recognize both that politics means power and that the absence of democracy in the Palestinian context must be addressed politically, rather than simply through NGO activity.

Indeed, as another speaker argued, the missing link between feminism and democracy and nationalism is democracy, involving not only women, but the whole society. Here, a strategic direction was outlined which countered the narrowing of women's roles not by advocating, for example, that young women take on the militarized roles of young men, but by widening the framework for participation through an alternative politics. These needs are strongly linked to the national aspirations of the Palestinian people – but it is up to civil society to make this link visible and a real force in politics. In the complex situation of the intifada, developing an alternative politics is not an easy challenge – but it is a main avenue not only for women's participation and gender equality, but for democratic transformation in an independent Palestine.

## Notes

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The authors would like to thank Rema Hammami, their colleague at the Institute of Women's Studies, for her insightful suggestions and comments.

- 1 Area A (under full Palestinian control, constituting West Bank towns, with the exception of East Jerusalem, within narrow boundaries and two divided blocks of Gazan territory), Area B (under joint Israeli–Palestinian control, constituting most West Bank Palestinian villages) and Area C (under full Israeli control, constituting all settlements, military installations and bypass roads).
- 2 This figure includes thirteen Palestinian citizens of Israel killed by Israeli police in October 2000.
- 3 We thank the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, and in particular Dr. Lama Jamjoun, for providing us with sex-disaggregated data from this important poll, one of a series published by JMCC, and available on their web site, [www.jmcc.org](http://www.jmcc.org)

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