

Women's Empowerment and Peace-Building under Occupation?

Sonia Najjar

Sonia Najjar is an expert on gender issues and development who has worked as an international consultant in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.



Introduction

As a contribution to the discussion on women's empowerment in the **Palestine-Israel Journal**, this article reflects on the possibilities for women's empowerment and peace-building under a condition of prolonged occupation. Specifically, it focuses on the near-impossibility of the manifestation of empowerment and peace for those who have been disenfranchised under a paradigm of extreme oppression in the context of Occupied Palestine. If one uses Eileen Kuttab's contextualization of Palestinian empowerment as historically being embodied in practices of mobilization and resistance, then being allowed neither mobility nor the right to organize resistance to Israeli military violence makes it clear that the prospects for successful peace-building and the realization of Palestinian women's empowerment face significant obstacles.¹ This is a result of the autocratic imbalance of power that has seeped from external into internal dynamics. The external factors are the architects and participants of the occupation comprised of an illegal Israeli military occupation force of women and men, abetted by an international community that does not adhere to its mandates to the fullest extent and follows an aid praxis that further serves to annihilate mobilization and resistance. The internal obstacles to women's empowerment are an extension of the external, that is, elements of the Palestinian local governing structure that was meant to be temporary in nature.

¹ Kuttab, Eileen, "Empowerment as Resistance: Conceptualizing Palestinian Women's Empowerment," *Development*, Vol.53 No.2 (2010), pp.247-253.

Different Manifestations of the Basis of Supremacy

To understand this analysis, it is imperative to pay attention to the overall environment and the multiplicity of factors within it. The existence of an Occupied Palestine is made possible through applying the concept of the “other,” which Edward Said eloquently elaborates in his book *Orientalism*. Said’s work on Orientalism is related to the notion of the subaltern as he explains the way in which Orientalism produced the silence of the Orientals. The term “subaltern” generally refers to marginalized groups rendered without agency.² Thus, European colonialists defined themselves by defining and presenting the differences of the “other”³ as a guise for colonial exploitation. The shift from standard European colonialism toward a policy-oriented neo-colonialism under various U.S. administrations driven by the military industrial complex has led to different manifestations of this basis of supremacy, which in recent times has been accompanied by the rhetoric of the right to development under occupation.⁴

Annihilation of the “Other’s” Identity and Aspirations

Through the State of Israel, a regime of militarized, patriarchal colonialism has been executed by implementing extreme measures in order to alter, if not eradicate, the sociality of the “other” or the Palestinian.⁵ Colonialism in Occupied Palestine lies in the practice of habituating the population to defeat and constructing normalcy out of that very subjugation. Continuous movement and encroachment on space accompanies this stillness of subjugation, which is necessary to achieve the annihilation of the other’s identity and aspirations. The self of the Palestinian is replaced through the establishment of an ethnocentric state and the deconstruction and construction that the project necessarily entails. This includes building colonial infrastructure such as settlements and settler (Jewish-only) roads and severely restricting mobility and accessibility through checkpoints, soldiers, machine guns and an impenetrable bureaucracy of control that administers every aspect of Palestinians’ lives.⁶ The most visible structure to date has been the Separation Wall, which may be perceived as the

² Spivak, G. C., “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Nelson C. and Grossberg, L. (eds) *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp.271-313.

³ Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Butler, Judith, “Cosmopolitanism, Peace and Conflict” lectures, as part of the Centre for the Humanities Intensive Programme (February 2010): <http://131.211.194.110/site1/Viewer/?peid=01adc462bcc245c98042365302c5cf09>.

