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Palestinian Women: A Status Report



Palestinian Society

Contemporary Realities and Trends

Lisa Taraki

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Woman in a West Bank village by Emile Ashrawi.

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INTRODUCTION

PALESTINIAN WOMEN: A STATUS REPORT is published by the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University in separate English and Arabic editions. This ten chapter report is an attempt to build a comprehensive picture of the current challenges facing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in building a society based on gender equality. The guiding assumption is that such equality is necessary for both sustainable development and democratization. This report is very much a product of its time. On the one hand, it has been greatly influenced by the conceptual revolution in women's studies which puts gender relations, asymmetries and gaps at the center of analysis. On the other, the report is an attempt to respond to the new complexity of the current situation in Palestine, which offers new opportunities for intervention in public policy alongside the continued efforts of grassroots organizations and activities towards bringing about positive change in women's lives.

Eight of the chapters address the situation of women in specific sectors of contemporary life in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A further two provide context and concepts for examining the main features and trends in this society, and the key issues in gender and development that can be brought to bear to understand Palestinian reality. The sectoral chapters have a threefold task. The first is to delineate gender gaps by analyzing women's differential access and/or integration in each sector. The second is to analyze how women's socially assigned roles and responsibilities may act to exclude women or place unequal burdens on them. Finally, the chapters aim to explore linkages between, and possible determinants of, these processes. Various chapters show the linkage between high fertility rates and gender gaps in secondary education: early marriage and the absence of labor opportunities and social protection. Others identify assumptions about gender roles and their impact on women and men's access to social security and assistance, or delineate the relationship between access to capital and achieving political power.

In terms of key gender indicators, the Report points out that the situation in Palestine shows some sharp contradictions. Positive indicators for women, such as rising educational levels and political participation, exist alongside negative indicators of their low labor force participation and persistent high fertility. To understand these seemingly contradictory indicators requires an integrated framework that examines the specific constraints, resources and opportunities that shape the lives of women and men. Instead of the common assumption that Palestinian women's lives are largely determined by culture, the report attempts to show that gender asymmetry is produced across a number of different but interacting realms of life: the family and household, economy, politics, and society.

While there are many commonalities between gender relations in Palestine and those in other Middle Eastern societies, the history of both military occupation and resistances to it stamp all areas of life in the West Bank and Gaza and must be taken into account. As such, gender as a basis of social organization is examined in relation to other dynamics - national/political, economic, and social - that shape the fates and futures of Palestinian women and men in their different socio-economic and political settings. In turn, the new reality of Palestine in transition has introduced changes in political, economic and social life that require fresh analysis and has made the task of understanding where change is needed more urgent, in order to create a democratic society of equal citizens.

Although the focus of this report is Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a work comparing the commonalities and differences between Palestinian women across their various territorial contexts is yet to be written. A project comparing the situation of women in the West Bank

and Gaza, in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, inside Israel, or in the far-flung Palestinian diaspora would be extremely important in illuminating the role of gender in structuring the Palestinian nation. Such a project is beyond the scope of this report but it is hoped that it may serve as a catalyst to other researchers.

Understanding the status, roles, economic and social participation and life circumstances of women in the West Bank and Gaza, is in itself a daunting task. This is both due to data gaps and inconsistencies and the historic lack of gender-informed research and scholarship, a gap which is just beginning to be addressed by gender-aware researchers and research centers. The report brings together the large but uneven range of existing research, data and policy documents on Palestine and Palestinian women. The Women's Studies Program was also fortunate to be able to draw upon new research and upon the new data generated by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. As such, the status report may also be useful in identifying areas for further investigation and research.

This status report is the final publication in the first phase of the Palestinian Women in Society project. In the second phase, researchers in the Program will be investigating gender and social policy in several aspects, including gender and public provisions for social security, gender and family and kin-based social support systems, and gender and educational reform.

In many ways, the making of this report was a collaborative effort, as each chapter was the subject of in-depth discussions by all members of the Women's Studies Program, where changes and new material were introduced. Each chapter, however, has an individual author who is acknowledged. As with many projects, the less acknowledged work of discussion and debate, and research and editorial assistance, were equally vital to the project.

The chapters and authors are as follows:

1. Palestinian Society -- Lisa Taraki
2. Population and Fertility -- Rita Giacaman
3. Family -- Rema Hammami
4. Labor and Economy -- Rema Hammami
5. Social Support -- Penny Johnson
6. Education -- Mona Ghali
7. Politics -- Islah Jad
8. Law -- Penny Johnson
9. Health -- Rita Giacaman
10. Gender and Development -- Eileen Kuttab

This edition is considered by the Women's Studies Program as a "discussion edition" to be developed and modified through the process of debate among women's movement activists, researchers, developmental practitioners and policy makers. The chapters have, wherever possible, tried to identify practical implications for positive change in order to promote the building of shared strategies.

- *Women's Studies Program*
Birzeit University

PALESTINIAN SOCIETY

Contemporary Realities and Trends

Lisa Taraki

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief profile of Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip today, with the aim of setting the general context for the discussion of the various aspects of Palestinian women's lives in the chapters that follow. As such, this chapter will focus on the most significant processes, trends and dynamics which have contributed to constituting the current social reality. It will also attempt to show the relevance of these socioeconomic and political processes, trends, and dynamics for understanding the situation of Palestinian women in particular and gender relations in general.

Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has emerged as a socio-political entity only very recently, that is, after the Israeli occupation of 1967 ended the isolation of the two regions, each of which was under the rule of a neighboring Arab state following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. This integration of the two regions, after they were both forcibly separated from the larger context of Palestinian society as it existed before 1948, has meant that they have shared a common political reality by virtue of their being under Israeli occupation. This shared destiny has been the major impetus in forging a number of features held in common between the two regions, notably the experience of Israeli military rule, resistance to that rule, and integration into the Israeli economic system. More recently, as a result of the agreements signed between the PLO and Israel which resulted in the establishment of a Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, the fate of the two areas have been further cemented. The two regions are to constitute an administrative, political, and economic entity, although current political realities have precluded this thus far.

Important demographic, geographical, and topographical differences exist, however, between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; these may be summarized as follows: the West Bank is significantly larger than Gaza (5,651 sq. kms. vs. 365 sq. kms.), has a much lower population density (284 persons per square kilometer vs. 2415 per square kilometer), a significantly lower percentage of refugees in its total population (18% vs. 63%), and a much larger proportion of its population in rural areas (62% vs. 20%). Concerning the last point, while the approximately 1.5 million residents of the West Bank are distributed over 11 medium-sized urban centers, 22 refugee camps and 430 villages, the roughly one million in the Gaza Strip are located in five urban centers, eight refugee camps, and nine villages. These features, along with others, have meant that the conditions, opportunities, and obstacles experienced by Palestinians in the two regions have varied, often with significant consequences. These will be referred to in the course of this chapter.

While war, dislocation, and occupation have joined the West Bank and Gaza to form a political entity, they also led to the fragmentation of Palestinian society. It is important to note that this fragmented reality has real and tangible meaning for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. First, Palestinians on either side of the Green Line continue to be linked by some degree of kinship and other ties. Second, and more important, the

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Palestinian diaspora, that is, the communities of dispersed Palestinians all over the world, is not just a place where "the rest of the Palestinians live." It is a collectivity with functional ties with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These ties are reinforced and continually renewed through marriage and economic relations; hardly a family exists in the West Bank and Gaza without an immediate extension in the diaspora.¹ More significantly, the past and current Israeli policy of restricting and banning the return of exiled Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza has meant that thousands of families remain disjointed, despite the close ties that bind their various "branches."

An additional aspect of the fragmentation of Palestinian society relates to the persistence of another community in the Palestinian consciousness and memory, that of Palestine as it was before the establishment of the state of Israel. We are not referring here merely to memories of a lost homeland for Palestinians, but to the real significance of pre-1948 society for the identity of a large part of the Palestinians, the refugees. Refugees, and particularly camp dwellers, continue to identify themselves with their villages and towns of origin, and the social and spatial organization of refugee camps still reflects the importance of place of origin in the lived experience of Palestinian refugees.

