



**Palestinian Women and
the National Liberation
Movement: A Social Perspective**
- Hamida Kazi

Dalal al Mughrabi, Palestinian nationalist militant.

*Although the paper is written with a view on Palestinian women's participation in general in the national struggle, it mostly focuses on women on the West Bank.

WOMEN HAVE ALWAYS PARTICIPATED in struggles for national liberation, and a few of them are glorified for what they do. However, the essence of their role in political struggles has always been ignored, just as it is ignored in economic development. This leaves the social sphere, where women's subordination is a generally accepted phenomenon. It is within this socially subordinate position that the non-recognition of women's participation or rather, the lack of participation in national liberation movements needs to be analyzed. There are three important dimensions to this analysis: (i) The role of women assumes secondary significance because of the nature of the task they perform; (ii) Women's participation in, and their position in, the national struggle is regulated by the class structure of the movement; (iii) Women do not participate in the movement en masse not because of their lack of politicization, but on account of social constraints. Besides, if and when women are incorporated in the struggle as the necessity arises, as in the case of Algerian women, then rather than participating, women are used. However, Palestinian women have a long history of creating women's organizations and of participating in the struggle for the security and liberation of their homeland. Today, when the Palestinian cause has eventually received world recognition, it is worth analyzing the contemporary struggle of Palestinian women in a historical context. Alongside this, we shall also examine the three dimensions of analysis cited above.

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A Brief History of the Struggle of Palestinian Women

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION in the struggle of the Palestinians for their homeland can be divided into three stages. The first stage dates from the beginning of the establishment of the Zionist settlements in 1882 to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The second stage extends from 1948 to June 1967 the end of the June war and the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The third stage is the contemporary on-going struggle.

These divisions provide a convenient framework for understanding the historical development of women's struggle. It is important here to note that since 1948 the Palestinian struggle has had to face repeated disruption and displacement and has been waged from the diaspora as well as in the Occupied Territories. In both places there are obstacles, but the struggle is a single and unified one.

(i) In the first stage, the participation of women was passive, inarticulate and unorganized. Under a strict social order, freedom of movement for women was almost non-existent. However, in 1884 women for the first time participated alongside men in raising their voices against the first Jewish settlement (near the town of 'Afulah). In November 1917, after the end of the First World War, they took part in huge demonstrations at the time of the Balfour Declaration.¹ In 1921, Palestinian women took their first step towards organized activities by setting up a society The Arab Women's Society, based in Jerusalem. It played an important role in organizing demonstrations against Zionist settlements. It ceased to exist after only two years, due to the lack of funding and the social and political pressure which was put on women. Shortly afterwards, however, women formed a 'rescue committee' to collect donations, and they revived it. During the 1929 rebellion, women took part in protests and demonstrations and a number of women were killed by British forces. They also organized a Women's Conference. The

conference sent a protest letter to the King of England and to the League of Nations (now the UN). They also formed a 14-member delegation to meet the High Commissioner demanding that the Balfour Declaration be revoked and Jewish immigration halted.

During the 1936 rebellion, women began to collect funds and distribute them among people in need, especially the families of the detainees. They delivered weapons, food and water to the men in the struggle. In 1948, when Israeli forces had already covered most parts of Palestine and fighting broke out in the streets, one woman (Helwa Zaidan) is known to have picked up her son's weapons after he and his father were killed before her eyes, and to have fought until she too was killed. On 10 April 1948, at the Deir Yassin massacre, a school teacher lost her life while giving first aid to the injured Palestinians.