⁶ Eyal Weizman, “The Politics of Verticality,” *openDemocracy* (Web publication at www.openDemocracy.net), April 25, 2002.

attempt to slice the Palestinians' location and memory from their homeland. Correspondingly, destroying homes and creating a complex network of checkpoint passages which dictate where Palestinians can go, when and for how long, and ensuing expulsion engenders perpetual states of dislocation, insecurity and domination.⁷

Some activists have suggested that a solution for empowerment and peace amidst the mentioned context should emanate from collective initiatives by Israeli and Palestinian women. However, it should be considered that the occupation — its imposition of immobility and the breakdown of Palestinian society that this produces — is sustained by an occupation army formed by forced conscription that also includes Israeli women.⁸ Israeli women may be exempt from serving in the army due to religious, marital or other factors; however, as Rela Mazali has noted, their socialization within a culture of war renders it difficult to break out of a militarized construct.⁹ Militarization has been described by Cynthia Enloe as “the step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria.”¹⁰ This transpires through a subtle process, which includes maneuvering women of diverse groups against one another.¹¹ Being conditioned within a militarized framework affects and incarcerates perceptions, thoughts and behavior within militarized societies. Israeli women's role in an illegal military apparatus may skew their comprehension of peace-building and empowerment as it relates to the cases of Palestinian women. A high probability exists that they will not have Palestinian national resistance or aspirations of self-determination as primary objectives on their agendas. Moreover, Palestinian women under occupation and the ensuing annexation of East Jerusalem have been excluded from the democratic privileges that Israeli women have enjoyed, further separating these communities.¹² Despite years of the international community's support for Palestinian/Israeli women's dialogues for peace, these conditions should be seen to render any such conversations difficult.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Israeli women” refers to Israeli women of Jewish descent, as opposed to Palestinian women (commonly referred to as Arab citizens of Israel) who have Israeli citizenship.

⁹ Mazali, Rela, “‘And What About the Girls?’ What a Culture of War Genders Out of View,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 6 (2003), pp.39-50.

¹⁰ Enloe, Cynthia, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.292

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Israeli Jewish women are differentiated under a paradigm of democracy from Palestinians who are Israeli citizens due to the differences in legislation. Please refer to Ilan Pappé, *The Forgotten Palestinians: A History of the Palestinians in Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Israeli Women Have More Access to Institutions That Can Implement Change

Moreover, it seems delusional to presume that simply being women, due to physiological commonalities, is sufficient to erase differences such as socioeconomic status, freedom and the *carte blanche* afforded to participants in an illegal occupation to negate and relinquish others' rights. Simply being a woman does not inherently engender compassion or enable true entry into a struggle for emancipation by a female in her position of a colonizer with regard to her subjects. Nonetheless, forms of peace-building and empowerment have generally taken guidance from those that have the resources to be in a position of greater might. In the context of Israeli and Palestinian women, these have predominantly been the Israeli women. While they are also constrained by a male-dominated environment, Israeli women have more access to institutions that can implement change than Palestinian women and therefore have the ability to wield stronger impacts. It is dubious that genuine empowerment and peace-building between women can transpire amidst such asymmetrical power relations. This is not to deny that empathy and benevolent intentions exist within attempts to reach peace. Rather, the location of Israeli women outside an imposed occupation and the mundane realities that accompany that level of existence removes them from that plight. Thus, we need to understand to what extent peace-building between women can be possible when one party comprises soldiers in an illegal occupation army, actors in the quelling of a civilian population, and the other forms part of a population under occupation.¹³

Nevertheless, initiatives between women seem to proceed regardless of Israel's on-going violations of international law and have proven insufficient in changing patterns of behavior. Israel continues to consistently violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, customary international law as reflected in the UN Charter, the Hague Convention, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The overarching frame of legal violations coupled with initiatives towards empowerment and peace building raises the question of these endeavors

¹³ Not all women, at all times, are soldiers. There is a feminist anti-conscription movement in Israel that works precisely to overcome this problem and faces great challenges.

as mere attempts of “normalization”¹⁴ under occupation, which appear to form part of the development and peace trajectory. The latter falls into the development *modus operandi* of the international community. Instead of enforcing international law, which would end the occupation, the international community generally has maintained the status quo and cemented power relations with the participation of some of the dispossessed.