Understanding the Israeli Occupation

The unique colonial relationship between Israel and the remaining part of Palestine occupied in 1967--the West Bank and Gaza Strip--is the most salient aspect of the overall context within which we are attempting to situate our discussion in this report. Many works produced in the past two decades have documented the nature of this relationship, the main features of which are Israeli control over Palestinian land and water through expropriation and other measures; the employment of cheap Palestinian labor in certain key sectors of the Israeli economy; the imposition of controls on the development of Palestinian agriculture and industry; unequal trade arrangements whereby Israeli goods are freely marketed in the West Bank and Gaza while the flow of Palestinian products into the Israeli market faces severe obstacles; the imposition of relatively high taxes without the provision of adequate services; and the operation of a sophisticated security apparatus aimed at subverting and subduing resistance through a system of varied punishments, both individual and collective.²

It is clear from the foregoing that the Israeli occupation has shaped the major contours of the current reality as it is lived by Palestinian men and women in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, particularly on the economic and political levels. We refer here to the major social transformations set in motion by the occupation, such as the proletarianization of Palestinian peasants, the marginalization of agriculture, the emergence of wage labor as the major source

¹ According to recent data, 61% of households in the West Bank excluding Jerusalem and 52.5% of households in Gaza report having close relatives living abroad. See Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, The Demographic Survey in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Preliminary Report, Ramallah, 1966, p. 32.

² Some general works on Palestine documenting and discussing these features are Naseer Aruri, ed., Occupation: Israel Over Palestine, AAUG Press, 1983 (first edition), 1989 (second edition); Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, Palestinians: the Making of a People, Free Press, 1993; Khalil Nakhleh and Elia Zureik, eds., The Sociology of the Palestinians, Croom Helm, 1980; and Pamela Ann Smith, Palestine and the Palestinians, 1876-1983, St. Martin's Press, 1984.

of family wealth, and the crystallization of a political infrastructure and movement of resistance to the occupation. We must caution, however, against emphasizing the uniqueness of the Palestinian experience and of Palestinian society at the expense of situating Palestine within its natural context, that of the region and the Middle East in general. A more contextualized analysis of the forces and dynamics of social transformation will identify what is unique about Palestine as well as what features it shares with other societies in the region. It goes without saying that wage labor migration, the hegemony of wage labor, and the proletarianization of peasants, for example, are increasingly becoming features of societies all over the Middle East. How these operate in each national context and what their consequences are vary from one society to another, but what should be kept in mind are global and regional trends which many societies experience in common.

Understanding Palestinian Society

Is Palestine a predominantly peasant society? What have been the consequences of male wage labor migration for the ordinary Palestinian woman and man? What are the avenues of social mobility in Palestinian society? Do "traditions" govern relations between men and women in Palestinian society? Did the intifada (the popular uprising of the late 1980s and early 1990s) revolutionize social relations and end traditional practices? What significance does kinship have in social organization and political life?

These and other questions, posed and answered in the voluminous literature on Palestine, constitute some of the important points of reference for the study of Palestinian society. Some of them are also questions that have either been poorly researched or have been approached with so many preconceived assumptions that their investigation has been hampered. In the sections of this chapter that follow, we shall address some of the questions that have been asked, and several that have not, about selected aspects of the current Palestinian reality. In so doing, it is hoped that we shall also be able to raise some conceptual issues concerning the framing of issues and the most fruitful ways of investigating them.

A. Economy and Society

One of the more recent summary profiles of the Palestinian economy describes it as:

mainly service-oriented with agriculture accounting for about 30 percent of GDP in 1991, industry about 8 percent, construction about 12 percent and services the remaining 50 percent. Private sector activity dominates the economy of the OT, accounting for about 85 percent of GDP. A striking feature of the OT economy is its heavy dependence on the Israeli economy. Until the recent border closure with Israel, about one third of the OT labor force worked in Israel (mostly on a daily commute basis), and earnings from these workers accounted for more than one quarter of the GNP of the OT. Over 90 percent of the OT trade is also with Israel. Remittances from Palestinians working in the Gulf countries have been another important component of the disposable OT income.³

³ The World Bank, Developing the Occupied Territories: an Investment in Peace, Washington, D.C., 1993, vol. I, p. viii.

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A similar assessment of the Palestinian economy is provided in a recent report by the International Labor Organization, which identifies the major structural characteristics of the economy as a small manufacturing base; a traditional, small-scale agricultural sector; a "labor-reserve economy" (primarily for Israel but also for the Gulf states); trade imbalances; low productive investment; and inadequate infrastructure. Poverty is estimated to be the lot of 17 percent of the population in the West Bank and 32 percent in the Gaza Strip, its direct cause being lack of access to employment.⁴

What are some of the more significant processes, trends, and dynamics which lie behind these broadly macro-level realities? What are some of the social consequences of the economic features outlined above? What relevance do they have for the understanding of gender relations?

Concerning the West Bank, it must be noted first that while the share of agriculture in the GDP has been shrinking over the past decades, the majority of the population still live in villages. Thus the process of rural-urban migration, very rapid in some surrounding countries, has been relatively modest in Palestine. Second, even though the population is predominantly rural, peasant society as such has been severely eroded in Palestine, in the sense that the rural population's main source of subsistence is no longer derived from agriculture based on the family as a productive unit. At the same time, however, agriculture, despite its marginalization, continues to provide employment and a proportion of household wealth and income. Third, and a concomitant of the trends noted above is the fact that since agricultural land is no longer the main source of wealth, it has ceased to be the main determinant of social stratification in the village. This means that the bases of social differentiation in the village have become more diversified, with income from wage labor in the Israeli and the local economy and remittances from work abroad playing an increasingly important role in the process of social differentiation in the village.

In the Gaza Strip, where we find a different urban-rural balance, agriculture's place in the economy has steadily weakened since 1967, after having been the largest single economic activity there and accounting for more than 33 percent of the GDP and close to 40 percent of employment. In 1987, its share of the GDP was 17 percent.⁵ As employment in Israel drew the labor force away from agriculture, dependence on Israel grew. To appreciate the magnitude of this dependence, it is enough to note that by 1987, just before the onset of the uprising and its aftermath, at least 60 percent of the total Gaza labor force was employed in Israel.⁶ Unlike West Bank peasant workers with access to some land to cushion the impact of loss of employment in Israel, Gaza's refugee workers have faced great hardships as a result of the frequent closure of borders between the Gaza Strip and Israel since the Gulf war and the stringent restrictions imposed on entry of Palestinians into Israel. In this sense,

⁴ International Labor Organization, Capacity Building for Social Development: Programme of Action for Transition in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Geneva, 1994, pp. 4-7, i-ii.

⁵ Sara Roy, The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995, p. 223.

⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

Gaza's refugees come closest to constituting a proletariat cut off from its rural roots, in this case irrevocably, after their removal from their native villages in 1948. Refugees, both in the West Bank and Gaza, are among the most disadvantaged groups in society. Analysis of household data from the FAFO survey carried out in 1992 confirms that the most deprived of the social segments in society are the urban poor who, in both the agricultural produce, other home-produced foodstuffs, and even consumer goods obtained from merchants on commission. West Bank and Gaza, constitute a significant section of the town population living in refugee camps.⁷

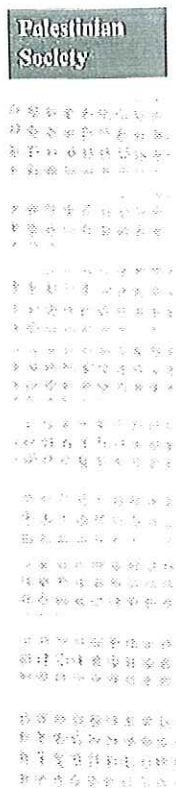
Urban society in Palestine has been relatively neglected in the social science literature. While a comprehensive study of Palestinian cities and towns has yet to be produced, the facts at hand suggest an urban landscape consisting of medium to small-sized towns serving as commercial, educational, cultural, intellectual, and service centers for the surrounding rural areas. In the West Bank, and due to the proximity of villages to the towns, the latter have become sites for employment and commercial and real estate investments by villagers without any significant expansion of the population due to permanent rural-urban migration. Both in the West Bank and Gaza, refugee camps constitute what may be called urban slums; the non-refugee urban poor are concentrated in poor quarters of the main cities and towns, although the pronounced residential segregation found in many other cities in the region is not a main feature of urban life in Palestine.

