

Women and Power in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Lucy Nusseibeh

Lucy Nusseibeh is the founder-director of Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy (MEND) and director of the Institute for Modern Media at Al-Quds University.



Women need to take their power, reconnect on issues of real concern about the future of the region, for both men and women, and take the lead in reframing the approach to security.

The situation here is undeniably stuck. It is also unsustainable, and a secure, peaceful and prosperous future for Palestinians and Israelis seems not only highly improbable but also a vision that eludes the imagination. What is more, women seem to be becoming less rather than more visible in the search for this future.

Wars begin in the minds of men — so therefore does peace, and so do all our possible futures, stable or unstable, violent or without violence. Peace and wars also therefore begin in the minds of women, so, as women, we need to start to think about the future we would like, and about what power we have to actually make a difference, and how we are going to use that power to bring about a sustainable and prosperous peace.

There is clearly a need for new mindsets, for more ideas and creativity. The involvement of women in both formal and informal peace discussion is one of the few ways that traditional mindsets, such as those focused on fear and military security, that are such a major part of the problem, can be transformed. If women are included at all levels of peace talks, and there is a truly gendered approach — with equal representation and respect for the concerns of all members of society — perhaps we could at least be on our way to a sustainable future. We need to start by working with our minds and our creativity, and from our perspective as women. We need to imagine and consider the different options for the future, even if these are all difficult and no longer very desirable, given the compromises that must be involved, and we must insist that our points of view and ideas be heard and acted upon.

A Mindset of Militarization

Too many Israelis and Palestinians, both men and women, place their faith in military security as the only way to keep the peace between the two peoples; they have a mindset of militarization.

This mindset is reflected in common understandings, or more precisely, “misunderstandings,” such as that maintaining a strong army and increasing the numbers of weapons, and therefore the level of militarization, will increase the overall level of security. Or that imposed separation/segregation of populations brings increased security. Or that the use of violence, or at any rate the sufficient use of violence (including institutional violence), will bring security. Or that some people are more human than others, love their children more, etc. Even that some people are all good and others are all bad. And with this, that some people are always victims and others always perpetrators, and that there is no middle ground between the two, and that we are either one or the other, never both. These understandings imprison the mind with their focus on fear, both in relation to the present and in relation to the future. They lead people to feel that they must always be afraid, because even if the circumstances change, the (inhuman and evil) character of their enemy, will surely stay the same, and will therefore always be a threat and will always need to be constrained by violence or threats of violence (as the only way to be safe from them). Whatever the potential political parameters, the insecurity that arises out of these mindsets will continue as long as the mindsets themselves continue, and will make it much harder to imagine peace.

Militarization, with its emphasis on violent, military solutions, tends to preclude the possibility of exploring other options, such as nonviolent ones, while at the same time increasing the probability that people will use the weapons that they have at their disposal simply because they are there and they have been trained to use them. As the violence is constantly present in the ever-present military, so is the fear that accompanies both violence (whether explicit or only implicit) and the constant emphasis on security. But this all too often creates a vicious cycle, as fear typically paralyzes the mind and often leads to violent reactions (which can then be justified as “defensive”). This excess of fear increases the polarization that is inevitably part of the conflict. But separation and polarization feed into the fantasies and allow for thoughts and fears and actions that again become part of a vicious cycle and create further reasons for people to have no contact and to refuse even intercultural dialogue — for why should anyone talk with non-humans?

The belief that the imposed separation of the Palestinians from the Israelis via the separation wall/barrier enhances security is another mistaken corollary of the military mindset — mistaken in so far as it ignores the long-term effects of denying basic rights and destroying social cohesion. Ultimately frustration will find a way to claim those rights. When people are held in a certain situation by force, there is always the risk that as soon as the restraint is removed, they will act to take revenge, so there can never be real security. There is in this situation of forced accommodation an illusion of security, but it is only an illusion.