Militarized Behavior Seeps into the Psyche and Behavior of Some of the Colonized

If peace-building and empowerment are confronted with obstacles vis-à-vis those who engage as oppressors and a population under that oppression, empowerment between the female segment of a population under occupation also has its fair share of divisions. In the past, diverse discourses and actions were deployed by Palestinian women’s autonomous movements. During the first intifada (1987-1993) — the popular civilian struggle against the Israeli occupation — a significant number of women were activists and leaders of civilian resistance.¹⁵ Women’s committees were established and affiliated with national liberation organizations in towns, villages and refugee camps. Grandmothers and young girls alike were in the protests, constructed barricades and used their own bodies to shield their men from soldiers. Further, they contributed to the reduction of their community’s economic reliance on Israel.¹⁶ Neighborhood committees were established along with home schooling, demonstrating the resilience of the Palestinian community under occupation.¹⁷ Yet women’s extraordinary capacity and contributions to the survival of Palestinian society have been marginalized.

Instead of women being enabled to contribute to new forms of peacemaking, what has ensued has been the extensive militarization of Palestinian society, which is apparent through the vehicle of local governing structures that were intended to be temporary. This has been a result of the occupation as well as the infiltration and purchase of an international development paradigm based on unequal yet intersectional relations of power. In the case of Occupied Palestine militarization may be perceived

¹⁴ “Normalization — *Tatbiyah*, in Arabic — means collaboration with Israeli institutions aimed at creating the impression of normality, while the context remains one of Israeli military occupation and the depriving of fundamental rights for the Palestinian people.” The Alternative Information Center, “The Case against Palestinian Normalization with Israel” (September 2007): <http://www.alternativenews.org/english/index.php/blogs/nassar-ibrahim/986-the-case-against-palestinian-normalization-with-israel>.

¹⁵ Daniel, Naila, “Palestinian Women in the Intifada,” *Peace Magazine* (July-August 1997).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

as being derived from a hegemonic interest, coupled with the practices of the colonial power, which seeps into the psyche and behavior of some of those who are colonized, pitting them against one another, dividing them and ultimately, conquering them.

For example, a local governing women's entity was established in November 2003 "as a response to the Palestinian women's struggle to achieve their national political and socio-economic rights."¹⁸ A glaring issue of contention was Hamas' landslide elections victory in 2006. Although Hamas overwhelmingly won the democratic parliamentary elections in Occupied Palestine with 76 seats of the 132-member parliament, it was prevented from governing by the international community.¹⁹ Following the insistence that democratic elections be held, the United States and donor countries either discontinued or severely curtailed assistance to any entity that was associated with Hamas. This was significant as the Palestinians were the most foreign-aid dependent nation at the time.²⁰

Domination and Submission

If one reviews women's empowerment through a postcolonial lens, several immediate questions arise connected to processes of domination and submission. How can women's empowerment be achieved within Palestinian society when Hamas' electoral victory — according to the Carter Center, in free and fair elections — was immediately nullified?²¹ Such nullification negated those who supported Hamas, which constituted the majority in Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas in the world. That population, which includes women, was denied any form of participation, decision-making or even presence.²² One may assume that the women envisioned to benefit from plans for women's empowerment were not supporters, voters or members of Hamas and were not married to men who were associated with Hamas. The women in Gaza were in fact quintessential subalterns due to their absolute erasure by the governing structures that were deemed appropriate by the international community. Indeed, the lives of many women in Gaza were either extinguished or placed under severe hardship with the massacre of people during Operation

¹⁸ Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) brochure released to the public July 2008.

¹⁹ BBC News, January 26, 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4650788.stm>.

²⁰ <http://electronicintifada.net/bytopic/432.shtml>.

²¹ http://www.cartercenter.org/peace/conflict_resolution/middle-east/index.html.

²² Conclusion derived from research through consultancy at the Central Elections Commission, Palestine, through UNDP 2006.

