

# THE DIALECTIC OF NATIONALISM AND FEMINISM AMONG PALESTINIAN WOMEN STUDENT-ACTIVISTS IN ISRAELI UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract** – *This paper explores the dialectical relationship between nationalism and feminism in the experience of a group of Palestinian women student-activists in Israeli universities. An overview of the history of Palestinian women's involvement in the national movement leads to the conclusion that the Palestinian Intifada in 1987 was a turning point in articulating a feminist-nationalist agenda among Palestinian women activists in the West Bank and Gaza and inside Israel. Qualitative interviews with 11 Palestinian women student activists in Israeli universities reveal two intertwined themes of nationalism and feminism. Participants clearly challenge their male dominated political organisations to espouse a progressive social-political agenda focusing simultaneously on national and gender forms of oppression.*

## Introduction

**A**ny attempt to understand the Palestinian Women's Movement without viewing it within the context of the broader Palestinian National Movement, or to discuss the latter without paying special attention to the indispensable role played by Palestinian women activists and their organizations in mobilising and sustaining the struggle for Palestinian sovereignty, is incomplete and misleading. Feminism and nationalism in national liberation movements around the world have historically been intertwined and clearly influence each other (Abdo, 1991), especially in relation to Third World feminism. Third world feminism is a concept that has received much attention in feminist and postcolonial circles. Rather than restate the multiple formations that Third World feminism speaks to, for the purposes of this article we use the term to underscore the various struggles that oppressed and marginalized women engage in as part of their collective pursuit for social justice, liberation and transformation. Following Chandra Mohanty (2001), we consider the 'intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation' (p. 55) that position women in Third World feminism. In the case of the Palestinian Women's Movement, and student activists in particular, our analysis pays distinct attention to the subjective location of

women engaged in struggles for preserving Arab-Palestinian national identity within an alienating educational context.

Numerous attempts to understand the ways in which nationalist movements for liberation could simultaneously be conceived as feminist (and vice versa) have revealed a corpus of contradictory relations between nationalist and feminist projects. A limited analysis of nationalist-feminist projects views the former as inherently masculine and patriarchal in purpose and scope, and the latter as stand-alone movements for women's liberation. When considered in unison, the contradictions between nationalism and feminism appear irreconcilable under the fixed definitions from which both concepts are conceived. Traditionally, various schools of Western-liberal feminism have been critical of the very concept of nationalism on the ground of its marginalization of women's liberation and their oppression (Hasso, 1998). However, as Kumari Jayawardena (1986) maintains in her classic text *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, women's feminist agendas have been, to a large extent, an integral part of general national movements for liberation from foreign colonialism and domination. In this sense, feminism in Third World countries is not a recently imported Western idea, but has its historical indigenous roots in the experiences of the native women themselves.

Himmani Bannerji (2001, 2002) correctly asserts, in our view, that feminist critiques – analyses rooted in the concepts of patriarchy and gender – of nationalism and nationalist movements include an examination of the cultural, economic and state dimensions from which nationalisms operate. Bannerji identifies two main strands of feminist critique that have emerged of nationalism. On this point, it is worth quoting her at some length:

'One strand considers any nationalism as inherently patriarchal and containing oppressive and exclusive moral constructions and regulations within its cultural, ideological and state apparatus. A patriarchally constructed icon of woman serves as the cultural/moral sign of the nation. Any national project, it is contended, identifies itself through this critique which deduces its patriarchal nature not from any direct content but from an ideologically driven absence of women and gender within their purview.' (2002, p. 6)

According to Bannerji, feminist criticisms of nationalisms primarily centre on the placement of women – both figuratively and concretely – as part of an overall movement towards nationalist transformation. Feminist critiques, as Bannerji also asserts, are important and necessary because they dutifully illustrate how women and the concepts of gender and patriarchy have either been ignored or manipulated to achieve un-feminist goals and objectives. But, as she also notes, such criticisms do not fully consider the social, political and economic sphere of feminist

struggles within nationalist movements. According to Bannerji, such an undifferentiated view does not offer us a lens from which to examine the complexity of women's participation in nationalist projects, and it does not allow us to move beyond the static formulations of 'feminist' versus 'nationalist' movements. Importantly, dominant conceptions of feminism and nationalism do not consider how both frameworks – when conceived as simultaneous projects towards liberation and justice – dialectically inform one another and how they can empower all members of a nation to rewrite their social location. As Bannerji notes, the purpose of expanding feminism's critique of nationalism is to 'broaden the parameters ... both as politics and as an epistemology, by situating the issues of patriarchy and gender justice within a wider space of revolutionary social criticism rooted in a demand for social justice – for all and at all levels' (2002, p. 6).

In light of Bannerji's insights, we are examining Palestinian student women's activism from a vantage point that pays considerable attention to the broader social relations that inform women's participation in the Palestinian struggle for national liberation and for women's rights. In the context of Palestinian student activists attending Israeli universities, our focus is on the factors – namely, family and collective ethnic identity – that motivate women to actively participate in the nationalist struggle. Further, their level and form of participation is examined in relation to their social location as women in a traditionally male dominated sphere. Consider, for example, the qualitative study conducted with a sample of Palestinian women students at the Hebrew University in which Erdreich & Rapoport (2002) investigated the construction of academic knowledge as a process of elaborating national identity among women student activists. In their reference to gendering the ethnonational discourse among Palestinian women, they point out that 'joining their male Palestinian peers in higher education catapults the women into the heart of the Palestinian national project' (p. 510). Erdreich & Rapoport (2002) note further that 'the attachment to the ethnonational story of Palestinians' positionality in Israel represents active participation of women in an arena previously reserved for men' (p. 510).