Economic activity in the urban areas is varied; agriculture, within the confines or outskirts of towns, is a feature of several areas, but the towns are primarily service and commercial centers for the urban and surrounding rural populations. With a very restricted industrial base composed of small-size and family-operated enterprises, the bulk of economic activity is concentrated in small-scale trade and service provision. The informal economy witnessed a significant expansion during and after the uprising, with the urban poor and unemployed villagers constituting the majority of those working in this sector. Peasant women are particularly visible in these activities; the commercial centers of most towns are dotted with stalls from which women peddle.

Social Protection

The absence of state authority in Palestine for the past three decades has meant that the infrastructure of public services has remained underdeveloped and unable to meet the growing needs of the population. Social welfare provision is particularly inadequate, and what scarce resources exist have been strained in recent years due to the pressure of increasing poverty and unemployment. One of the features of the system of social protections in Palestine is the diversity of its providers. The main providers are the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs (until recently the Social Welfare Department of the Israeli Civil Administration), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and

⁷ Salim Tamari, "The Transformation of Palestinian Society: Fragmentation and Occupation," in Marianne Heiberg, et al., Palestinian Society in Gaza, West Bank and Arab Jerusalem: A Survey of Living Conditions, FAFO, 1993, p. 25.



a large number of Palestinian organizations, primarily Islamic Zakat committees and women's and other charitable organizations.⁸ Throughout the three decades of occupation, political parties and fronts and the PLO have been important sources of support for families of prisoners and martyrs and for other needy individuals.

As in other third world societies with inadequate provision of social protection, family and other informal networks are the mainstays of social support for Palestinians. There is little detailed information available on the extent of these informal systems, but the existing research points to the centrality of the household unit in the daily lives of Palestinians, followed by larger kinship groups such as the extended family. The *hamula*, or clan (composed of a number of extended families), has lost much of its significance as a source of economic support; in many communities, it has only symbolic or ceremonial importance, invoked and its elders convened only on occasions such as marriage, death, and dispute resolution. Despite this general trend, however, there are some indications that there may be a revival of the *hamula* structure in the areas of social support and political life.

A study examining the mechanisms of adaptation to economic shocks in West Bank and Gaza refugee camps in the wake of the dramatic drop in adult male labor force participation has found that the "family employment network" hypothesis makes a great deal of sense in understanding coping with economic stress:

The presence of other income-earners in the household is of decisive importance for the economic welfare of individuals who lose employment. The larger the household, the greater the chance that at least one household member will be full-time employed. Large households thus seem to form a private "social security system" on the microlevel, offering their members a kind of collective insurance against sudden economic shocks.... the "family employment network" hypothesis cannot, of course, apply to households where no members are labour-force participants. Because of their small size and low labour activity, most female-headed households fall outside the private "social security system." Small households thus seem to be particularly vulnerable...⁹

To what extent is the large extended-family household composed of several working-age adults the idealized norm rather than current reality in Palestine? While data on household size and composition are patchy, results from the 1995 PCBS survey report a mean household size of 7.06 in the West Bank and Gaza (7.81 in Gaza and 6.7 in the West Bank excluding Jerusalem).¹⁰ Data from the 1992 FAFO survey indicate that the average number of persons per household in the West Bank and Gaza is 7.5 (8.9 for Gaza, 7 for the West Bank, and 5.7 in East Jerusalem). Given high fertility rates, the ratio of children to adults is

⁸ A survey of the activities of the service providers can be found in Radwan Shaban and Samia Al-Botmeh, *Poverty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip*, Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS), 1995.

⁹ Geir Ovansen, *Responding to Change: Trends in Palestinian Household Economy*, FAFO, 1994, pp.128-129.

¹⁰ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

relatively high (0.58 children per adult or 2.1 children per household in East Jerusalem, 1.02 children per adult or 4.5 children per household in Gaza, and 0.77 children per adult or 3 children per household in the West Bank). This, coupled with women's low labor force participation, means that the burden of providing income for the household falls upon a limited number of adult males (an average of two adult males per household in the three areas), not all of whom may be income-earners to begin with.¹¹

The picture that emerges then is that of a contracted extended family as the norm in the West Bank and Gaza, with a significant proportion of households comprised of nuclear families, suggesting that the "social security system" referred to above may be shaky indeed, and not only in the case of female-headed households or those with no working adult. However, it cannot be assumed that households are independent and isolated socioeconomic units; what is more likely is a considerable amount of social and economic interdependence between households, as in the case of an adult son living in a separate household with his spouse and children but assisting his parents and unmarried siblings living in the natal household. Evidence from countries in the region suggests that the functional family unit extends beyond the household and comprises close kin linked by various forms of assistance and obligation.¹² Since almost no research has been conducted on kin support networks in Palestine, it is difficult to determine how these operate in times of hardship, that is, rising male unemployment and a drop in household income. However, the cushioning effect of such networks for individual households should be considered.

Finally, a focus on income from wages (earned primarily by males due to women's low labor force participation) should not lead us to neglect the contribution of women's paid and unpaid labor to household survival, especially among the more disadvantaged social groups. Women have devised a variety of ways of coping with economic stress, such as home-based work (usually on a subcontracting basis), peddling, reliance on their own kin, and selling their personal property (mainly in the form of the *mahr*, or dowry), such as jewelry. Women's contribution to family support is also visible in another area, that of seeking assistance--with a considerable expenditure of time and energy--from the various agencies and organizations dispensing aid to families in need.

Wage Labor

Much of the writings on the effects of wage labor income and remittances upon the rural economy has focused on the marginalization of agriculture, the change in consumption and investment patterns (towards the acquisition of consumer durables and investment in real estate and petty trade), and the emergence of wage income as the main source of household wealth. Relatively little work, however, has been carried out on the differential impact of wage labor on the division of labor within the family, both in the rural and urban sectors.

¹¹ Heiberg, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 364.

¹² Samih Farsoun, "Family Structure and Society in Modern Lebanon," in Louise Sweet, ed., *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, National History Press, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 257-307; Fahd Thaqib, "Kinship and Family Ties in Contemporary Kuwaiti Society," *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, Kuwait University, 1982, pp. 23-44 (in Arabic); Ibrahim 'Uthman, "Changes in the Urban Family in Jordan," *Journal of the Social Sciences*, Jordan University, vol. 14, No. 3 (Fall 1986), pp. 153-177 (in Arabic).

One assumption often cited in the literature that male wage labor in the rural areas leads to an increase in women's role in agriculture has been proven to be too simplistic and in need of further study.

The work of Annelies Moors on rural women in the West Bank, for instance, has shown that the impact of male wage labor migration on women's share of agricultural labor is variable, and depends on the social position of the household; in better-off migrant households (particularly those of workers in the Gulf), women may almost completely refrain from working the land, as this signifies a higher social status.¹³ Similar findings for Jordan and Egypt point out that where wage labor income is significant, women's agricultural labor is withdrawn altogether.¹⁴

The loss of employment in the Gulf states and in Israel following the Gulf war has produced a new situation also in need of investigation. Are pre-migration patterns (in the case of returnees from the Gulf) being established, or as is more likely, are returnees investing their savings in real estate and trade, as they and their families had already done at the height of labor migration in the 1970s and 1980s? We also do not know enough about what forms of economic activity workers no longer employed in Israel are engaged in. Other than the emergency employment program for unskilled young males operated by PECDAR and financed by the World Bank and other international agencies, little is known about how loss of work in Israel is being accommodated, especially in those rural areas of the West Bank where employment rates in Israel were very high.