Women get sucked into these mindsets and thereby shut out the potential for shared feminine concerns. In so far as women still see themselves and are still perceived as dependent on men for their protection, under the traditional view of security, these fears are perhaps even more deeply entrenched in relation to women. “Weak women” traditionally put their faith in men and their military might.

Women are sometimes credited with being more peaceful than men, but women have in fact traditionally supported this same military belief/mindset and have encouraged their men to go off to war to protect them. Perhaps this made sense in a different world when the fighting could be far away and the women and children in a safe space where they would not be attacked, raped, sold into slavery, etc. But it cannot make sense in the profoundly intermingled space of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which shifts from house to house and street to street and field to field, village boundary to settlement. The occupation is the epitome of the “new wars” in which the focus is precisely on aggression against the civilian population and in which human rights abuses are a key strategy to foment fear and hatred. However, these “new wars” have also given rise to a new approach to security, the beginnings of the transformation of the military mindset, and one in which women can be key. What is more, despite not being inherently “more peaceful,” as women we can start by looking with fresh eyes, and through different prisms.

Women’s Perspective

A group of women at a workshop organized by Inclusive Security in November 2010 identified the following among the reasons why women must fully participate in peace negotiations: “Women have different priorities for public policy, which include the welfare of society as a whole.” “Women are more connected to the grassroots and therefore bring a perspective to policymaking that is more representative of society as a whole; they don’t lose this perspective when they achieve high-level leadership positions.”

“Women have a critical role in family decision-making and managing household finances. They are, therefore, more aware of the basic needs of the community and have expertise in managing budgets to meet those needs.”

These all give hope that women can in fact bring a new non-military and human-focused approach to security, based on realities and a more holistic view of society than that focused on security as defined by militarized national borders. A mindset that can also allow for, even encourage, connections across the conflict.

Therefore, one of the things that women can do is bring a change in emphasis and a reframing of the concept of security. Women can start by simply calling attention to the fact that there is no security for women where weapons are involved. In the face of increasing international focus on “security” as military security, women can promote the broader definition of security based on the ability to live in dignity and peace. According to the 2003 *Report of the UN Commission on Human Security*, “Human security means protecting vital freedoms. It means protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations, building on their strengths and aspirations. It also means creating systems that give people the building blocks of survival, dignity and livelihood. Human security connects different types of freedoms — freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom to take action on one’s own behalf.” This reframing of security as “human security” can help lead the way to seeking what is actually needed for peace, whereby addressing the need for basic human dignity and self-respect are fundamental.

Women can draw attention to these needs and potentials by simply drawing attention to their daily lives. This would have many advantages. As long as any peace agreement is linked to military security or ending any form of violence, the extremists can hold it hostage simply by engaging in acts of violence, thereby effectively nullifying the agreement or significantly impeding its progress. With a “holistic concern with the security of the people” on the part of those responsible for working toward peace, the daily lives of those suffering in the conflict would start to become the focus of attention and would highlight the urgency of addressing the many critical human rights needs. If these urgent needs — economic, medical and psychological — of the societies that have been breaking down in the conflict were to be addressed and remedied, the appalling pressures that fuel acts of desperation would be reduced. With the reduction of constant pain and fear, the possibility of human sympathies across the conflict would also be given space. It would reverse the methodology of the conflict. It could

provide an opening for those who genuinely want to solve it.

Women as Victims, Women as Activists

One crucial point is that women in the peace process should not be seen only in the context of women as “victims of war and conflict” or as needing “protection and empowerment” but as women playing a proactive role in the process of peace negotiations and long-term peace-building. Women are agents and can have power; in fact they simply need to assert that power to really start to make change toward peace.

There have always been powerful Palestinian women since the beginning of the last century, especially in the 1920s and 30s, setting up the women’s union (General Union of Palestinian Women) and going on delegations to England to protest the policies of the British Mandate; holding their families together during and after the catastrophe of 1948; and organizing and leading demonstrations after 1967 and throughout the 1970s and 80s through the end of the intifada of 1987. It was only with the intifada of 2000 and the increasing militarization that came with the peace process (with the influx of small arms and, again, the emphasis on military security and violence) that women became less visible.