As Ibrahim Makkawi (1999) has noted elsewhere, asserting and enhancing their Arab-Palestinian national identity is one of the core issues for Palestinian student activists in Israeli universities. For female student activists, the growing awareness of their oppression not only as members of the Palestinian national minority but also as women within their own patriarchal Arab society, adds more complexity to their struggle. The women we interviewed for this study were committed activist members in mixed gender student political organisations. These organisations are the student branches of the various Palestinian political parties in the community. The contradictions identified by Palestinian women

activists between the politically progressive and socially conservative outlooks of their male comrades become one of the major concerns they grapple with as political activists. This dialectic between feminism and nationalism is the focus of this paper.

In order to understand the complexity of feminist consciousness among Palestinian women activists and its dialectical relation with their nationalist consciousness, it is essential to review the historical roots of the Palestinian Women's Movement as it evolved within the context of the Palestinian National Movement. We therefore first provide a brief historical review of Palestinian women's political involvement with special attention to the *Intifada* in 1987 as a turning point in Palestinian women's struggle. Then we turn the focus to the situation of Palestinian women in Israel, and discuss findings from in-depth interviews with Palestinian women student activists in Israeli universities.

## **History of the Palestinian Women's Movement**

Since the beginning of the Palestinian resistance during the British Mandate (1917-1948), participation of Palestinian women in the public space would not have been possible unless it was part of the national struggle despite the lack of articulation of social agenda pertaining to women's equality. The precedence of the national cause over the social cause in the Palestinian women's political involvement during that time was attributed to the conservative nature of the Arab-Palestinian society (Kuttab, 1993). In contrast to earlier women's activism in other Arab countries (such as Egypt and Tunisia) where women activists focused on social issues such as the abolition of polygamy and the right to vote, Palestinian women at that time marched against the Balfour declaration, Jewish immigration to Palestine and the treatment of Palestinian prisoners (Hiltermann, 1991). The argument put forth by the male dominated national movement was that the challenges facing Palestinian society as a whole demanded the participation of all segments of the population, which required the minimisation of internal conflicts. As expected, Palestinian women's organisations at that time reflected the political and social structure of Palestinian society. Indeed, the leadership of the women's associations consisted of women from the upper class, usually relatives of the national male leadership. Most of their activities were limited to charitable and humanitarian domains, which was consistent with the society's class structure and reflected a picture of 'the rich helping the poor'.

The Palestinians refer to the war of 1948 and the establishment of Israel as the *Nakbah* (catastrophe), which resulted in the fragmentation of their society and the destruction of their sociopolitical institutions. Consequently, they became

scattered in several locations under different sociopolitical and economic conditions<sup>1</sup>. The uprooting led to a series of dramatic changes in Palestinian women's lives that included a weakening of the power of the family as a social, economic and political unit.

Class differences in Palestinian society did not vanish after the *Nakbah* of 1948. On the contrary, class differences became more acute in exile as peasants and the poor settled in refugee camps while the upper class urbanites settled in towns and cities in their host countries. The tradition of Palestinian women's grassroots work around charitable issues continued in exile, but was expanded by the entry of peasant (now camp) women into the political arena which had been dominated by men (Peteet, 1991). Women's charitable organisations mushroomed in the camps in order to meet the pressing demands of survival in exile. Although this may be seen as an extension of their domestic roles as care givers and protection providers to those in need, the women carried on a substantial role of substituting for the state services.

Palestinian women in Lebanon had played an indispensable role in both the preservation of the refugee community in exile and the armed struggle led by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Their major participation in the struggle was made through the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), which has officially represented Palestinian women in the PLO since 1965 (Kawar, 1993). The GUPW membership reflected the size and power of the different factions within the PLO, and its membership and structure supposedly unites women from all the various political factions (Peteet, 1991). However, in reality, these women advocate and represent the agendas of their respective political organisations rather than their common issues as women. The failure of the Palestinian leadership to formalise a clear policy of social change and the incorporation of women's issues in the agenda of the national struggle has been attributed to its reluctance to 'rock the social structure with an accelerated, social change ideology that might be divisive and might drain its limited political and financial resources' (Kawar, 1993, p. 57).

Mobilising Palestinian women to participate in the national movement during the period of 1970-1982 in Lebanon was not isolated from the situation of war. Not only was their participation in the resistance affected by the war itself, but also their daily lives in the camps were continuously under war related stress. The class differences that the Palestinians carried with them in exile and the conservative outlook of the camp community were crucial to the manner in which women organised themselves. The camp women were caught between the revolution and the traditions of the Palestinian patriarchal society. What made matters worse was the fact that from the outset the leadership of the Palestinian National Movement had pursued compromise and coexistence with the existing patriarchal structure

rather than challenge it with an agenda of social transformation and change. Woman's earlier involvement in the revolution required the blessing and approval of her father or husband (Bendt & Dawning, 1980; Peteet, 1991). Because of the economic difficulties among the camp community, women recruitment was geared towards this domain, which also had more chances of support by the men in the family. According to Kavar (1993), 'programs to engage women included literacy classes, sewing, embroidering, and beauty salon workshops which formed the sort of traditional activities that were attractive because they increased opportunity for employment' (p. 38).