Social Mobility

It was noted earlier that the interrelated processes of wage labor migration and the marginalization of agriculture contributed to changes in social stratification at the village level. At the societal level, four factors may be singled out as the most important in accounting for social mobility in recent decades. First, income from work in Israel but primarily remittances from Palestinians working outside the West Bank and Gaza (mainly in the Gulf states) have generally improved the standard of living of families, enabling them to invest in commercial and real estate ventures and thus improve their income levels.

Increased wealth also enabled families to invest in the education of their children, particularly at the post-secondary level. Indeed, the higher education of sons (and daughters to a much lesser degree) has become possible for most families only within the last two decades, no doubt also assisted by the availability of near-free education as we shall see below.

Second, the increasing integration of the economy of the Occupied Territories into that of Israel and its dependence on it not only fostered but also necessitated the creation of local

¹³ Annelies Moors, "Women and Property: A Historical-Anthropological Study of Women's Access to Property Through Inheritance, the Dower and Labour in Jabal Nablus, Palestine," Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1992, p. 28.

¹⁴ Setency Shami and Lucine Taminian, "Women, Work, and Development Programs: Two Case Studies from Jordan," *Yarmouk Research Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1992, p. 13 (in Arabic); Soheir A. Morsy, "Rural Women, Work and Gender Ideology: A Study in Egyptian Political Economic Transformation," in Setency Shami, et al., eds., *Women in Arab Society: Work Patterns and Gender Relations in Egypt, Jordan and Sudan*, Berg/UNESCO, 1990, p. 143.

Palestinian points of contact with the Israeli system. We thus witnessed the emergence since the 1970s of a new and diversified stratum of individuals who found a niche for themselves in the new order and who prospered as a result of opportunities to act as a bridge between the Israeli and Palestinian economies. Tourism (primarily in Jerusalem and Bethlehem), labor subcontracting, commerce, and small-scale manufacturing on a subcontracting basis (such as garment production) became the sectors where the new class of Palestinian "nouveau riches" became ensconced.

Education may be considered the third major factor accounting for social mobility in Palestinian society. A significant development since the mid-1970s has been the availability of free (or nominally free) higher education at the expanding network of universities and community colleges, mainly in the West Bank but also in Gaza. Professional training, usually free, was also provided to thousands of Palestinians at universities in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and some Asian countries through political parties and organizations as well as the PLO.

Palestinian women became a very visible component of the growing student body at universities, and also of the expanding cadres of white collar workers produced by higher education. The low cost of education and the proximity of universities and colleges to home towns was no doubt a factor in encouraging families to invest in their daughters' education, although it remains the case that the majority of women in colleges, unlike men, have and continue to come from urban areas. Professional employment is perhaps the most acceptable form of work outside the home for women. A reflection of this is provided in the FAFO survey findings on women's perceptions of appropriate working roles for women: 86% of the women surveyed would like to see their daughters hold a professional job.¹⁵

While higher education continues to be an important factor in social mobility in the sense that it opens the door to relatively high-status and high-paying occupations, it must be noted that its role in social mobility has been weakened in recent years due to the relatively high numbers of college graduates who cannot all be absorbed in the local economy, and to the dramatic fall in employment opportunities for Palestinians in the Gulf states. Increasingly, young men and especially women with college degrees are being employed in clerical and other low-paying white collar jobs in local institutions.

The realm of politics constitutes the fourth avenue of social mobility for a certain sector of Palestinian society. The expansion of PLO structures in the 1960s and their extension into the Occupied Territories in the following two decades in the form of political parties, fronts, and mass organizations, opened up new possibilities for political participation for Palestinians. Any study of the current political leadership will no doubt show that its class and regional composition is more diverse than that of the leadership in the decades prior to the occupation. Many individuals who today hold responsible and influential positions in political parties and NGOs as well as in the Palestinian Authority rose to these positions through the routes made available to them by political organizations and the youth and student federations attached to them in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁵ Rema Hammami, "Women in Palestinian Society," in Heiberg, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 306.



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INTRODUCTION

PALESTINIAN WOMEN: A STATUS REPORT is published by the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University in separate English and Arabic editions. This ten chapter report is an attempt to build a comprehensive picture of the current challenges facing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in building a society based on gender equality. The guiding assumption is that such equality is necessary for both sustainable development and democratization. This report is very much a product of its time. On the one hand, it has been greatly influenced by the conceptual revolution in women's studies which puts gender relations, asymmetries and gaps at the center of analysis. On the other, the report is an attempt to respond to the new complexity of the current situation in Palestine, which offers new opportunities for intervention in public policy alongside the continued efforts of grassroots organizations and activities towards bringing about positive change in women's lives.

Eight of the chapters address the situation of women in specific sectors of contemporary life in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A further two provide context and concepts for examining the main features and trends in this society, and the key issues in gender and development that can be brought to bear to understand Palestinian reality. The sectoral chapters have a threefold task. The first is to delineate gender gaps by analyzing women's differential access and/or integration in each sector. The second is to analyze how women's socially assigned roles and responsibilities may act to exclude women or place unequal burdens on them. Finally, the chapters aim to explore linkages between, and possible determinants of, these processes. Various chapters show the linkage between high fertility rates and gender gaps in secondary education; early marriage and the absence of labor opportunities and social protection. Others identify assumptions about gender roles and their impact on women and men's access to social security and assistance, or delineate the relationship between access to capital and achieving political power.

In terms of key gender indicators, the Report points out that the situation in Palestine shows some sharp contradictions. Positive indicators for women, such as rising educational levels and political participation, exist alongside negative indicators of their low labor force participation and persistent high fertility. To understand these seemingly contradictory indicators requires an integrated framework that examines the specific constraints, resources and opportunities that shape the lives of women and men. Instead of the common assumption that Palestinian women's lives are largely determined by culture, the report attempts to show that gender asymmetry is produced across a number of different but interacting realms of life: the family and household, economy, politics, and society.

While there are many commonalities between gender relations in Palestine and those in other Middle Eastern societies, the history of both military occupation and resistances to it stamp all areas of life in the West Bank and Gaza and must be taken into account. As such, gender as a basis of social organization is examined in relation to other dynamics - national/political, economic, and social - that shape the fates and futures of Palestinian women and men in their different socio-economic and political settings. In turn, the new reality of Palestine in transition has introduced changes in political, economic and social life that require fresh analysis and has made the task of understanding where change is needed more urgent, in order to create a democratic society of equal citizens.

Although the focus of this report is Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a work comparing the commonalities and differences between Palestinian women across their various territorial contexts is yet to be written. A project comparing the situation of women in the West Bank

and Gaza, in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, inside Israel, or in the far-flung Palestinian diaspora would be extremely important in illuminating the role of gender in structuring the Palestinian nation. Such a project is beyond the scope of this report but it is hoped that it may serve as a catalyst to other researchers.

Understanding the status, roles, economic and social participation and life circumstances of women in the West Bank and Gaza, is in itself a daunting task. This is both due to data gaps and inconsistencies and the historic lack of gender-informed research and scholarship, a gap which is just beginning to be addressed by gender-aware researchers and research centers. The report brings together the large but uneven range of existing research, data and policy documents on Palestine and Palestinian women. The Women's Studies Program was also fortunate to be able to draw upon new research and upon the new data generated by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. As such, the status report may also be useful in identifying areas for further investigation and research.

This status report is the final publication in the first phase of the Palestinian Women in Society project. In the second phase, researchers in the Program will be investigating gender and social policy in several aspects, including gender and public provisions for social security, gender and family and kin-based social support systems., and gender and educational reform

In many ways, the making of this report was a collaborative effort, as each chapter was the subject of in-depth discussions by all members of the Women's Studies Program, where changes and new material were introduced. Each chapter, however, has an individual author who is acknowledged. As with many projects, the less acknowledged work of discussion and debate, and research and editorial assistance, were equally vital to the project.