Cast Lead in 2008-09.²³ The latter is a somber reminder of the difficulties of empowerment and peace-building under the onslaught of occupation, although the ones in power and their supporters may pretend that women's empowerment and peace can transpire under such conditions.

The local governing structure's empowerment or gender equality route fits into a model of development that has followed the political sentiment of the international community. The development trajectory of the international community upheld the external suppression of the Palestinian democratic structure and referred to those that were deemed favorable to their interests rather than those who were democratically elected. Emphasis was not placed on addressing and including the entire Palestinian population inside Occupied Palestine. Instead, the focus was on the language of gender, the third Millennium Development Goal, which aims at promoting gender equality and empowering women as well as UNSC Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, again regardless of the possibilities of implementation under occupation. This is not to underestimate the relevance of these concepts and initiatives. However, it is worth analyzing the local context of struggle, its indigenous characteristics and the rights of the entire Palestinian population. This was replaced with the use of a certain discourse by local governing structures, which at times permitted dominance over the "other" by entering into processes of negotiation that included not only the loss of voice but the acquiescence and adoption of a donor-driven discourse that was once alien.²⁴ Subsequently, various categories of subalternity were created, which entailed the complete exclusion of segments of the population that local governing structures were intended to serve.

Conclusions

To conclude, peace building and empowerment among women cannot take place in the absence of liberation. Asymmetrical power relations where a civilian population is continuously occupied under a colonial state-building process does not lend itself to empowerment or peace for any member of humanity. Instead, the militarization of the societies involved takes hold which confines perception, circumscribes thought and, in turn, determines actions both externally and internally. An ongoing occupation which is a constant condition of violence by Israel renders it challenging for Israeli

²³ Approximately 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed resulting in conclusions of war crimes as detailed in the Goldstone report. See Shamir, Shlomo, "UN Human Rights Chief Endorses Goldstone Gaza Report." *Haaretz*, Feb. 11, 2009: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1121045.html>.

²⁴ Bhabha, Homi K, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.85-92.

women to engage in empowerment or peace with the Palestinian women whom they occupy. Indeed, it is patronizing that women who served as conscripts in an occupation army, or are part of a country that engages in an illegal occupation and annexation, should form a partnership of empowerment with those who live under the oppression of colonization. A more realistic option is to seek a new path which facilitates localized empowerment and peace initiatives on the ground, as well as general nonviolent resistance against the occupation by both Israeli and Palestinian women, separately, until the gap in power is minimized.

An in-depth understanding of civil society on the ground may result in more authentic processes of empowerment and peace based on how the people define themselves, their situation and their needs. On the other hand, due to the continuously changing nature of a prolonged occupation and ensuing annexation, Palestinian entities and their plans should serve to facilitate the strengthening of all people and sectors of Palestinian society regardless of political affiliation. This entails the active participation of the people in their self-determination while demanding that the international community and the Palestinian “representatives” comply with their mandates. The fragmentation of the Palestinian nation under occupation

The only type of empowerment, peace and development that should take place in Occupied Palestine is that which builds on the people’s resilience, sumud (steadfastness) and resistance, which challenges the situation of colonialism through occupation.

renders these initiatives difficult; however, they are not impossible. Fostering belief and cohesion like that which took place in South Africa among anti-Apartheid activists, instead of local divisions, should be a constant objective.²⁵ The only type of empowerment, peace and development that should take place in Occupied Palestine is that which builds on the people’s resilience, *sumud* (steadfastness)²⁶ and resistance, which challenges the situation

of colonialism through occupation. A course of “development” which ignores these elements will only serve to mitigate, rather than eliminate, the root cause that does not allow peace and empowerment to take hold, which is the occupation and current annexation.

²⁵ Interview with Sedjwick Jane, London School of Economics and Political Science, psychologist and South African activist, London, March 2010.

²⁶ Bethlehem University Former Dean of Arts, Waleed Mustafa, Talking About the Concept of Sumud to Palestine-Family. March 5, 2010. http://www.bethlehem.edu/archives/2010/2010_024.shtml.