Having lost the base of their revolution as a result of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the focus of the Palestinian struggle has since shifted to combating the deplorable and inhumane living conditions of the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Since 1967, Palestinian women's charitable organisations in the occupied West Bank and Gaza played a significant role in supplying public services such as nurseries, orphanages, relief and income-generating projects for needy families (Sayigh, 1989).

Most interesting in the Palestinian women's movement is the political disparity between the older and younger generations of women activists. While both generations are equally eager to end the Israeli occupation, they sharply differ regarding the role and status of women in Palestinian society. The fact that older Palestinian women activists are reluctant to commit themselves to radical social change must be attributed to their relatively influential status in the traditional patriarchal system. As Haj (1992) notes,

'The entry of the older generation of activists into the political struggle is a natural extension of their relatively powerful status as mothers within the extended family household, earned through seniority and bearing sons. Since they are part of the power structure, their political mobilization does not lead them to question patriarchal relations or the prevailing forms of gender inequalities. Simply put, they have an investment in protecting patriarchal relations.' (p. 775)

Despite the magnificent role played by these charity organisations in defying the occupation authorities, and the abundant services they provided to women in need, their older women leaders continuously refrained from addressing issues of women liberation in their agenda. But a new generation of Palestinian women activists in the West Bank, motivated by their national consciousness on the one hand and their awareness of the need to address women's social issues on the other, began looking for appropriate organisational frameworks in the 1970s. When the next wave of Palestinian women activists realised the absence of such organisations, they set up their own (Hiltermann, 1991).

Four Women's Working Committees (WWC), who differed sharply in their structure and political ideology from the charitable associations, have emerged in the West Bank and Gaza since 1978. They recruited members from all sectors of women with the aim of building a mass women's movement (Sayigh, 1989). The political views of the four main women's committees roughly paralleled the four organisations of the PLO's consensus block. But while there may be differences on long-range political questions, there has been a firm unity among them on the need to mobilise all women in support of the *Intifada*, the PLO and an independent Palestinian state.

The WWCs had since their inception advocated two separate but interrelated agendas. Their political stances regarding the national cause have been mere extensions of that advocated by their respective mother organisations. The other agenda focused on Palestinian women and their oppression both under the Israeli occupation and within the patriarchal social structure of the Palestinian society. For the first time in Palestinian history, women organisations stressed the need to work towards the advancement of women's issues regardless of their political differences. Nearly a decade of organisation and grassroots activities before the *Intifada* allowed the women to enter a new phase of Palestinian national struggle. They were better organised and more determined to achieve national liberation for their people and social liberation for themselves as women.

When the *Intifada* erupted in the West Bank and Gaza in 1987, it demanded the mobilisation of the entire Palestinian population, and consequently, women's organisations emerged as one of its most active and visible constituencies. Women ran kindergartens and child care centres, conducted literacy and skills classes, helped to create and support agricultural and food processing cooperatives, and maintained a wide variety of discussion and support groups, and other activities that women working from a Western framework generally define as 'consciousness raising' (Sosebee, 1990).

During the *Intifada*, Palestinian women extended their participation from mere economic and social projects. They organised demonstrations, smuggled wanted youths to safety, mobilised and issued political manifestos and communiqués, and threw stones at the soldiers. Furthermore, women have been arrested, beaten, shot and killed in unprecedented numbers in Palestinian history. According to Sayigh (1989), 'after decades of media-starvation, Palestinians are suddenly bombarded by journalists, film-makers, researchers, novelists, conference-conveners, all interested in one topic: Palestinian women' (p. 465). It is this turning point that made Palestinian women's voices advocating a combination of feminist and nationalist agendas finally be heard. This qualitatively new form of Palestinian women's participation led to the conclusion that the *Intifada* was not only against the Israeli occupation, but also a new way of life the Palestinians were creating.

While the question of how much social change Palestinian women accomplished during the *Intifada* remains debatable, 'some writers went so far to claim that women had achieved equality through the *Intifada*' (Hammami, 1991, p. 73).

Many Palestinian women activists dwell on the lesson they have learned from the experience of Algerian women. Ask any Palestinian woman activist and she will tell you that although Algerian women had fought in the revolution, when Algeria was liberated they were sent back 'to the kitchen'. Palestinian women do not want to repeat this mistake. Hiltermann (1991) quoted an activist member of one of the women's committees as saying: 'The struggle for our rights as workers and as women should start now or we'll end up with another bourgeois state and another kind of regime that will oppress women and the working class. It all has to go side by side' (p. 165). Another Palestinian woman activist, representing her committee at the international women's conference in Nairobi in 1985, was also quoted by Hiltermann (1991) as saying: 'If a woman is going to participate only in the national struggle, she'll have to start at square one after liberation' (p. 165).

An articulated and clearly defined feminist-nationalist agenda has emerged among Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza during the *Intifada*. The new agenda addresses the status of Palestinian women and their oppression both under the Israeli occupation and within their own society. Inspired by the experience of Palestinian women during the *Intifada*, and subsequently the growing body of literature about their experiences, Palestinian women activists everywhere began voicing their demands to integrate the feminist agenda within the national struggle.

## **The Palestinian Student Movement in Israeli universities<sup>2</sup>**

Unlike many so-called Third World voluntary ethnic minorities living in Western societies, it is important to remember that the Palestinians in Israel constitute a non-voluntary national minority group who did not immigrate to a new society or system; rather, the system was imposed on them. The reference here is to an indigenous people striving for their national self-determination while under the British Mandate, only to find themselves under a new form of Zionist colonialism. The abrupt change in the status of the Palestinians who fell under Israel's control in the aftermath of 1948 was very traumatic. It took them several years to realise its impact on their collective existence. Almost overnight, these Palestinians were transformed from a majority living in their own country to a minority forced to live, work and study in an alien system imposed on them against their national aspirations (Minns & Hijab, 1990).



