

The Palestinian women's movement: new realities, old concerns

A central feature of Palestinian politics in the nineties, and specifically after the signing of the Oslo agreement in 1993, was that while many Palestinians were enthusiastically debating laws and challenging their newly established government on the basis of equality, they were aware that the framework within which their new reality was constructed was an agreement which deprived them of their fundamental right to self-determination and independence. The Oslo Accords sustained Palestinian inequality with Israel; in fact, by virtue of being signed by Palestinian representatives and approved by the international community, they amounted to a written surrender to the state of Israel. Oslo thus established a new mode in international relations in the globalisation era, based on an acknowledgement of colonial relations by co-opted representatives of the colonised themselves.

Another important feature of Palestine is empirical. Anyone living in Palestine in 1995-99 would have been struck by the passion of its people in discussing every law submitted to the legislative council. A huge number of workshops was devoted solely to debating proposed legislation; there was regular media coverage of debates on law.

Participation in these activities was not restricted to professionals. Nor was it dependent on whether or not the participants knew the mechanism through which laws are formulated, or whether specific laws had direct or indirect effects on their lives. For the first time in their history, Palestinians had the opportunity to pass their own legislation. It was within this context that the Palestinian women's movement appealed for equal rights and equal citizenship for both genders, an exercise embedded in the larger trajectory of a nation still struggling for independence, yet celebrating limited self-rule.

The non-Islamist sections of the Palestinian women's movement engaged in a collective effort to negotiate their rights and articulate a new discourse for their involvement in the social and political spheres. The last two years of the first *Intifada* (1990-91) witnessed a growing emphasis on religio-national identity *vis-à-vis* the colonial occupier,¹ an issue which bluntly - and perhaps fortunately - implicated and confronted the nationalists with the most sensitive subject: the gender question. A clear indication of this development was the women's movement's bold expression of its dissatisfaction with the gendered views and approaches of the nationalists, who have persistently relegated women's interests to the bottom of the agenda, in favour of the national cause and, in the last years of the first *Intifada*, in favour of political compromise with the religious parties.²

Issues that are religiously, politically and culturally sensitive started being debated publicly, this critique going hand-in-hand with the movement's redefinition of gender interests and re-establishment and re-articulation of the very legitimacy of women's rights. Women's groups have powerfully brought to the fore the valid claim of equal rights for women on the basis of their equal participation in the struggle for self-determination and independence.³

Significant in the movement's politics is the historical moment of its appeal; the 'autonomous' Palestinian women's movement introduced into public debate issues related to equal rights and equal citizenship at a time when the national movement was at its 'lowest ebb'⁴ due to international power shifts, regional political changes, local disputes over the Oslo agreement,⁵ and the striking failure of the nationalists to 'address complex issues ... such as social rights, pluralism of worldviews, and freedom of speech'.⁶ Palestinian women's activists were aware of the nationalist trend around the world to overlook women's contributions once national liberation was won; some women's activists expressed their disappointment with the post-Oslo Palestinian Authority (PA) attitude towards women: in the words of one woman activist, 'We have worked so hard for so long, but we do not see fruits of our work'.⁷

The debate about women's strategies *vis-à-vis* the state has arisen only in the last decade, with the establishment of the PA, which made possible the first meeting between 'Palestinian society and its leadership in exile'.⁸ In this period, the Palestinian women's movement was the most active social movement; it brought up the question of equality and claimed its rights from the 'nonsovereign government'.⁹ The claims of the Palestinian women's movement not only drew attention to new 'social agents', but also provided a different interpretation of old problems.

A key element in the movement's campaign is its political strategy. When the female participants in the Model Parliament (MP) for Family Law Reform (1997-98) were intimidated and labelled as western by the Islamists, as happened frequently,¹⁰ their 'counterdefense to the Islamists was to ground [their] equality argument in the language of nationalism, state building and democracy'.¹¹ This political strategy, which links gender equality with the 'deep geopolitical inequalities of the Oslo period, not only reclaims nationalist ground from the Islamists, but opens up the possibility of a new democratic alliance' with the nationalists.¹² The same nationalists who were apologetic *vis-à-vis* the Islamists during the first *Intifada* became supporters of women's rights. It was the social question posed by the Model Parliament, which the nationalists had for a long time failed to advocate, that attracted public attention and nationalist support. A leftist leader commented on the Model Parliament campaign, saying that 'the parliament was like a light and we had to respond'.¹³

This shift in the nationalists' attitude does not signify a transformation in their discourse about women's rights; it is rather due to the political space created by the women's movement, which 'opened up a political debate that had been absent'.¹⁴ The nationalists' support for the women's cause in this specific case confirms the fact that the women's question continues to be a matter of political pragmatism.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it validates the movement's claim that their political concerns are not restricted to family law reform as such; the women's movement is concerned with the question of citizens' rights and political democracy in general.