(ii) The second stage, from 1948 to 1967, is characterized by a retreat from direct struggle. During this time social, charitable and superficial political activities are dominant. Women's participation was usually shaped by the ideology of the male leadership, which could not take direct action, either in occupied Palestine, now Israel, or in the West Bank that became part of Jordan. Women made some headway in economic activity and education. Within Israel's 1948 border, Palestinian social, political and educational institutions were under the threat of closure and all the restrictions imposed by the newly established state of Israel had in fact gravely limited the chances of continuing the struggle. Resistance activities remained confined to a small group of educated women mainly from the bourgeois class. In the West Bank, most Palestinians became absorbed in the Jordanian system. For the educated Palestinians, their professions, education and everything else were linked with Jordan. Thus resistance meant the loss of everything and poor Palestinians in the refugee camps had even fewer options open to them. However, after the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964, the Palestinian Women's Association was set up, through which women took part in the first session of the

Palestinian National Council held in Jerusalem. By now economic survival had become a major issue for most Palestinians. Loss of land for agrarian people, especially immediately after 1948, meant the agrarian population entering into wage labour and a new process of proletarianization of the Palestinian peasantry began, which women too could not escape. Despite religious values and strict social control it was essential for families to allow women to enter into waged employment. This certainly provided women with freedom of movement (although we must emphasize that freedom of movement does not necessarily lead to other kinds of freedom such as freedom in decision-making). In these circumstances, education became the most significant element of Palestinian society (Palestinians have the highest rate of literacy in the Arab world).

In 1965, the Palestinian Women's Association held its first conference, and later it was to set up branches in different parts of the West Bank. The association was banned by the Jordanian regime in 1966. However, in the late 1960s women became very active—although women's groups consisted of mainly educated middle-class women.

(iii) The third stage of women's struggle in the Palestinian liberation movement can be divided into two parts: from June 1967 until 1970, and from then onwards.

From 1967 to 1972, armed struggle was a dominant aspect of the Palestinian movement. The role of women was not confined to delivering food and weapons to the fedayin (Palestinian freedom fighters). They also took part in the planning and carrying out of armed operations. Leila Khalid is perhaps the best known among them. Many women were sent to prison for anti-occupation activities. In the West Bank and Gaza, women were active in demonstrations, public meetings and so on. However, there is little they can do under conditions of occupation. Since 1967, the Israeli occupation has created enormous constraints on all kinds of activities; for anything from armed struggle to collecting herbs

(zaCtar) in the mountains people may be subjected to military detention.

From 1967 to 1982, women were freely mobilized. In fact during this period women began to wrestle with the not unique dilemma of reconciling participation in the national struggle and their reproductive role while the continued existence of three and a half million Palestinians dispersed all over the world is under threat, as is the survival of Palestinian culture.

Women under colonialism face the dilemma of a double struggle against foreign domination and against societal oppression. However, for Palestinian women this dilemma has additional problems. The most crucial of these is that one part of Palestine has become Israel, and the rest is occupied by Israel. Nearly three and a half million Palestinians are dispersed all over the world. It is hard to get an exact breakdown of their numbers in the various countries of the diaspora. However, the following table is based on PLO, Israeli and UN statistics. According to the UN, 641,000 of these live in 59 refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza (because of the 1982 Israeli attack on Lebanon and its consequences, the Palestinian population there has dropped considerably). Also, while colonialism in other countries has been a political force, in Palestine there is an added religious aspect which makes the colonizers even more determined to keep control.² Furthermore, continuous dispersion of the population since 1948 has had a destructive effect on the community life of the Palestinian people.³ Finally, due to the fact that there is no home base for the struggle, the national liberation movement is displaced every time a host country decides to close its doors on the Palestinian people (always of course in its own national interest!) In view of these circumstances, the movement has also to fight for its own continuity. These factors create an even more difficult position for Palestinian women, and reinforce traditional oppression, this time through political necessity. On the one hand it is not participation in the national struggle but the struggle itself that faces annihilation, and

on the other, in the absence of any state or government of their own, the family assumes a strong institutional character and women find themselves as the bearers of Palestinian culture which only they can keep alive wherever they may be.