Palestinian women’s role as peacemakers has been essentially in demonstrations to start with and then to some extent reaching out as sisters across the conflict. This was going well until the collapse of the Oslo process and the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, which affected women’s peace activism deeply. This was partly because this intifada brought a considerable element of shock, and with the shock came a sense of betrayal despite all the strength of earlier connections. What was more, when Palestinian children threw stones as in the intifada of 1987, they were portrayed as abused children whose parents put them on the front lines of the conflict because they, the parents, and especially the mothers, “didn’t love their children.” Thus, regardless of the fact that this was untrue, a huge gulf was created at the most basic level of possible shared concern — that of mothers for their children.

In summary, the militarization of society, coupled with the use of violence, and the increase in demonization drove women out of the public sphere.

Palestinian women are sometimes described as double victims, due to the two-fold forms of oppression. There is indeed a similarity between the situations of the Palestinians vis-à-vis the Israelis and that of many women vis-à-vis men, especially in relationships where there is an emphasis on force or violence. There is a sense in which the conflict is similar to any other unequal power situation — not even necessarily a conflict, such as the one

that still all too often exists between a man and a woman or more generally between men and women. But the Israeli women still share much of this with Palestinian women, and there is a possibility for them to identify with them in many ways and on many levels. There is therefore also the potential for women to overcome the military mindsets, to refuse to be dragged, as they were during the second intifada, into representing these beliefs. Together, women can, and therefore must, transform the paradigm from military to human security and from victimhood to inclusive humanity.

Dr. Amalia Saar, who specializes in gender and feminist theory as well as Palestinian citizens of Israel, talks of “intersecting identities” with “mixed loyalties” — “the simultaneous belonging to multiple self-defining groups that are all hierarchical and gendered” and work in favour of the patriarchal system. She says that “[g]endering the discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict means uncovering this complication. It means showing how this complication keeps men and women trapped in situations in which they are obliged to oppress.” She believes that “[i]n terms of strategy, making UN Resolution 1325 relevant for women means working with peace organizations and women’s organizations in order to convince them to take an extra step towards radicalism, to look inward in order to uncover oppression and to face it squarely.”

Let us go back to the earlier question of weakness and of being victims



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— and why women have not sufficiently made use of their potential power in regard to this conflict, despite the fact that there are many dynamic and powerful women (both Palestinian and Israeli) in government and in civil society who could take the lead and who can (and do, of course, to some extent, but not enough) serve as role models. And now we have the examples of the revolutions taking place in the surrounding Arab countries, revolutions that are a powerful assertion of the need for reciprocal recognition of dignity and that, apart from Libya (which proves the point), the emphasis has been on nonviolence and on shifting the power from that of military violent domination to that of sharing — an approach that also implies gender equality, even though it has a long way to go. These revolutions of the underdogs, of the weak, the victims of the abuse of power, have been an inspiration to others in the same situation. They can also be an example to women — not to the extent of taking to the streets and making revolutions, but to the extent of seizing the power to make change. This is something that can be done as much by the powerless as by the powerful (in fact, it has to be like this), and this is perhaps one of the major lessons of the so-called Arab Spring and one that can be learned and applied across other situations, including the situation of women in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Women can use the fact of their being weak or victims or on the receiving end of oppression in effecting change — both as the reason to insist on inclusion and as the way to unite and gain traction toward inclusion.

Asserting Power to Create Change

The Arab Spring has given birth to a new excitement and a sense of pride and a renewed sense of interconnectedness throughout the Arab world, with sparks that catch and inspire and ignite, in a galvanizing awakening toward the restoration of dignity. This also has produced the awareness that however demoralized and downtrodden and poverty stricken and hopeless, people will rise up and demand their dignity, that there are limits on what people will endure in silence. This interconnectedness can exist among women. It even does at one level; that is why there continue to be initiatives solely among women, including creative ones such as the Israeli women taking Palestinian women to the seaside, and always the bonds that can be formed by women as women. But there are too few initiatives of this kind.