The government has systematically manipulated the formal educational system among the Palestinians in Israel in order to inflict social, economic and political control, mainly aiming at stripping them of their national and cultural identity (Nakhleh, 1977, 1979; Mari, 1978, 1987; Zuriek, 1979; Lustick, 1980; Al-Haj, 1995; Makkawi, 1999). The implicit goal found in the Israeli schooling system is to educate Palestinian youth for a special type of collective identity that does not challenge the status quo of Israel as a Jewish state. This 'reproduction' model of schooling (Giroux, 1983) is applied throughout all levels of the educational system. However, there is evidence of a growing resistance among the Palestinian students to such an oppressive educational experience.

Palestinian students in the Israeli universities graduate from school systems that systematically blur and control their national identity according to the political interests of the majority group and the state (Lustick, 1980; Mari, 1987; Nakhleh, 1979). Given this form of identity blurring education, most Palestinian students rely on their families or community-based social and political organisations to develop their national and cultural identity. For a large number of them, the most intense process and actualisation of national awareness and socialisation takes place at a later point – through student activism at university.

Universities are the only educational institutions in Israel where Palestinian and Jewish students are fully integrated. In fact, it is the only educational situation in which Palestinians and Jews, as individuals, engage in direct interaction with each other on a presumably 'equal' basis as students. It is because of this 'integration' that the universities find it difficult to apply double standards in their attempt to limit Palestinian students' political activism while at the same time allowing the majority Jewish students the freedom of political organisation. Nonetheless, due to the very definition of the universities in Israel as 'Jewish institutions', Jewish students continue to benefit from a wide variety of venues for the expression of their collective interests – an activity that is comparatively limited for Palestinian students attending the same institutions. The relationship between the Palestinian students and the university authorities is conflictive and corresponds to the government's oppressive policy towards the Palestinian population at large.

Palestinian students in Israeli universities are politically and culturally alienated because the educational context of the universities belies their national aspirations. Nakhleh (1979) argues that the 'Israeli universities are dominated by Jewish-Zionist ideology, and this ideological basis frequently gets reinforced by rituals. Such context places heavy sanctions on an Arab nationalist expression' (p. 113). Palestinian students maintain their rights to organise independently from the General Student Union (GSU) which is 'dominated by the majority Jewish students who do not cater to the specific needs of Arab students' (Zureik, 1979,

p. 176). Despite their legitimate argument that as a national minority group, they have different national and cultural needs, which are not on the agenda of the GSU, the university authorities still do not recognise Palestinian students' organisations. University recognition of their organisations would imply an explicit recognition of their national identity as Palestinians; a reality which Israeli universities and the Israeli government systematically deny and suppress.

The goals of the Palestinian Student Movement are political in nature and aim at satisfying the social, cultural, and political needs of the general Palestinian student population in Israeli universities. In other words, Palestinian student activists perceive themselves and are perceived by the community as dynamic agents working towards social-political change and national awareness among Palestinian students as a social category. Furthermore, they see themselves as an active branch of the Palestinian National Movement as a whole and participate in activities in their home communities as well. In addition to the social and political contributions of the student movement to the general Palestinian student population and the community, individual student activists also undergo a significant process of personal, social and political development as a result of this experience.

The representation of Palestinian women activists in the student organisations is much higher than that in the general population. Gender role expectations (of marriage, child-bearing, etc.) are less distinct at this stage, which allows equal participation of female students. After college, however, women's political involvement gives away to the expectation to get married and establish a family. Men who continue to be active after college, on the other hand, do not face the same limitation of gender role expectations between their family life and political activism.

Similar to their sisters in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian women in Israel have also been active in nationalist male dominated political organisations. Whenever they organised their own women's groups within these organisations, the controversy between the social and political agendas could not be avoided. A clear call for a feminist agenda has been only a recent development in their political participation. In fact, it was the first time in recent Palestinian history that a group of Palestinian women in Haifa set their own organisation called *Al-Fanar* – the Palestinian Feminist Organisation (or 'the lighthouse') with a clear combination of nationalist and feminist agendas. *Al-Fanar* included only women members, which opened the space for more critical and direct action regarding women's issues in Palestinian society. Established in 1991, the organisation considered itself 'totally independent of all existing parties and organizations and their programs. *Al-Fanar* is open to every Palestinian woman who accepts its basic principles and its goals of struggling for full equality for Palestinian women as

women and as Palestinians' (Al-Fanar, 1991, p. 1). By stressing all aspects of oppression as they are manifested in their life conditions, it is evident that Palestinian women are calling for the most comprehensive political and social agenda.

The bulk of the literature on Palestinian women focuses on the experience of Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza, especially since the *Intifada* in 1987. The powerful participation of these women in the struggle for liberation resulted in a growing body of research spearheaded by feminist scholars and predominantly Palestinian activists in the West Bank. However, Palestinian women activists in Israel were often left out of the analysis. Their participation in the national movement through male dominated political organisations reduced their presence as a distinct group actively engaged in a project of feminist and nationalist struggle. In light of their status as invisible members of the movement, recently established Palestinian women organisations in Israel have moved to distinguish themselves from male dominated political organisations. They focused their action around issues of violence against women, sex related crimes, the legal controversy of personal status, etc. (Al-Fanar, 1991; Espanioly, 1991; The Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women in Israel, 1997)<sup>3</sup>.