Table 1. Palestinian Population

<i>Country</i>	<i>Population</i>
Israel (1967 borders)	520,000
West Bank and Gaza	1,100,000
Jordan	960,000
Lebanon	260,000
Syria	170,000
Egypt	35,000
Kuwait	170,000
Libya	7,000

It should be emphasized that this predicament makes it all the more imperative for Palestinian women to involve themselves in the Liberation Movement. The leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Movement seems to have recognized the seriousness of this fact, especially after the 1967 war. However, to what extent it has been innovative in regard to the role, we shall attempt to analyze in the discussion that follows.

Women's mobilization in the contemporary national struggle

AS WE MENTIONED EARLIER, the present phase of Palestinian women's struggle dates from 1967. At this time it became the movement's policy to recruit women. The defeat of the Arab forces in 1967 once again strengthened the idea in the Palestinian mind that women's participation was essential for the success of their struggle. Women had always contributed to the national cause in all struggles. They became visibly involved in the movement and were given military training. Mostly, however, their work was channeled into

support activities such as nursing, the provision of food and uniforms for the fighters and also the setting up and developing of social and cultural institutions, which were an extension of women's 'natural' skills. Thus, 'female participation in the PLO structure verges on little more than tokenism,' (Haddad, 1980; 162).

The situation changed after 1970, especially in Jordan but also in the rest of the diaspora as women began to participate in the armed struggle. However, the extent of women's involvement in this regard depended not only on themselves, but to a greater degree on the support they received from their families, particularly the men in the family. Thus, although women were sent out on missions alongside men, their participation remained sporadic. To argue that women lacked the opportunity to become actively involved in the armed struggle does not in any way undermine their support activities. But the categorization of activities in this way separates the women's world from that of men, where all non-domestic activities are dominant. It simply extends the public/private dichotomy to the mass movement in which men and women are segregated according to a socially conventional division of labour.

It may be argued, though, that Palestinian women themselves have been aware of the under-utilization of their participative abilities and that the national liberation movement basically lacked a theory of armed struggle relating to social change (Sayigh, 1985). Thus social reality was not conducive to women's active participation in the movement. In addition, a large number of women remained deprived of their role in the struggle. This critique did not go unnoticed by the movement. For example, provisions were made for women to obtain technical and professional skills. These provisions were made for camp women in particular. In addition, much attention was given to literacy among women, and income-generating projects helped those in need to become self-sufficient. Unfortunately, the Israeli invasion of 1982 brought about yet another disruption, with serious consequences for women's contribution to the movement.

Women in the West Bank

The role of women in the West Bank requires further analysis. It must be noted that under occupation the very existence of every Palestinian is threatened. Economically the society is in ruins; politically, the occupying authority has one aim to crush any sign of Palestinian activism. After nineteen years of occupation, it became increasingly difficult to carry on the struggle in the face of measures such as collective punishment and the demolition of houses of those even suspected of being involved in the struggle. According to a 1984 UN report, between 1967 and 1982 1,346 houses were demolished and new measures included the sealing of house or rooms with concrete. Other obstructions such as the closure of academic institutions and house arrests are ongoing phenomena. Another common tactic is deportation; this deprives the Palestinians not only of their home and family, but also of their ability to carry on the struggle.

This is only the tip of the iceberg. The psychological effects of the occupation, particularly on women, are beyond description. Despite all the restrictions and problems, the struggle for liberation continues, albeit with frequent interruptions. Women's participation under these conditions is extremely difficult and the social system itself represents further obstacles since in Muslim culture the place of woman is separated from that of men. However, occupation has also produced some underlying contradictory forces which have led to women's participation in many areas of life. For example, despite social inhibitions, the rate of female employment has increased since the 1967 war from 8.4 per cent in 1968 to 24.8 per cent in 1980 (UN report, 1984). Here, though, it must be emphasized that this increase in female employment has not occurred as a result of a thriving economy. On the contrary, the West Bank has no independent economy of its own and there is no Palestinian financial or banking system. Whatever economy existed under Jordanian control before the occupation when the West Bank was part of Jordan is now controlled by and channeled through Israel.