Here also is the distinction between “empowerment,” with its implication of someone helping the other toward power, and “power,” which is there for the taking and can theoretically be taken by any who are interested and determined enough. While empowerment is a way to help, that means there is still someone that is doing the helping and therefore

there is still some element of dependence. “Power” on the other hand, as in “women and power,” has the implication of equality: that the women are there and so is the power, and that women can do what they like with it (rather than being helped toward it). While perhaps the “empowerment” is a necessary and even an excellent stage, it is less appropriate for real gender equality and for the involvement of women on an equal basis as leaders, especially in regard to leading the various processes toward a real and lasting solution to the current conflict.

Women can be learning about the power and the need and the driving force of dignity. As we assert our power, we are transforming our own mindsets and moving away from the stereotypical mindsets of the conflict. By shifting ourselves, we can also help to shift the entire conflict, because we will have created a change. Men will not do this and they are too heavily invested in the traditional mentality, but we as women can, especially if we can provide role models and can educate women to take up their power and not allow others to take it over and use it “for their protection.”

When a situation between two parties is stuck, one of them has to move, and that will generally be the one that has most to gain by change. It does not work simply to blame and require the other to make changes; it is only by actually changing and thereby creating a shift in the relationship that both can begin to change. Perhaps we also as women may have a preference for stability over change, even when the situation is not in fact stable, let alone sustainable. But stability means no change, especially in a conflict. Many of us are seduced by the desire for stability, but change is essential if we are ever to achieve real peace.

In the case of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, since the Israelis, despite their lack of security, are generally less in need of change than the Palestinians, it is really up to the Palestinians to start the process of change. As men are still so stuck in their own increasingly militaristic attitudes, it is up to the women to create the shift that can give some new momentum.

Women are essential in the efforts to create a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine by reframing of the language of military security into human security and in reaching out and across at the grassroots and mid-levels in addition to the leadership levels. The overall goal would no longer be “security for Israel and a state for the Palestinians,” in accordance with the current political wisdom, but security for both Palestinians and Israelis, and a state for Israel and a state for Palestine (as long as this involves an end to occupation, this could be taken to mean one or two states). The intermediate goal would be a shift to a focus on the humanitarian needs of all in the conflict, such that civilians, especially children, would be protected

as completely as possible.

Palestinian and Israeli women should ideally be working with UN Security Council Resolution 1325, both separately and together, and exploring ways to transform the conflict at every level (from official governmental to the various forms of public opinion). Their resourcefulness, their tenacity and their resilience from the very beginning of the conflict are testimony to how much they/we could contribute to this process, especially with clear international official support.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is constantly in the public eye, influencing and being influenced by international, and especially American, public opinion. As women start to find their voices around the world, the voices of women peacemakers among Palestinians and Israelis can carry more weight as they resonate with all those, women and men, who sincerely want lasting peace for the region. Many of the battles are fought via the media or in the halls of Congress, and this is where new initiatives can be

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effective against the old hardliners. Peace needs to be worked toward at many different levels and on many different tracks — what is most important at the present time is not to allow the stagnation of the status quo to stymie the progress toward a real and lasting peace. If women leaders, especially from the mid- and grassroots levels, can be engaged by the leadership so that the gap

between young and old, social and political, as well as Palestinian and Israeli, starts to be bridged, they can help bring peacemaking back to the streets. There are young women involved in the Palestinian youth movements for change; perhaps the need for communication across generations is as urgent as the communication across borders.

The communication has therefore to be reopened, and as much as possible, to allow for visibility and audibility, so that there can be resonances among all those who share views on oppression generally and share their desire for a just and lasting peace.

How we live our days is, of course, how we live our lives.... Perhaps one day we will reach the stage when Israeli and Palestinian women will pull down all barriers between them and say in agreement with Virginia Woolf: “As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.”¹

¹ Virginia Woolf, 1938. *Three Guineas*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966) p.80.