## **Method**

The findings reported in this paper build upon and constitute an extension of a larger study, which was conducted with Palestinian student activists in the Israeli universities including both male and female participants (Makkawi, 1999). The broader theme that emerged from 35 in-depth interviews with male and female student activists indicates that the Palestinian Student Movement takes place in an educational context where Palestinian students strive to develop and maintain their sense of national identity. When examined separately and in comparison with their male comrades, women activists repeatedly expressed deeper concerns with issues pertaining women's rights and the pursuit for liberation, both as part of the national movement for all Palestinians and as women oppressed within their own patriarchal Arab society. This led us to believe that a dialectical interplay between nationalism and feminism is manifested and articulated in their experiences. Because of this, we decided to focus on the women's interviews as a separate set of data and conduct a second round of qualitative analysis.

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 11 Palestinian women student activist members of mixed gender student political organisations. All of the participants were approached due to their visible and recognisable leadership role in their respective student organisation. The interviews focused on: (i) the

students' experience as political activists; (ii) the meaning of being an Arab-Palestinian in an Israeli university; and (iii) the issues, dilemmas, and concerns encountering them as women activists for a national cause in a male dominated national movement.

The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 26 years. Three women identified themselves as active members of *Abnaa al-Balad* (a non-parliamentary Marxist-Palestinian nationalist organisation), three of *Al-Jabha* (which is affiliated with the Israeli Communist Party), and five of *Al-Tajammu* (a newly formed parliamentary organisation with diverse individuals and political groups). As indicated earlier, these student organisations constitute the student branch of the various political organisations active within the Palestinian community. At the time of the study, a student branch of the Islamic Movement had just begun operating within the universities. However, it did not include women activists during those early stages. The women included in this study, thus, all came from secular political affiliations.

There were seven participants from the Galilee, two from the Triangle, and two from the Negev. There were five participants who attended Haifa University, and two each from Ben-Gurion University, Tel-Aviv University and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Seven participants indicated that they came from activist families that encouraged and supported them, and four participants were raised in non-activist families and received no support.

All the recorded interviews were simultaneously transcribed and translated into English. The first round of the exploratory interviews was analysed using grounded theory development techniques (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). After several readings of the data, a total of thirteen categories were identified. The second step in the data analysis was clustering these categories into a smaller number of meaningful themes. Two broad themes emerged from the interviews of this group of Palestinian women activists. The first theme illustrates the participants' sense of Palestinian national identity and closely related topics, such as, their sense of group relative deprivation and party identification. The second theme pertains specifically to the struggle between nationalism and feminism, and the experience of the women participants.

## **The dialect of nationalism and feminism**

It should come as no surprise that the Palestinian national cause and the struggle to preserve their national identity has been a major theme, dominating all forms of the students' social-political activism. Consequently, a feminist discourse among Palestinian women activists that ignores their national oppression would

represent only one part of the women's reality, if not distort it. On the other hand, mere nationalism without considering a wide range of social issues and relations, such as women's rights and patriarchy, also distorts the reality women face as participants in activist struggles. The Palestinian women students in this study entered the public domain of political activism through their commitment to the national cause, and subsequently demanded that their feminist agenda be also incorporated.

While what is probably the most revealing finding of this study is the women's insistence on integrating their feminist agenda within that of the broader national movement, it is equally important to emphasise their deep and unquestionable commitment to the national struggle in general. All participants developed a clear and confident sense of their Palestinian national identity. In fact, the participants perceived their collective-national identity as Arab-Palestinian, and saw it both as the cause of their involvement in student activism and as something that was enhanced and further developed through the experience of activism itself. This sense of collective-national identity was much more than self-identification or the choice of a specific label to describe their collective identity. It also included a strong sense of national awareness, the individual's daily behaviour, collective action on behalf of the group's national cause, a strong feeling of national pride, and the perception of national identity as part of the individual's self-concept.

Most of the participants were raised in political activist families that encouraged their national awareness, but they also continued to explore and reconstruct their sense of national identity on their own through their involvement in the student movement. Two Palestinian women activists, one attending the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the other attending Tel Aviv University, had this to say about their family upbringing:

*I grew up in a family where the first rule has always been that 'you are living in order to give-and-take, not only to take'. Since I was in the first grade, my mother made sure that I was always in my class committee. I had to be involved in something else in addition to my own education. There is no doubt that my family had the most impact on my political involvement. (1-1-1998)*

*I remember since I was very, very young that even the children's songs that I learned were revolutionary and nationalistic songs. Political orientation was rooted in my socialisation through children songs and stories and much more. (12-18-1997)*

Arabic is the national language of these Palestinian students. It forms an important component of their sense of collective-national identity. Asked about the importance of being Arab-Palestinian to her self-concept, a student activist

majoring in journalism emphasised the importance of her language and history to her national identity. She clearly articulated her sentimental attachment to her people and the collective self-esteem she derived from that attachment:

*I don't believe that people belong to the state as an institution to which they pay taxes and receive education and other social services. I feel that people belong more to their language. I speak Arabic fluently and I feel that the best way I can express myself is in Arabic. Being an Arab goes back to my language, my civilisation, even the Islamic civilisation despite the fact that I am not a Moslem. My Palestinian identity means more to me. Maybe the suffering we live through led us to hold stronger onto our Palestinian identity. In my opinion, and I don't say this as an expression of supremacy towards the rest of the Arabs, but I feel that the Palestinians are very, very, very distinct people. (1-1-1998)*

The Israeli universities as sociopolitical contexts are suppressing the development of national identity among Palestinian students (Nakhleh, 1979). Unlike American predominantly white institutions where there is a majority culture and several minority groups on campus, Israeli universities cater mainly to the needs of the dominant Jewish group with Palestinian students as the only minority group on campus. Not only that, but the existing history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the strong need to assert Palestinian identity within that conflict makes the polarisation between the two groups even sharper. Consider how one activist explains her search for collective belonging at the university.