The result of this is that the Occupied Territories have been witnessing a decline in agricultural and economic development. In addition, the continuous expropriation of Palestinian land and the seizure of control over water resources by the Israeli authorities has resulted in a number of changes in the labour market, including the economic status of women and their patterns of employment. Besides repressive economic conditions, political oppression such as deportation, imprisonment and the migration of male members of the family have obliged many women to take up employment. Thus a woman's income is vital for the survival of the family. A great number of women go to work in Israel as migrant agricultural workers. Palestinian women's labour is also being exploited by Israeli enterprises set up in the Occupied Territories. These enterprises specialize in finishing goods such as garments imported from Israel and the wages women receive are nearly 50 per cent lower than wages for equivalent work in Israel. Awareness of such exploitative practices and their vulnerable economic-political situation has strengthened women's determination to fight against occupation. Despite the odds, women have been contributing to the struggle for liberation. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and of course other groups have been active in organizing women. Initially activities included political disobedience, the distribution of pamphlets and even smuggling arms. However, women's participation in the resistance remained confined to young and educated middle-class women.⁴ Women have also been active in women's work committees but these have mostly been concerned with the educational and social welfare of ordinary women.

For their participation in political activities, such as demonstrations against occupation, writing for newspapers and other forms of opposition to the occupation, women have been imprisoned. It is not unusual even for girls attending university or high-school to be sentenced to short-term or in some cases long-term detention. Education is another field in which women's participation is increasing, since it is considered a significant aspect of their

resistance against occupation. Thus, in the 1981/82 session female students constituted 40 per cent of the total number of students in institutions of higher education on the West Bank. However, one should not conclude from these figures that the position of women in Palestinian society has altered considerably or that their participation in the national struggle is greater than in other movements. The consequences of the education and employment of women can of course be seen in their social and political consciousness. As women and men in Palestinian society have switched from farming to waged labour, the proletarianization of women has led to women's entry into trade unions, where they are very active.

A critique of women's activities in the national liberation movement

WE MENTIONED EARLIER that Palestinian women's organizations date back as far as 1921. Today there are about 38 officially registered women's charitable organizations on the West Bank alone.⁵ The broad spectrum of social activities undertaken by these organizations include child-care and health and literacy programs, and the creation of self reliance and vocational training centers and income-generating projects. In addition, the growing realization of the significance of women's participation in the national struggle led to the formation of four women's committees in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first of these was the Women's Work Committee set up in Ramallah in 1978 by a group of highly educated and ideologically and politically motivated women. It aimed to reaching large numbers of women and to mobilize them to join the women's and national movements. It developed rapidly in many parts of the Occupied Territories, reaching a membership in the range of two thousand. However, growth also brought problems; there were debates on priorities and the emphasis given to different issues. A Working Women's Committee was then formed whose priority was to make working women aware of their threefold

oppression that originating in the traditional patriarchal nature of society; that to be found at the workplace; and that caused by Israeli occupation. Through their struggle at the workplace, in many organizations they have won a paid holiday on 8 March, International Women's Day.⁶

In 1982, two other committees, the Palestine Women's Committee and the Women's Committee for Social Work, were formed in the same way. While women in all these committees are active in the unionization of working women, generating social and political consciousness, supporting prisoners' families etc, the divisions which led to the establishment of the four different committees seem to reflect the factionalist trend in the larger movement (Al-Relous, Lends, 1986). The membership of these committees reflect the ideological views of the factions in the larger movements itself. Moreover, as the women's groups are part of the national liberation movement, their programs and policies are linked to the movement's wider policies, which it might be argued are in the interest of Palestinian people in general.