Despite their different ideologies and heterogeneity, and even with the plurality of their political orientation and class background, a central element has emerged in non-Islamist women's organisations: a shift towards a public interrogation of gender relations in Palestinian society through employing the notion of equality. This process has been paralleled by a

gradual institutionalisation of the women's movement itself through the establishment of women's study centres, increased numbers of grassroots women's organisations focusing on empowerment and awareness raising, the setting up of women's departments within ministries, etc.

In this regard, Ameri¹⁶ observes that there are two viewpoints within the Palestinian women's movement concerning the issue of institutionalisation.¹⁷ One sees this development as a defensive action, which comes from the movement's fear of the Palestinian Authority's power to limit the scope of mass mobilisation, while the second sees it as a move away from the grassroots, which perhaps will weaken the roots of the movement and make it an easy target for the Islamists and the PA. In Egypt, professionalisation and institutionalisation were among the main effects of donors on the women's movement. This led, as Al-Ali observes, to what has been called careerism within the women's movement.

Model Parliament: a brief overview

The Palestinian Model Parliament was a networking project between a number of human rights centres, women's centres, and women's coalitions. It was established in 1997 with the aim of bringing together all parties interested in proposing Palestinian laws and legislation based on equality and human rights.

The Model Parliament began with planning sessions in all regions of the West Bank and Gaza. The activities resulted in the election of 88 members from the West Bank and 120 members from the Gaza Strip. The parliamentary seats were divided equally between men and women. The participants were representatives of political parties, members of the Legislative Council, human rights activists, representatives of women's organisations and grass-roots organisations, as well as some sheikhs.

What was striking was the fact that the MP members worked systematically to examine, debate and challenge the very basis of the family law, namely the issue of frame of reference, a field which fundamentally questions the sources and consequences of any legal reform. Most women's groups view family law reform as a figurative indication of the state's policy towards not only the gender question but also towards what constitutes the identity of the state itself.

In order to provide MP participants with the opportunity to debate women's rights from different perspectives, training courses were conducted on issues related to human rights. These included contemporary readings in religious thought dealing with women's rights and the position of women in Islamic legislation. The training sessions compared the ideas of Muslim thinkers from many different periods and regions. The members of the MP were all conscious of the fact that the issues before them were basically a matter of power relations. Thus, their problem was to find solutions that would help to build a new, more balanced equation that would strengthen the 'progressive' discourse while keeping the realities of Palestinian society in mind.

There were two main approaches to doing this. Some participants argued that the Islamists should be confronted on their own ground and challenged on the basis of new and progressive readings and interpretations of the *Qur'an*. They called for a feminist interpretation of the *Qur'an* as a way to strengthen the feminist discourse.

The second viewpoint came from some 'secular' members in the MP, who said that Islam's position on women's rights in general is ambiguous at best, and that Islam's compatibility with women's rights cannot be resolved easily. They added that the *Qur'an* would have to be read selectively and subjectively to find supportive verses, and thus feminist interpreters would use the same methodology as the dominant religious institutions. Furthermore, the feminist interpreters would have fewer texts to support their perspective, while the 'traditional' Islamic school of thought has at its disposal an arsenal from the mainstream of the Islamic heritage. In addition, they described the women's battle within Islam as a losing one, not only because Islamic texts contain clear ideas of male superiority, but also because the authority of feminist interpreters of Islam would never be greater than that of the male-dominant institutions.

These members also argued that efforts to comb through Islamic texts for evidence of sympathy for women would be unfruitful from the 'liberal' viewpoint. Their strong argument was that women's struggle for their rights should be seen as a political struggle within the power structure of society and that any attempt to obscure this fact would serve the opposition. Therefore the battle should be conducted politically, taking into account the power relations of society and the dominant patriarchal relations in every aspect of life in Palestine and in the Islamic world in general.