The chapters and authors are as follows:

1. Palestinian Society -- Lisa Taraki
2. Population and Fertility -- Rita Giacaman
3. Family -- Rema Hammami
4. Labor and Economy -- Rema Hammami
5. Social Support -- Penny Johnson
6. Education -- Mona Ghali
7. Politics -- Islah Jad
8. Law -- Penny Johnson
9. Health -- Rita Giacaman
10. Gender and Development -- Eileen Kuttab

This edition is considered by the Women's Studies Program as a "discussion edition" to be developed and modified through the process of debate among women's movement activists, researchers, developmental practitioners and policy makers.. The chapters have, wherever possible, tried to identify practical implications for positive change in order to promote the building of shared strategies.

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PALESTINIAN SOCIETY

Contemporary Realities and Trends

Lisa Taraki

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief profile of Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip today, with the aim of setting the general context for the discussion of the various aspects of Palestinian women's lives in the chapters that follow. As such, this chapter will focus on the most significant processes, trends and dynamics which have contributed to constituting the current social reality. It will also attempt to show the relevance of these socioeconomic and political processes, trends, and dynamics for understanding the situation of Palestinian women in particular and gender relations in general.

Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has emerged as a socio-political entity only very recently, that is, after the Israeli occupation of 1967 ended the isolation of the two regions, each of which was under the rule of a neighboring Arab state following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. This integration of the two regions, after they were both forcibly separated from the larger context of Palestinian society as it existed before 1948, has meant that they have shared a common political reality by virtue of their being under Israeli occupation. This shared destiny has been the major impetus in forging a number of features held in common between the two regions, notably the experience of Israeli military rule, resistance to that rule, and integration into the Israeli economic system. More recently, as a result of the agreements signed between the PLO and Israel which resulted in the establishment of a Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, the fate of the two areas have been further cemented. The two regions are to constitute an administrative, political, and economic entity, although current political realities have precluded this thus far.

Important demographic, geographical, and topographical differences exist, however, between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; these may be summarized as follows: the West Bank is significantly larger than Gaza (5,651 sq. kms. vs. 365 sq. kms.), has a much lower population density (284 persons per square kilometer vs. 2415 per square kilometer), a significantly lower percentage of refugees in its total population (18% vs. 63%), and a much larger proportion of its population in rural areas (62% vs. 20%). Concerning the last point, while the approximately 1.5 million residents of the West Bank are distributed over 11 medium-sized urban centers, 22 refugee camps and 430 villages, the roughly one million in the Gaza Strip are located in five urban centers, eight refugee camps, and nine villages. These features, along with others, have meant that the conditions, opportunities, and obstacles experienced by Palestinians in the two regions have varied, often with significant consequences. These will be referred to in the course of this chapter.

While war, dislocation, and occupation have joined the West Bank and Gaza to form a political entity, they also led to the fragmentation of Palestinian society. It is important to note that this fragmented reality has real and tangible meaning for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. First, Palestinians on either side of the Green Line continue to be linked by some degree of kinship and other ties. Second, and more important, the

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Palestinian diaspora, that is, the communities of dispersed Palestinians all over the world, is not just a place where "the rest of the Palestinians live." It is a collectivity with functional ties with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These ties are reinforced and continually renewed through marriage and economic relations; hardly a family exists in the West Bank and Gaza without an immediate extension in the diaspora.¹ More significantly, the past and current Israeli policy of restricting and banning the return of exiled Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza has meant that thousands of families remain disjointed, despite the close ties that bind their various "branches."

An additional aspect of the fragmentation of Palestinian society relates to the persistence of another community in the Palestinian consciousness and memory, that of Palestine as it was before the establishment of the state of Israel. We are not referring here merely to memories of a lost homeland for Palestinians, but to the real significance of pre-1948 society for the identity of a large part of the Palestinians, the refugees. Refugees, and particularly camp dwellers, continue to identify themselves with their villages and towns of origin, and the social and spatial organization of refugee camps still reflects the importance of place of origin in the lived experience of Palestinian refugees.

Understanding the Israeli Occupation

The unique colonial relationship between Israel and the remaining part of Palestine occupied in 1967--the West Bank and Gaza Strip--is the most salient aspect of the overall context within which we are attempting to situate our discussion in this report. Many works produced in the past two decades have documented the nature of this relationship, the main features of which are Israeli control over Palestinian land and water through expropriation and other measures; the employment of cheap Palestinian labor in certain key sectors of the Israeli economy; the imposition of controls on the development of Palestinian agriculture and industry; unequal trade arrangements whereby Israeli goods are freely marketed in the West Bank and Gaza while the flow of Palestinian products into the Israeli market faces severe obstacles; the imposition of relatively high taxes without the provision of adequate services; and the operation of a sophisticated security apparatus aimed at subverting and subduing resistance through a system of varied punishments, both individual and collective.²

It is clear from the foregoing that the Israeli occupation has shaped the major contours of the current reality as it is lived by Palestinian men and women in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, particularly on the economic and political levels. We refer here to the major social transformations set in motion by the occupation, such as the proletarianization of Palestinian peasants, the marginalization of agriculture, the emergence of wage labor as the major source

¹ According to recent data, 61% of households in the West Bank excluding Jerusalem and 52.5% of households in Gaza report having close relatives living abroad. See Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, The Demographic Survey in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Preliminary Report, Ramallah, 1966, p. 32.

² Some general works on Palestine documenting and discussing these features are Naseer Aruri, ed., Occupation: Israel Over Palestine, AAUG Press, 1983 (first edition), 1989 (second edition); Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, Palestinians: the Making of a People, Free Press, 1993; Khalil Nakhleh and Elia Zureik, eds., The Sociology of the Palestinians, Croom Helm, 1980; and Pamela Ann Smith, Palestine and the Palestinians, 1876-1983, St. Martin's Press, 1984.

of family wealth, and the crystallization of a political infrastructure and movement of resistance to the occupation. We must caution, however, against emphasizing the uniqueness of the Palestinian experience and of Palestinian society at the expense of situating Palestine within its natural context, that of the region and the Middle East in general. A more contextualized analysis of the forces and dynamics of social transformation will identify what is unique about Palestine as well as what features it shares with other societies in the region. It goes without saying that wage labor migration, the hegemony of wage labor, and the proletarianization of peasants, for example, are increasingly becoming features of societies all over the Middle East. How these operate in each national context and what their consequences are vary from one society to another, but what should be kept in mind are global and regional trends which many societies experience in common.

Understanding Palestinian Society

Is Palestine a predominantly peasant society? What have been the consequences of male wage labor migration for the ordinary Palestinian woman and man? What are the avenues of social mobility in Palestinian society? Do "traditions" govern relations between men and women in Palestinian society? Did the intifada (the popular uprising of the late 1980s and early 1990s) revolutionize social relations and end traditional practices? What significance does kinship have in social organization and political life?

These and other questions, posed and answered in the voluminous literature on Palestine, constitute some of the important points of reference for the study of Palestinian society. Some of them are also questions that have either been poorly researched or have been approached with so many preconceived assumptions that their investigation has been hampered. In the sections of this chapter that follow, we shall address some of the questions that have been asked, and several that have not, about selected aspects of the current Palestinian reality. In so doing, it is hoped that we shall also be able to raise some conceptual issues concerning the framing of issues and the most fruitful ways of investigating them.

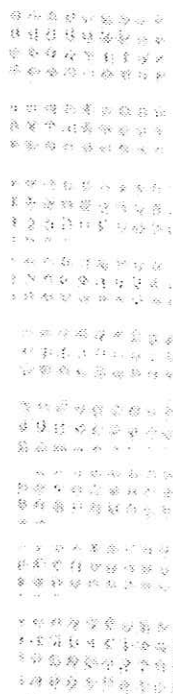
A. Economy and Society

One of the more recent summary profiles of the Palestinian economy describes it as:

mainly service-oriented with agriculture accounting for about 30 percent of GDP in 1991, industry about 8 percent, construction about 12 percent and services the remaining 50 percent. Private sector activity dominates the economy of the OT, accounting for about 85 percent of GDP. A striking feature of the OT economy is its heavy dependence on the Israeli economy. Until the recent border closure with Israel, about one third of the OT labor force worked in Israel (mostly on a daily commute basis), and earnings from these workers accounted for more than one quarter of the GNP of the OT. Over 90 percent of the OT trade is also with Israel. Remittances from Palestinians working in the Gulf countries have been another important component of the disposable OT income.³

³ The World Bank, Developing the Occupied Territories: an Investment in Peace, Washington, D.C., 1993, vol. I, p. viii.