*See, when I enrolled in the Psychology Department we were only two Arab students out of 150 Jewish students. When you enter a lecture hall, it becomes very evident that you are a minority even in terms of your feelings since you have no people around you. I used to go look for other Arab students between classes. There was an area where all the Arab students hang out, which we called Sahat Falastin (Palestine Hall), which is the 600 Hall. In this Hall it feels like you are going there to search for your belonging. We used to go there and meet other Arab students. Even if I did not know these students it was enough to hear people speak Arabic around me. It made me feel that I belong and helped me a lot. (12-18-1997)*

As citizens of the state of Israel, participants perceived that their collective group, the Arab-Palestinians in Israel, when compared to the Jewish majority group was experiencing institutionalised discrimination, inequality and an overall state of relative deprivation. This cognitive perception of relative deprivation was associated with feelings of injustice, anger and frustration, which in turn led to their involvement in political action on behalf of the interests of their group.

Furthermore, there was a clear link between their individual relative deprivation as individuals and their relative deprivation as a group. In some cases, when individual participants did not feel that they were deprived as individuals, they still insisted that the group at large was not receiving what they perceived as its legitimate right. Let us first consider this clear distinction between individual and group relative deprivation. A very successful student activist illustrated the relationship between her successes as an individual and the situation of her collective group as whole.

*See, there are two sides of the issue, which I think are very connected, but I still can talk about them separately ... on one hand, as an individual I can talk about my personal accomplishments, which gives me self-confidence and satisfaction. But on the other hand, on the collective level where I feel strong attachment – I don't feel that I am an individual who can do whatever she wants and move on with life – my feelings towards my group make me feel first of all unhappy. Not unhappy for belonging to the group, but unhappy about the situation of the group itself. Maybe at some point it makes me feel inferior that my group is the one that is working in unskilled labour and serving the other group. The contradiction here, when I go to a restaurant or when I am at the university it seems as if I am with the Jewish group, that I am with the group that had accomplished things. On the other hand, most of the people who do cleaning jobs are Arabs to whom I belong. (12-18-1997)*

Being successful as an individual, this student activist is obviously not experiencing a state of individualistic relative deprivation. However, her insistence that her collective group is experiencing a state of relative deprivation indicates a strong relationship between group identity and group relative deprivation.

The most pressing domain of group relative deprivation for these Palestinian students was the repression of their national identity and culture through their formal education. Women activists who graduated from public high schools (the majority) were very critical of their formal educational system for alienating them of their national and cultural identity. Being controlled by the Israeli government, the Palestinian formal educational system was perceived as an instrument of domination and control. There was a strong feeling of resentment towards the biased curriculum taught in Palestinian public schools. The participants who graduated from public schools perceived their education as irrelevant to their national identity. Not only that, but they were very frustrated about the fact that they study Jewish history instead of their own. An activist attending Haifa University, when discussing her educational experience, had this to say:

*Everything we study is about the Jews. Everything is Jewish culture. We study Bialik and Rachel. Why do I have to study them? Why don't they teach me Mahmud Darwish? Why don't they teach me Nizar Qabbani? Why don't they teach me Edward Said? Why don't they teach me about Arab philosophers and Palestinian poets? ... The whole world now recognises the existence of Palestine and that there is something called Palestinian people. So why are they still teaching me about Bialik and Rachel? What is the problem in teaching us Palestinian history? The problem is that they are afraid. They don't want us Arab-Palestinians to develop any awareness of our national identity. (1-4-1998)*

The gap between the family and the school's practices with regard to Palestinian students' national identity is a problematic area for the formal educational system. The formal educational system continues to disregard the growing awareness among Palestinian students of the need to adapt the curriculum to fit their national belonging. Continuing to do so will only alienate the students from the school altogether.

Identification with the group (or party) and its political programme was evident in most of the participants' responses. Group identity could be viewed as a mediating level of identification between the personal identity (self) and collective identity (society). In order to express their Palestinian national identity, student activists join political organisations that best represent their political views. The organisation provides them with the opportunity to examine and express their ideas about the national cause and their feelings of belonging. In this sense, the party itself provides a deeper psychological connection that exceeds the practical goal of achieving a specific political objective. Consider how a female student activist of the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (*Al-Jabha*) is passionately committed to her political organisation. She described her party identity as an important aspect of her self-concept:

*I am telling you that I have lots of criticism of Al-Jabha today. We have an unusual leadership vacuum. I feel that it is during this time that I have to stand with Al-Jabha. When Al-Jabha was strong in the seventies, maybe it did not need me as much as it needs me today. The true test of your commitment is at the time of crisis. If we have principles then we stand with the people who share our principles at times of crisis. I would be a defeated person if I leave Al-Jabha when it is weak and then come back after three years when it passes the crisis. (1-1-1998)*

Involvement in collective action is obviously conducted through membership in specific political organisations. Friendships and social interactions were more common among in-group members. Viewed within the context of the larger study,



which included both male and female participants (Makkawi, 1999), one finds little difference between the groups with regard to their national identity and national cause. However, when the interviews focused on the question of women's liberation, it became clear that the women participants struggle with a deeper complexity of the dialectical relationship between nationalism and feminism in their political activism.