A comprehensive evaluation was conducted at the conclusion of the MP's activities. One of the main achievements of the project was its success in reaching thousands of women and men in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Other achievements included raising the awareness of political parties, especially the leftists, about issues specific to women, and lobbying them for better laws for a Palestinian society based on justice and equality. The MP initiative sparked a debate that had been missing from Palestinian society for a long time. The MP members were able to communicate their objectives to the people despite the counter-campaign. The project succeeded in ensuring the right of women to discuss their situation and the discrimination against them in the current laws. The MP members crossed the limits and taboos set by some Islamists that forbid people from discussing *shari'a*. Finally, in implementing the slogan that the national and social struggle have to be carried out side by side, the MP filled the vacuum left by the democratic movement.

Longer-term implications

The movement's political strategy is very significant in terms of its relevance to the public/private discussion; it is quite instructive that the women's movement's attempts to enter the monopolised public space with new claims and demands actually opened up the same space to the voices of the 'stronger' political actors. Hammami and Johnson discuss these changes extensively.¹⁸ They argue that the Oslo agreement produced a 'profound crisis of

political visions, language, and direction for the national movement, particularly as it was locked in the Palestinian Authority system of rule'. Thus the Model Parliament provided an exceptional opportunity to the political parties to make their voices heard.

The movement has not only challenged the state on the grounds of women's rights, but also thrown up profound questions about the rights of citizens *vis-à-vis* the state and the right of the whole nation to equality, citizenship, and independence at the international level. In other words, the movement has succeeded in making the links between the women's question and people's rights (men and women) *vis-à-vis* the state, and could link the two with the nation's right to independence and self-determination. Interestingly, this specific strategy of Palestinian women, as Peteet¹⁹ has pointed out, emanates from the movement's deliberate approach of locating their arguments within the human rights and democracy paradigm rather than situating the debate around issues related to sexuality. These three linkages made it clear that the Palestinian women's movement has begun to make the transition from the 'chorus' seats²⁰ to centre stage at the national theatre.

Endnotes

- ¹ I have argued elsewhere that in the Palestinian context, the issue of identity is complex and should be understood in an historical framework. Palestinians have suffered many types of oppression and discrimination since the turn of the twentieth century, which have led them to view their past as the true expression of their nationalism. During the first *Intifada* (1987-91), Palestinian women were viewed as the symbolic 'container' of Palestinian identity. The glorification of women's fertility, the recognition of their bodies as the most important part of national resources, and the encouragement to bear more children as part of the national struggle, were explicit expressions in the Palestinian national discourse. A frequent popular slogan continues to be: she has a military womb, and thus she is responsible for producing more fighters. The Islamists, who have gained considerable popularity since the late eighties, have made powerful claims on religious identity; in their discourse, authenticity is viewed as being identical with Islam (see N. Sh'hada (1999) 'Gender and Politics in Palestine, Discourse Analysis of the Palestinian Authority and Islamists', ISS Working Paper no. 307, The Hague: Institute of Social Studies).
- ² The unified leadership of the first *Intifada*, which consisted of all secular and democratic forces, accepted the conservative social agenda of Hamas. The leadership called for national unity over divisive and 'marginal' issues such as the *hijab*, and tacitly supported its enforcement by the Islamists in the Gaza Strip. Thus the political interests of those parties were given higher priority than women's rights.
- ³ It is worth noting here that there are no 'Islamist feminists' in Palestine, as they exist in Iran or Egypt. Provocative Islamist women's organisations (which are affiliated to Islamist parties) appeared only in 1997-98, after the Islamist counter-campaign against the strong women's drive for family law reform. Thus the role played by the Islamist sections of the women's movement in the campaign to reform the family law and attain equality for women could be considered in this context as being negative, with such organisations presenting obstacles to reform (see Hammami and Johnson, 1999). Generally, the women's movement in Palestine, as in other parts of the South, has emerged and been articulated from within the nationalist (secular) movement. Badran argues that the feminist discourse in Muslim states has been located through the nationalist, Islamic modernist, and 'more recently democratic and human rights discourse' (Badran 2001, p. 49). It is also important to differentiate between the prevalent Islamic culture in Palestine and the political (or women's) organisations which use Islam as a means for political gain.
- ⁴ R. Abdulhadi (1998) 'The Palestinian Women's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics, and Challenges', *Gender and Society* 12(6), pp. 649-73.
- ⁵ For more details, see G. Usher (1995a) 'Bantanisation or Bi-nationalism? An interview with Azmi Bishara', *Race and Class* (issue on the theme 'Palestine: Diplomacies of Defeat') 37(2), pp. 43-50.
- ⁶ R. Hammami and P. Johnson (1999) 'Equality with a Difference: Gender and Citizenship in Transitional Palestine', *Social Politics*, Fall 1999, pp. 314-43.
- ⁷ A. Ameri (1999) 'Conflict in Peace: Challenges Confronting the Palestinian Women's Movement', in A. Afsharuddin (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/Ate*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 29-54.

