

Introduction

Women and Power

Galia Golan

We cannot speak about “women” as such. Nothing could have brought this home more graphically than a small incident a few years ago. At an academic conference abroad, I proposed to a group studying women and politics that we examine the effects of the parity quota system (50% ensured representation) on voting patterns. A Saudi woman turned to me with a look of disbelief bordering on disdain and said, “What are you talking about? We can’t even vote!” Well, as of a September 2011 royal decree, itself the result of public action by Saudi women, women will be allowed to vote in local elections there. A step in the right direction, but for me, this incident was a lesson in what feminist theory has told us for some time: The category “women,” like gender altogether, is socially constructed, to be seen and understood through many prisms, be they race, class, nationality, religion, economics, politics and more. Women, like men, vary; their circumstances, backgrounds, traditions, all differ; their experiences are shaped by an enormous variety of factors. Yet, one factor that does seem to hold true universally is that women, in all their varieties and backgrounds, experience things differently from men. Gender, however constructed, is an operative factor in all our lives, and perhaps none more so than in the realm of power in the public sphere.

Thus, in this issue on Women and Power, we make no effort to claim nor have any illusion that women under occupation — women in Palestine — face the same issues or struggle within the same environment as women in the occupier state of Israel. Even as women vary within each of these societies, this variety itself cannot but be affected by the different circumstances, history and more. What we do attempt in this issue is to look at the different aspects of power as experienced, or challenged, by women — beginning with the international realm and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which was designed to render women greater power in public life, moving through our Palestinian and Israeli realities — political, social, cultural — and on to the revolutionary experiences within our region.

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Lucy Nusseibeh

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has decided that the Nobel Peace Prize for 2011 is to be divided into three equal parts between Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work. We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society.

In October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325. The resolution for the first time made violence against women in armed conflict an international security issue. It underlined the need for women to become participants on an equal footing with men in peace processes and in peace work in general:

"It is the Norwegian Nobel Committee's hope that the prize to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman will help to bring an end to the suppression of women that still occurs in many countries."

This is some of the most exciting news (in a year of exciting news in this region) to come out of the international community in recent years. Finally there is acknowledgment and appreciation of the role of at least some women in bringing about change for the better, and in leading the way to peace and justice. Surely every woman who heard of this prize must have felt some renewed hope and pride.

It is not the fact of the women's leadership that is new. That has been going on for years, as also has the use of nonviolent activism (e.g., in the 1920s and the 1960s and '70s in Palestine). What is new is the public recognition of the value of this leadership and the potential that this prize can now open up peace-building and decision making processes throughout the region to include women.

Implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 is urgently needed in this part of the world, and the issue of the **Palestine-Israel Journal on Women and Power** clearly stresses this. The decision of the Norwegian Nobel Prize Committee will surely give this resolution some of the impetus it needs and deserves, as it states specifically that there is a "need for women to become participants on an equal footing with men in peace processes and in peace work in general."

This issue of the **Palestine-Israel Journal** is important because women need to be heard, not just as echoes of, or answers to men, but in themselves

and as themselves. Women need to be heard with full recognition of the complexity of our multiple roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict situation and in the broader struggle for women's rights. This issue reflects some of this complexity, including international voices as well as local.

With this, as with any conflict, it is the stereotypes that tend to be prevalent, from "women are natural peacemakers," "naturally peaceful (and, therefore, never belligerent)," to "naturally sisters who can connect across a conflict"; or women are totally identified with the enemy and, as such, are all evil and no openings or connections as women are possible.

But connections are possible, and this issue of the Palestine-Israel Journal has a wide variety of articles that can resonate with women across the conflict and with others across the world as we try to work with power to improve our situation and our lives.

The work on this issue was an important and interesting process as we shifted the title from "Women's Empowerment," with its implication of lack of power, to "Women and Power," with its implication of agency and strong individual and collective voices. As women, we need to work with full awareness of our power to make positive change. When we held the roundtable discussion, both the similarities and the differences between Israeli and Palestinian women came into focus, as it also remained painfully clear that the problem of the Israeli occupation is still the fundamental problem for Palestinians.



Young Israeli and Palestinian women lead a discussion on peace at a university.