This group of female student activists expressed a strong sense of awareness of the need to address women's liberation as part of the political-social agenda of their student organisations – definitely more so than their male comrades. Being women in a patriarchal society, which is also suffering from national oppression as a whole, Arab-Palestinian women activists found themselves advocating both nationalist and feminist agendas at the same time. They also perceived an inherent tension between their national identity as Arab-Palestinians and their gender identity as women and expressed commitment to consolidation between the two. The complexity of this oppression in the case of Palestinian women is best illustrated in the programme of *Al-Fanar* – the Palestinian Feminist Organisation:

‘As Palestinians they suffer from oppression and discrimination based on nationality, as women they are dominated by the patriarchal system throughout their lives, and as female workers they are the most deprived sector of the workforce. These forms of oppression do not operate separately, but are intertwined, and clearly influence one another. The liberation of women – as persons with a social, personal, gender, and national identity – requires a simultaneous struggle on many fronts, which cannot be fragmented or conducted in separate stages.’ (Al-Fanar, 1991, p. 1)

By stressing all aspects of oppression as they are manifested in the life conditions of one particular group, it is clear that Palestinian women are calling for the most radical political-social agenda. A participating psychology major female student activist, who defined herself as a feminist, works both in political groups with men and in all women organisations. She had this to say about the relationship between her gender and national identities:

*These are very complicated and interrelated issues. We have the question that my belonging to the Arab-Palestinian society provides me with feelings of attachment and belonging to the group. But, on the other hand, my belonging to the Arab-Palestinian society oppresses me as a woman. There is a clear contradiction here and the question is how can we deal with this contradiction? How can we consolidate the two without satisfying one of them at the expense of the other? What has been going on in the various political organisations so far is their emphasis on the political-national side only. (12-18-1997)*

The contradiction between the revolutionary political consciousness and the conservative social consciousness, which many Palestinian male activists demonstrated, remains a major dilemma facing Palestinian women activists. Asked if she sees any contradiction among Palestinian male activists between their political attitudes and their attitudes towards women, the above female student was not even surprised that male activists themselves are unaware of that contradiction. She said:

*Palestinian male activists believe it is their role to maintain our national and cultural identity, including traditions. They do not see that many of these traditions were there to oppress women at the first place. I don't think that many Palestinian male activists are aware of this contradiction. (12-18-1997)*

Another female student activist, unwilling to accept this contradiction among Palestinian male activists, insisted that in many cases male comrades treated the female activists in a way that constantly reminded them of the traditional domestic roles imposed on Palestinian women.

*Take the student movement as a good example. I am used to sitting in meetings as the only woman and feeling that I was being treated differently. It used to make me angry and want to cry. When I go to these meetings and hear a guy giving me compliments on my clothes, I tell him, 'why don't you say the same thing to the guy next to you? We have a meeting to discuss certain issues so let's get to work'. No matter how much confidence I have in myself, when I confront all of these men, they still look at me differently. While they say it as a compliment that another male activist has a strong personality, and I agree with them, they still wonder why I, as an activist woman, am that strong. I am expected to be very soft, not to speak in a loud voice, not to smoke, not to interrupt a guy when he is speaking, not to stand in the cafeteria and speak to a crowd of students. As a woman, I am not expected to do any of this, but to go instead to dances and things like that. There are certain roles imposed on us as women in the student movement, which are similar to our domestic roles. (1-1-1998)*

Women's organisations, such as *Al-Fanar*, and their rigorous feminist-nationalist agendas inspire many Palestinian female student activists. However, instead of setting up their own women organisations on campus, they advocate a feminist agenda through the political organisations of which they are members. A female student activist majoring in education expressed her frustration and pessimism about the future of Palestinian women. Her awareness of this conflicted situation and commitment to keep working despite the frustration is supported by

examples from women's experiences in other Arab national movements such as the case of Algiers.

*I am fighting for the establishment of a Palestinian state where I would feel much more comfortable among other Arabs. But on the other hand, the oppression of women in Arab society bothers me. First of all, women are oppressed all over the world. Everywhere their rights are being confiscated. But the situation is worse especially in Arab society. We have a double problem here. Before we liberate our country, we first have to liberate ourselves. We have to be liberated both politically and socially in order for the state of Palestine to be a democratic state, which we all aspire for. We are experiencing in Palestine something similar to what happened in Algiers. It was Algerian women who fought in the revolution and now they are oppressed. This is actually what happened in the Intifada. The women were the most active group during the Intifada and now they are left with nothing to do. Men go to work and women stay at home. There is a problem here. There are contradictions among all of these things. This makes me very depressed. The whole situation of being an Arab-Palestinian woman living under occupation, under oppression and repression is agonising. (1-4-1998)*

The issue from the Palestinian women's perspective is, however, not only that individual Palestinian male activists are more conservative in their social views. The issue is that many political decisions regarding the Palestinian national cause are inspired by such views. The most controversial example was the tendency of the Palestinian National Movement to compromise women's issues in order to avoid confrontation with conservative forces in the national movement.