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A similar assessment of the Palestinian economy is provided in a recent report by the International Labor Organization, which identifies the major structural characteristics of the economy as a small manufacturing base; a traditional, small-scale agricultural sector; a "labor-reserve economy" (primarily for Israel but also for the Gulf states); trade imbalances; low productive investment; and inadequate infrastructure. Poverty is estimated to be the lot of 17 percent of the population in the West Bank and 32 percent in the Gaza Strip, its direct cause being lack of access to employment.⁴

What are some of the more significant processes, trends, and dynamics which lie behind these broadly macro-level realities? What are some of the social consequences of the economic features outlined above? What relevance do they have for the understanding of gender relations?

Concerning the West Bank, it must be noted first that while the share of agriculture in the GDP has been shrinking over the past decades, the majority of the population still live in villages. Thus the process of rural-urban migration, very rapid in some surrounding countries, has been relatively modest in Palestine. Second, even though the population is predominantly rural, peasant society as such has been severely eroded in Palestine, in the sense that the rural population's main source of subsistence is no longer derived from agriculture based on the family as a productive unit. At the same time, however, agriculture, despite its marginalization, continues to provide employment and a proportion of household wealth and income. Third, and a concomitant of the trends noted above is the fact that since agricultural land is no longer the main source of wealth, it has ceased to be the main determinant of social stratification in the village. This means that the bases of social differentiation in the village have become more diversified, with income from wage labor in the Israeli and the local economy and remittances from work abroad playing an increasingly important role in the process of social differentiation in the village.

In the Gaza Strip, where we find a different urban-rural balance, agriculture's place in the economy has steadily weakened since 1967, after having been the largest single economic activity there and accounting for more than 33 percent of the GDP and close to 40 percent of employment. In 1987, its share of the GDP was 17 percent.⁵ As employment in Israel drew the labor force away from agriculture, dependence on Israel grew. To appreciate the magnitude of this dependence, it is enough to note that by 1987, just before the onset of the uprising and its aftermath, at least 60 percent of the total Gaza labor force was employed in Israel.⁶ Unlike West Bank peasant workers with access to some land to cushion the impact of loss of employment in Israel, Gaza's refugee workers have faced great hardships as a result of the frequent closure of borders between the Gaza Strip and Israel since the Gulf war and the stringent restrictions imposed on entry of Palestinians into Israel. In this sense,

⁴ International Labor Organization, Capacity Building for Social Development: Programme of Action for Transition in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Geneva, 1994, pp. 4-7, i-ii.

⁵ Sara Roy, The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995, p. 223.

⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

Gaza's refugees come closest to constituting a proletariat cut off from its rural roots, in this case irrevocably, after their removal from their native villages in 1948. Refugees, both in the West Bank and Gaza, are among the most disadvantaged groups in society. Analysis of household data from the FAFO survey carried out in 1992 confirms that the most deprived of the social segments in society are the urban poor who, in both the agricultural produce, other home-produced foodstuffs, and even consumer goods obtained from merchants on commission. West Bank and Gaza, constitute a significant section of the town population living in refugee camps.⁷

Urban society in Palestine has been relatively neglected in the social science literature. While a comprehensive study of Palestinian cities and towns has yet to be produced, the facts at hand suggest an urban landscape consisting of medium to small-sized towns serving as commercial, educational, cultural, intellectual, and service centers for the surrounding rural areas. In the West Bank, and due to the proximity of villages to the towns, the latter have become sites for employment and commercial and real estate investments by villagers without any significant expansion of the population due to permanent rural-urban migration. Both in the West Bank and Gaza, refugee camps constitute what may be called urban slums; the non-refugee urban poor are concentrated in poor quarters of the main cities and towns, although the pronounced residential segregation found in many other cities in the region is not a main feature of urban life in Palestine.

Economic activity in the urban areas is varied; agriculture, within the confines or outskirts of towns, is a feature of several areas, but the towns are primarily service and commercial centers for the urban and surrounding rural populations. With a very restricted industrial base composed of small-size and family-operated enterprises, the bulk of economic activity is concentrated in small-scale trade and service provision. The informal economy witnessed a significant expansion during and after the uprising, with the urban poor and unemployed villagers constituting the majority of those working in this sector. Peasant women are particularly visible in these activities; the commercial centers of most towns are dotted with stalls from which women peddle.

Social Protection

The absence of state authority in Palestine for the past three decades has meant that the infrastructure of public services has remained underdeveloped and unable to meet the growing needs of the population. Social welfare provision is particularly inadequate, and what scarce resources exist have been strained in recent years due to the pressure of increasing poverty and unemployment. One of the features of the system of social protections in Palestine is the diversity of its providers. The main providers are the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs (until recently the Social Welfare Department of the Israeli Civil Administration), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and

⁷ Salim Tamari, "The Transformation of Palestinian Society: Fragmentation and Occupation," in Marianne Heiberg, et al., Palestinian Society in Gaza, West Bank and Arab Jerusalem: A Survey of Living Conditions, FAFO, 1993, p. 25.



a large number of Palestinian organizations, primarily Islamic Zakat committees and women's and other charitable organizations.⁸ Throughout the three decades of occupation, political parties and fronts and the PLO have been important sources of support for families of prisoners and martyrs and for other needy individuals.

As in other third world societies with inadequate provision of social protection, family and other informal networks are the mainstays of social support for Palestinians. There is little detailed information available on the extent of these informal systems, but the existing research points to the centrality of the household unit in the daily lives of Palestinians, followed by larger kinship groups such as the extended family. The hamula, or clan (composed of a number of extended families), has lost much of its significance as a source of economic support; in many communities, it has only symbolic or ceremonial importance, invoked and its elders convened only on occasions such as marriage, death, and dispute resolution. Despite this general trend, however, there are some indications that there may be a revival of the hamula structure in the areas of social support and political life.

A study examining the mechanisms of adaptation to economic shocks in West Bank and Gaza refugee camps in the wake of the dramatic drop in adult male labor force participation has found that the "family employment network" hypothesis makes a great deal of sense in understanding coping with economic stress:

The presence of other income-earners in the household is of decisive importance for the economic welfare of individuals who lose employment. The larger the household, the greater the chance that at least one household member will be full-time employed. Large households thus seem to form a private "social security system" on the microlevel, offering their members a kind of collective insurance against sudden economic shocks.... the "family employment network" hypothesis cannot, of course, apply to households where no members are labour-force participants. Because of their small size and low labour activity, most female-headed households fall outside the private "social security system." Small households thus seem to be particularly vulnerable...⁹

To what extent is the large extended-family household composed of several working-age adults the idealized norm rather than current reality in Palestine? While data on household size and composition are patchy, results from the 1995 PCBS survey report a mean household size of 7.06 in the West Bank and Gaza (7.81 in Gaza and 6.7 in the West Bank excluding Jerusalem).¹⁰ Data from the 1992 FAFO survey indicate that the average number of persons per household in the West Bank and Gaza is 7.5 (8.9 for Gaza, 7 for the West Bank, and 5.7 in East Jerusalem). Given high fertility rates, the ratio of children to adults is

⁸ A survey of the activities of the service providers can be found in Radwan Shaban and Samia Al-Bouneh, Poverty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS), 1995.

⁹ Geir Ovensen, Responding to Change: Trends in Palestinian Household Economy, FAFO, 1994, pp.128-129.