⁸ Hammami and Johnson, *ibid*, p. 318.

⁹ Hammami and Johnson, *ibid*.

¹⁰ The Islamists were able to launch an extensive counter-campaign, which accused the MP of working against Palestine, Palestinian society, Islamic norms and Islam as a whole. The Islamists not only attacked MP members for their positions on women's rights, they also criticised their 'moral' and 'personal' conduct, describing them as prostitutes (M. Wurmser and Y. Carmon (1998) 'Uncaptive Minds: The Palestinian Women's Movement', *Middle East Insight* XIII(6), MEMRI: <http://www.memri.org/staff/mei.htm1>). The Islamists described the MP as the most serious danger to Palestine, one contributing to the 'Western conspiracy against Islam'. By linking the women's movement with a western conspiracy against Islam in general and Palestinians in particular, the Islamists try to turn the distrust of the West bred by historical experience to their own purposes. Under the provocative heading, 'Severe Upsets Among the Ulama and Muslims in the West Bank and Gaza; Due to MP Draft of Family Law', the *Al-Risala* (Mission) newspaper published an interview with Sheik Hamid Al-Bitawi, president judge of the Court of Appeal. In this interview, Sheik Hamid said: 'There is a conspiracy against Islam and Muslims, and against the current Family Law. The proposed law by the MP claims that there is no need for a bailee [marriage guardian]. This claim is un-Islamic, it is against the Hadith. The Prophet said, "No marriage, unless with bailee".' M. Sabri (1998) 'Severe Upsets Among the Ulama and Muslims in the West Bank and Gaza; An interview with Sheik H. Al-Bitawi', *Al-Risala* daily newspaper, 3 March (44), p. 5. See also Sh'hada, *ibid*.

¹¹ Hammami and Johnson, *ibid*, p. 339.

¹² Hammami and Johnson, p. 337.

¹³ Zakut, cited in Hammami and Johnson, p. 335.

¹⁴ Hammami and Johnson, p. 338.

¹⁵ The instrumentality of women's issues was best shown when the Egyptian parliament discussed the Family Law Reform Bill (2000); the leftists and the Islamists argued on the same lines, submerging the real substance of the issue into the political game of power and dominance (for more details, see Nadje Al-Ali (2000) *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 75).

¹⁶ Ameri (1999), *ibid*.

¹⁷ There is a growing debate about the meaning and consequences of institutionalisation of women's movements as social movements. Diani (2000), for instance, believes that one of the main features of a social movement is its loose identity and un-institutionalised actions and activities. He even argues that once an organisational identity becomes overwhelmingly dominant, and thus institutionalised, it dies. M. Diani (2000) 'Networks and Social Movements: from metaphor to theory?', paper for the conference *Social Movements Analysis: The Network Perspective*, Ross Priory, Loch Lomond, 23-25 June 2000.

¹⁸ Hammami and Johnson, *ibid*, p. 338.

¹⁹ J. Peteet (1999) 'Gender and Sexuality: Belonging to the National and Moral Order', in A. Afsaruddin (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/Ate*, *ibid*, pp. 70-88.

²⁰ Nun (1989), cited in V. Vargas and C. Olea (1999) 'An Agenda of One's Own: The Tribulations of the Peruvian Feminist Movement', in N. Yuval-Davis and P. Werbner (eds) *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, London and New York: Zed Books, pp 246-62.