However, the policies are conspicuous for their segregation of the world of women from that of men. Although there are women in the forefront of the armed struggle - for example Fatima Barnawi, who threw a bomb in an Israeli cinema, and women such as Leila Khaled, who became a legend not only among Palestinians but also among women throughout the Third World - these are exceptions, not the norm. While exceptions may indicate the beginning of women's full participation, they may also give rise to an illusionary perception that women have gained equality in the movement. The three dimensions of analysis of women's situation noted earlier in this way become more apparent. The struggle demands the unity of the sexes but there is no equality in this unity. Both inside and outside the movement, political awareness far outstrips social consciousness; the patriarchy that dominates the social system also shapes the political structure of the movement. Consequently the role of women in the movement is generally seen as the support of the fidayin, the

freedom fighters. In order not to disrupt power relations between men and women, the movement plays safe by encouraging women to serve the struggle in their socially acceptable role as mothers preparing their sons to fight, and as wives producing fighters for the 'cause'. Women are caught in a trap where they have to find a balance between challenging their subordinate position and political exigencies which demand upholding the same cultural values in the interests of national integrity which restrain women from participating in the movement.

The subordinate position of Palestinian women in the movement is further shaped by the movement's class structure. The military, political/diplomatic and administrative wings of the movement have evolved into complex organizational modules. A new breed of educated Palestinians that constitutes the aspiring middle-class, active in the movement, along with members of old prestigious families, form the hierarchy. Their leadership is patriarchal in nature which, to a certain extent, favors women's participation; especially, of women from the same social groups who themselves have attained higher educational qualifications. The decisions to set priorities for, and policies regarding, participation of women remain in the hands of male members of the movement. The participation of women even in the most radical faction, the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) is subject to male domination. It mainly involves working on women's projects, or domestic support for the revolutionaries (producing children, arranging social activities and so on). Inasmuch as the leadership sets its political goals for women in correspondence with the social system, women's participation remains contingent upon their social position. Therefore, as Peteet (1982; 23) observes: '... with slight modifications, traditional forms and mechanisms of patriarchal control continue to govern women's behavior within the resistance'. This situation seems to have changed over the years, in the sense that, whereas in the past the structural mechanism was set to organize women separately and impose strict control on men-women relations, now women have more freedom of movement.

However, in contemporary political activism only the forms of control have changed; the constraints in themselves have not disappeared. Physical control and segregation of sexes are replaced by verbal ridicule. For example, female activists who interact with men are looked upon with contempt and named as 'loose women'. Women often encounter intimidation from male members when they try to raise women's issues, since these are not considered 'political' and are regarded as trivial. Thus most women either find it difficult to continue their political involvement, or content themselves with the secondary roles available to them. This obviously reflects the attitude of the majority of male members who consider the women's role as associated with home and domestic affairs. It explicates the third dimension of analysis noted earlier, that non-participation of women in the movement is mainly due to social constraints.

While the political participation of women is impeded as shown above, at the same time political oppression itself and the question of national liberation provide no impetus to any radical transformation of their social position. On the contrary they reimpose socio-cultural traditions, and therefore an autonomous women's movement which is likely to challenge social control is discouraged. Although such a challenge is expected to lead to the increasing participation of women in the movement, it is certainly not acceptable to the majority of male members. Therefore either the leadership of the movement does not consider it, or it has secondary status as the women's role itself. Another argument put forward for an autonomous women's movement being unnecessary within the contemporary national struggle is that through participation in the revolutionary struggle women's status will change (Fanon, 1967). However, in the case of the Algerian revolution the conclusive evidence is that: 'Algerian people battled for national independence, not especially to create a different society'. (Minces, 1978; 163)

Women's experience has been that national liberation movements, while disallowing or at the least discouraging a women's autonomous movement that could accelerate their full political

participation, themselves recruit women for mass mobilization. However, when these movements successfully gain their national independence, women are conveniently pushed back into the domestic sphere. Thus women participants very correctly realize that: 'It is easier to eliminate the colonial bourgeois influences that were imposed upon us and identified with the enemy than to eliminate generations of traditions from our own society' (Davies, 1983; 131).