¹⁰ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, op. cit., p. 31.

relatively high (0.58 children per adult or 2.1 children per household in East Jerusalem, 1.02 children per adult or 4.5 children per household in Gaza, and 0.77 children per adult or 3 children per household in the West Bank). This, coupled with women's low labor force participation, means that the burden of providing income for the household falls upon a limited number of adult males (an average of two adult males per household in the three areas), not all of whom may be income-earners to begin with.¹¹

The picture that emerges then is that of a contracted extended family as the norm in the West Bank and Gaza, with a significant proportion of households comprised of nuclear families, suggesting that the "social security system" referred to above may be shaky indeed, and not only in the case of female-headed households or those with no working adult. However, it cannot be assumed that households are independent and isolated socioeconomic units; what is more likely is a considerable amount of social and economic interdependence between households, as in the case of an adult son living in a separate household with his spouse and children but assisting his parents and unmarried siblings living in the natal household. Evidence from countries in the region suggests that the functional family unit extends beyond the household and comprises close kin linked by various forms of assistance and obligation.¹² Since almost no research has been conducted on kin support networks in Palestine, it is difficult to determine how these operate in times of hardship, that is, rising male unemployment and a drop in household income. However, the cushioning effect of such networks for individual households should be considered.

Finally, a focus on income from wages (earned primarily by males due to women's low labor force participation) should not lead us to neglect the contribution of women's paid and unpaid labor to household survival, especially among the more disadvantaged social groups. Women have devised a variety of ways of coping with economic stress, such as home-based work (usually on a subcontracting basis), peddling, reliance on their own kin, and selling their personal property (mainly in the form of the *mahr*, or dowry), such as jewelry. Women's contribution to family support is also visible in another area, that of seeking assistance--with a considerable expenditure of time and energy--from the various agencies and organizations dispensing aid to families in need.

Wage Labor

Much of the writings on the effects of wage labor income and remittances upon the rural economy has focused on the marginalization of agriculture, the change in consumption and investment patterns (towards the acquisition of consumer durables and investment in real estate and petty trade), and the emergence of wage income as the main source of household wealth. Relatively little work, however, has been carried out on the differential impact of wage labor on the division of labor within the family, both in the rural and urban sectors.

¹¹ Heiberg, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 364.

¹² Samih Farsoun, "Family Structure and Society in Modern Lebanon," in Louise Sweet, ed., *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, National History Press, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 257-307; Fahd Thaqib, "Kinship and Family Ties in Contemporary Kuwaiti Society," *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, Kuwait University, 1982, pp. 23-44 (in Arabic); Ibrahim `Uthman, "Changes in the Urban Family in Jordan," *Journal of the Social Sciences*, Jordan University, vol. 14, No. 3 (Fall 1986), pp. 153-177 (in Arabic).

One assumption often cited in the literature that male wage labor in the rural areas leads to an increase in women's role in agriculture has been proven to be too simplistic and in need of further study.

The work of Annelies Moors on rural women in the West Bank, for instance, has shown that the impact of male wage labor migration on women's share of agricultural labor is variable, and depends on the social position of the household; in better-off migrant households (particularly those of workers in the Gulf), women may almost completely refrain from working the land, as this signifies a higher social status.¹³ Similar findings for Jordan and Egypt point out that where wage labor income is significant, women's agricultural labor is withdrawn altogether.¹⁴

The loss of employment in the Gulf states and in Israel following the Gulf war has produced a new situation also in need of investigation. Are pre-migration patterns (in the case of returnees from the Gulf) being established, or as is more likely, are returnees investing their savings in real estate and trade, as they and their families had already done at the height of labor migration in the 1970s and 1980s? We also do not know enough about what forms of economic activity workers no longer employed in Israel are engaged in. Other than the emergency employment program for unskilled young males operated by PECDAR and financed by the World Bank and other international agencies, little is known about how loss of work in Israel is being accommodated, especially in those rural areas of the West Bank where employment rates in Israel were very high.

Social Mobility

It was noted earlier that the interrelated processes of wage labor migration and the marginalization of agriculture contributed to changes in social stratification at the village level. At the societal level, four factors may be singled out as the most important in accounting for social mobility in recent decades. First, income from work in Israel but primarily remittances from Palestinians working outside the West Bank and Gaza (mainly in the Gulf states) have generally improved the standard of living of families, enabling them to invest in commercial and real estate ventures and thus improve their income levels.

Increased wealth also enabled families to invest in the education of their children, particularly at the post-secondary level. Indeed, the higher education of sons (and daughters to a much lesser degree) has become possible for most families only within the last two decades, no doubt also assisted by the availability of near-free education as we shall see below.

Second, the increasing integration of the economy of the Occupied Territories into that of Israel and its dependence on it not only fostered but also necessitated the creation of local

¹³ Annelies Moors, "Women and Property: A Historical-Anthropological Study of Women's Access to Property Through Inheritance, the Dower and Labour in Jabal Nablus, Palestine," Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1992, p. 28.

¹⁴ Seteney Shami and Lucine Taminian, "Women, Work, and Development Programs: Two Case Studies from Jordan," *Yarmouk Research Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1992, p. 13 (in Arabic); Soheir A. Morsy, "Rural Women, Work and Gender Ideology: A Study in Egyptian Political Economic Transformation," in Seteney Shami, et al., eds., *Women in Arab Society: Work Patterns and Gender Relations in Egypt, Jordan and Sudan*, Berg/UNESCO, 1990, p. 143.

Palestinian points of contact with the Israeli system. We thus witnessed the emergence since the 1970s of a new and diversified stratum of individuals who found a niche for themselves in the new order and who prospered as a result of opportunities to act as a bridge between the Israeli and Palestinian economies. Tourism (primarily in Jerusalem and Bethlehem), labor subcontracting, commerce, and small-scale manufacturing on a subcontracting basis (such as garment production) became the sectors where the new class of Palestinian "nouveau riches" became ensconced.

Education may be considered the third major factor accounting for social mobility in Palestinian society. A significant development since the mid-1970s has been the availability of free (or nominally free) higher education at the expanding network of universities and community colleges, mainly in the West Bank but also in Gaza. Professional training, usually free, was also provided to thousands of Palestinians at universities in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and some Asian countries through political parties and organizations as well as the PLO.

Palestinian women became a very visible component of the growing student body at universities, and also of the expanding cadres of white collar workers produced by higher education. The low cost of education and the proximity of universities and colleges to home towns was no doubt a factor in encouraging families to invest in their daughters' education, although it remains the case that the majority of women in colleges, unlike men, have and continue to come from urban areas. Professional employment is perhaps the most acceptable form of work outside the home for women. A reflection of this is provided in the FAFO survey findings on women's perceptions of appropriate working roles for women: 86% of the women surveyed would like to see their daughters hold a professional job.¹⁵

While higher education continues to be an important factor in social mobility in the sense that it opens the door to relatively high-status and high-paying occupations, it must be noted that its role in social mobility has been weakened in recent years due to the relatively high numbers of college graduates who cannot all be absorbed in the local economy, and to the dramatic fall in employment opportunities for Palestinians in the Gulf states. Increasingly, young men and especially women with college degrees are being employed in clerical and other low-paying white collar jobs in local institutions.

The realm of politics constitutes the fourth avenue of social mobility for a certain sector of Palestinian society. The expansion of PLO structures in the 1960s and their extension into the Occupied Territories in the following two decades in the form of political parties, fronts, and mass organizations, opened up new possibilities for political participation for Palestinians. Any study of the current political leadership will no doubt show that its class and regional composition is more diverse than that of the leadership in the decades prior to the occupation. Many individuals who today hold responsible and influential positions in political parties and NGOs as well as in the Palestinian Authority rose to these positions through the routes made available to them by political organizations and the youth and student federations attached to them in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁵ Rema Hammami, "Women in Palestinian Society," in Heiberg, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 306.