## **Conclusion**

The findings show that Palestinian women students' involvement in activism was not only an expression of their collective-national identity, but was also guided by their deep awareness of the need to explore, develop and maintain this sense of national identity among Palestinians in Israel in general. Motivated by their awareness of the Israeli government's planned attempt to eradicate this sense of Palestinian national identity, the women in the study committed themselves to student activities in universities directed specifically towards raising national awareness and national identity among the general Palestinian student population. At the same time, Palestinian women student-activists consistently advocated the issue of gender equality and women's rights within Palestinian society.

In as much as it constitutes a source of motivation for involvement in student activism, Palestinian national identity is shaped, developed and enhanced through the process of activism itself. This dialectical relationship between collective-national identity and activism led to the conclusion that involvement in student activism during the college years is, in fact, a process of national education and development for Palestinian student activists.

The findings about the students' perception of inequality and systematic discrimination practised against their group, that is the Arab-Palestinians in Israel, was intertwined with their sense of national identity and belonging to the Palestinian people in general. The relationship between the students' commitment to the broader Palestinian national cause and their struggle for equality within the Israeli system uncovers the enigma inherent in their status as a non-voluntary national minority. While several areas of oppression were mentioned as examples of this state of relative deprivation (e.g., land confiscation, employment opportunities, and budget for local authorities), the repression of their Palestinian national identity through the formal educational system was the most pressing for them. They repeatedly pointed out the overwhelming emphasis on Jewish history and culture in their high school curriculum in comparison to the complete absence of Palestinian history and culture. To recognise their collective-national identity as Palestinians raises the last, and probably the most important, challenge to Israel as a Jewish state in Palestine.

The prevailing finding of this study was that Palestinian women activists advocated an integrated nationalist-feminist agenda. They clearly articulated the relationship between their national oppression as Palestinians on one hand, and their gender oppression as women on the other. Through their involvement in student organisations, which include both male and female members, Palestinian women activists consistently advocated a comprehensive nationalist-feminist agenda as part of the political programmes of their respective groups. This is not to suggest that Palestinian male activists opposed gender equality – after all, their progressive political outlook requires that they support women's liberation as well – but the issue was less 'burning' for them in comparison to their female comrades (Makkawi, 1999). The view that questions of gender equity or feminist struggles must be secondary to broader social (and, in the case of Palestine, nationalist) struggles is an issue contended with at depth across time and place (see Kurks, Rapp & Young, 1989). It is also an issue that brings to mind a similar situation encountered by women of colour in American society.

According to Bell Hooks (1984), white women and black men are both oppressed and oppressors at the same time. While white women suffer from sexism, the practice of racism still enables them to oppress black women.

Similarly, while black men are oppressed in terms of racism, they can still be sexist towards black women. The conclusion is that black women suffer from oppression both ways. The same analogy can be found in the relationship between Palestinian women and Palestinian men on the one hand, and between them and Israeli Jewish women on the other. In fact, when Israeli Jewish women groups approached Palestinian women to work on common issues as women, it was clear to them that unless they support the Palestinians' struggle against the occupation, such a cooperative relationship would be fruitless. The results were manifested in the establishment of several Israeli Jewish women groups such as Women in Black and Women Organisation for Women Political Prisoners, both of which support Palestinian women as women and as victims of national oppression and occupation (Falbel, Klepfisz & Nevel, 1990).

Liberation for Palestinian women – including national, gender and class liberation – by definition implies liberation for all the oppressed groups in society. These forms of oppression are not additive. Instead, they interact and clearly influence one another.

In conclusion, maintaining that issues of gender and national identity development in the Palestinian National Movement are interrelated, the contribution of this project is twofold. First, to understand the process by which Palestinian young women develop their national and gender identities during student activism and to keep a dialectical balance between the two. Second, by asserting the dual oppression based on their gender and nationality, Palestinian women are making the most rigorous demand for a new society free from all forms of oppression. Their struggles force us to engage difficult questions and to apply painstaking standards of critique to movements for liberation of which we form part. Languages of critique do not shy away from examining cultural, religious, political, economic and other social relations as they impact the formation of and participation of women in nationalist struggles. The narratives and experiences of Palestinian student activists remind us of the importance of directly confronting the 'woman question' in struggles for liberation, recognising that such movements require, and in some way invite, the full participation of all members of society. Nationalist movements can offer the opportunity and the space to creatively imagine societies free from all forms of marginalization, where people are united in their shared and collective struggle against colonisation and oppression. But in order to do so, we must learn from the past and present struggles of women activists and commit our praxis against sexism and all other forms of colonising the mind and body.

## Notes

1. Within Israel, the remaining indigenous Palestinians were transformed overnight from a majority in their own country to a minority who was forced to live as second-class citizens in an alien system. Furthermore, Jordan annexed the West Bank and the Egyptian military began to administer Gaza Strip. The rest of the Palestinians became refugees in the neighbouring Arab countries, mainly Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.
2. In this study, we use the term Palestinian Student Movement (PSM) in reference to the formal political organisational structure of Palestinian students in the Israeli universities into a number of student political organisations that parallel the political parties that are active within the communities in Israel. Since the early 1960s, these student political organisations have consistently formed through annual elections their Arab Student Committee (ASC) in each campus and an overall umbrella organisation called the National Union of Arab Students (NUAS). Despite their democratic election by the Palestinian students, Israeli universities have never recognised these organisations.
3. In response to their realisation that Israel's Initial Report (IIR) to the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) had essentially ignored the status of Palestinian women in Israel, a Working Group of Israeli and Palestinian women activists developed a report (132 pages long) on the status of Palestinian women, along with a critique of IIR, and submitted it to the CEDAW in July 1997.

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