It is in this context that, when we look at Palestinian women's participation in the national liberation movement, despite their political awareness and their pragmatic strategies which ascribe priority to the national struggle, an alternative image of future Palestinian society in which women would not have to wage their own battle after the liberation does not emerge. Instead, while the movement itself is male dominated, women participants come mainly from bourgeois and educated middle class groups. Some of these women even reach positions of responsibility, perhaps as UN observers, as representatives of educational institutions and so on. Some women have achieved higher positions as academics and researchers contributing to the dissemination of information about the Palestine problem to the outside world. According to 1980 statistics, women's participation in various institutions of the movement is as follows:

1. *Participation of Palestinian Women in PLO Institutions*

<i>Institutions</i>	%
Steadfastness (Leadership)	67 27
Media	24
Social Affairs	65
Palestine Red Crescent (Leadership)	70 25
Research	45
Planning	36

Source: Samad 1986

Although these figures depict Palestinian women's involvement in many areas of the movement, such involvement has not yet reached ordinary women, especially women living in refugee camps and peasant women who have been going through the upheaval of proletarianization. Education has become a great asset to middle-class women in becoming involved in the struggle while keeping a balance between tradition and political activism. The movement certainly benefits from this state of affairs. While women cadres are critical of women's position and the role in the movement, their welfare work among ordinary women - for example in literacy classes, vocational training in sewing, typing, hairdressing, education on nutrition, health and child-care - gives them the satisfaction of having a role in the movement. There is no denying that all these programs are essential to the quality of life of people even under occupation, and it is necessary to have these programs and projects to allow the movement to continue its struggle. However, they merely serve to perpetuate women's so-called extended domestic skills. Furthermore, by extending political activism to domesticity the movement has helped to sustain the gender-based division of labour between men and women. Women's participation in the movement has unquestionably influenced their lives and position. Nonetheless, the degree of change in its unevenness is highly debatable. Most importantly, female participation is conditioned by the structure and social ideology of the movement and therefore does not reach women at the popular level; and whenever it does, as we have seen, it takes the form of domesticity reaching into the political arena.

In terms of female participation, in national liberation movements that are known to have followed the same strategy whereby women are inspired to join and even recruit into the movement but where women are used as a vehicle of mobilization and in supportive roles, mere participation does not necessarily lead to equality and emancipation. Moreover, asymmetrical gender relations are not challenged even within the movement and therefore no radical transformation in the division of labour occurs. As a result, a small

number of women gain some equality or challenge social control as individuals, and may even become successful, but this is not the norm. Palestinian women are no exception. Not only that; their commitment to domesticity has not challenged the unequal gender relations-they have in fact legitimized women's reproductive role and domesticity and men's exclusion from it by engaging in the domestic sector for political purposes. By giving national and patriotic meaning to women's reproductive and domestic roles without any prospect for gender equality, Palestinian women may be actually helping the patriarchy to further institutionalize gender-based division of labour and social control.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that there can be no doubt of the political awareness existing among Palestinian women. Whether living in the diaspora or confronting soldiers and settlers in the Occupied Territories, Palestinian women are conscious of the dialectical nature of their struggle-in other words, both the political struggle for national liberation and the need to bring social change within the society in order to extend their contribution in the national struggle.

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- 1
The Balfour Declaration: Palestine should be re-constituted as the national home for Jewish people.
- 2
The Jewish claim that God promised that they would return to the promised land reinforces the legitimacy of the colonization of Palestine.
- 3
Some families have become refugees several times over: the first time in 1948 at the time of the establishment of the State of Israel; then in 1967 after the June War; in 1972 at the time of the PLO defeat in Jordan and in 1982 after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.
- 4
Female university students have mostly been actively involved; they enjoy more freedom and opportunity for organizational activities.
- 5
These are the only organizations allowed by the occupation authorities.
- 6
In an interview with the secretary of the WWC (Working Women's Committee) in Bethlehem, I was told how proud women are to have won this holiday on International Women's Day. The secretary herself has a master's degree in biochemistry from Moscow University, lives in the Dheisheh camp and is extremely proud of serving the women's cause and being part of resistance.
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A critical look at the relationship
between women's struggle and
national liberation, focusing
particularly on the Palestinian
national liberation movement
and the involvement
of women in it.



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