A point worth making in this regard is that the opportunities of advancement were available primarily to young men; those who benefitted most were those young men from villages and refugee camps who, because of their considerable organizing abilities and discipline, were able to progress quickly to positions of national prominence. Women have been largely excluded from these opportunities; only a handful of women have made their way up through party and other hierarchies. It must be noted, however, that politics in the form of membership and activism in the women's organizations--both those affiliated with political parties and independent organizations--did offer many women opportunities for social advancement and visibility. Again, an examination of the backgrounds of women prominent in public life today would most likely reveal that a large proportion of them began their public careers within the ranks of women's organizations, particularly those affiliated with political parties and fronts.

One important factor accounting for social mobility in many Arab and Middle Eastern countries has been notably absent in the Palestinian case. We refer here to the state bureaucracy, which in other countries in the region constitutes a major avenue of mobility for the men and women employed in its burgeoning ranks, in addition to fostering the creation of a new managerial state bourgeoisie. While it is true that the Israeli-controlled Palestinian public sector under occupation provided white-collar jobs to thousands of Palestinians and was particularly instrumental in providing professional and semi-professional employment to women, there is no identifiable social group whose fortunes have risen as a result of association with the public sector.¹⁶

This situation is likely to change rapidly and dramatically as the institutions of the Palestinian National Authority are put in place. Indicators that important posts in the PNA bureaucracy facilitate access to resources, opportunities, and services are beginning to emerge, and it will likely not be long until we witness the consolidation of a new "state bourgeoisie" with a distinct lifestyle and set of privileges. Throughout the years of the occupation, Palestinian nationalist ideology had downplayed the significance or existence of social cleavages in the name of national unity in the face of a common enemy. This had served as a check against the flaunting of privilege and wealth. Such restraint is now eroding, and the emblems of status and privilege are being more openly displayed.

Politics

Palestinian society is possibly among the most politicized of societies in recent times. Developments and events at the global, regional, and local level have continued to affect Palestinian lives and destinies in a real and immediate way; it is thus not surprising to find politics a part of the lived experience of every Palestinian. At the same time, however, Palestinian society as a whole is not a revolutionary society, notwithstanding the voluminous literature on the uprising documenting the revolutionary spirit of those five years. It is true that the experiences of exile and colonial domination have given rise to spontaneous and organized forms of resistance, and that a national liberation movement with a developed infrastructure of institutions has dominated politics over the last three decades. Despite this,

¹⁶ Alan Richards and John Waterbury discuss the processes whereby interventionist states in the Middle East have fostered the creation of large public sectors and a state bourgeoisie in their book, A Political Economy of the Middle East: State, Class, and Economic Development, Westview Press, 1990, pp. 184-218.

social organization, social relations, and political culture and ideology have not undergone a radical transformation, that is, away from primordial loyalties and identities. Furthermore, Palestinian political institutions have operated within a political culture that has witnessed tensions between the realities of patronage and personal influence and control on the one hand, and discourses of public responsibility, participation, rights, entitlements, and merit on the other.

The legacy of the Palestine national movement, thus, is a mixed one. At one level, the success of the movement--under the general aegis of the PLO--in forging an infrastructure of national institutions and mass organizations and mobilizing wide sectors of the society from the mid-1970s until and through the uprising is impressive. At the social level, and as discussed earlier, the movement was also instrumental in drawing into political life those sectors of the society which had traditionally been kept out of elite politics. Furthermore, the national movement and its constituent organizations--especially the student and youth federations--began the process of unhinging politics from its narrow local base and creating an environment where individuals from different regions and social backgrounds could come together and forge a national-level movement.

On another level, despite the reality of spontaneous and organized rebellion and the hegemony of discourses of liberation and resistance, Palestinian political culture and institutional structures have remained socially conservative. Ideologically, this conservatism has found expression in a nationalist discourse which has as its referent an idealized stable rural society unscathed by the violence and dislocation brought upon it by colonial rule. Idealized constructs of the peasant and the peasant way of life as the true and original expressions of "Palestinianism" have been a constant feature of political discourse since the rise of the nationalist movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, they became a central element in political, literary, and artistic discourse both in the Palestinian diaspora and in the Occupied Territories.

Such uses of the past and of "tradition" are certainly not unique to the Palestinian nationalist movement. The anthropologist Deniz Kandiyoti has observed that a feature of nationalist discourse around which there is considerable consensus is its Janus-faced quality; it represents itself both as a modern project and as a reaffirmation of authentic cultural values culled from the depths of a presumed communal past. Regarding the place of women in this discourse, she goes on to suggest that the very language of nationalism singles women out as the symbolic repository of group identity.¹⁷ While there is not much space here to deal with the representation of women in Palestinian nationalist discourse, it is sufficient to note that political, literary and artistic discourse in Palestine has wittingly or unwittingly idealized the traditional division of labor and gender hierarchies. The mobilization of women's reproductive and nurturing roles, and the conflation of Palestine and "woman" are striking features of nationalist discourse in Palestine, just as they have been in the discourse of national movements elsewhere.

On the institutional and organizational level, the situation is more complex. PLO institutions in the diaspora, vibrant vehicles of social mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s, were

¹⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation," in P. Williams and L. Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.



transformed with time into rigid bureaucracies. The PLO bureaucracy became increasingly centralized, and dealt with its diverse constituency--including that in the Occupied Territories--with a mixture of modern administrative practices and patronage-based politics.

In the Occupied Territories in the roughly three decades following the occupation in 1967, the various political formations were successful in mobilizing wide sections of the society for political action, and maintained almost complete hegemony over political life. It is true that most deployed kinship and regional affiliations and ties as vehicles for such mobilization, but the party and faction framework was the major arena within which political life was conducted. However, the weakening of political parties (particularly on the left) after the waning of the uprising and the shift in focus from mass action to diplomacy in the 1990s created an opportunity for more traditional social forces to invade the political space and reassert themselves after three decades of the hegemony of formal political formations. The elections for the Palestinian Council in January 1996 were the first opportunity in many years for regional and kinship identities and affiliations, and patronage networks to be deployed actively in a political contest.

Can we conclude from this that Palestinian society is "traditional" after all, and that its true nature was finally revealed in the Council elections, as has often been observed by critics of the post-Oslo political system? The answer to this question hinges on a number of factors. One of these is whether a considerable sector of the population which has identified itself with nation-wide institutions and whose careers, opportunities, and indeed lifestyles are irrevocably linked with them is prepared to withdraw from modern political life. Another is the ability of Palestinian political parties--particularly those in the opposition--to rejuvenate or reconstitute themselves and take the lead in political life once again. The formation of new parties, fronts and movements, as well as lobbies in the modern sense, should not also be dismissed. Palestinian society is embarking upon a new stage in its political history where contending ideas concerning social policy, state responsibility, the educational system, and civil and human rights will require modern forms of organization transcending kinship and regional formations. Traditional forces may assert or reassert themselves in different times and different forms, but their hegemony over political life is not a matter that has been settled, even in the short term.

Family, Household, and Kinship

It has become a commonplace in both scholarly and popular writings on Arab societies to stress the centrality of family and kinship in social organization and identity formation. As with other broad generalizations about Arab societies, these formulations do not always help us understand the workings of social institutions in specific social contexts, particularly the dynamic and changing nature of the social relations subsumed under these institutions. In the Palestinian context, it is important to situate any discussion of family and kinship within the particular circumstances prevailing in Palestine, while being mindful of the broad similarities between Palestinian and Arab social organization where they exist.

The issue of the interconnectedness of family and politics is one example. In a discussion of the family in Arab countries, Suad Joseph reflects a prevailing view when she notes that the family functions as a political network for the individual seeking access to governmental services, and that politicians and administrators often allocate resources to individuals

through the heads of the family; this constant emphasis on family in the state arena renders family relationships into powerful political tools.¹⁸

In Palestine, where an indigenous state authority has been absent for the past three decades, the relationship between family and politics and family and the state has to be formulated somewhat differently. While the family in Palestine, as in the rest of the Arab world, is an individual's point of reference and basic source of identity, it has by and large not served as a tool for securing benefits from the state. One of the reasons for this has been the non-indigenous character of political authority, precluding the kinship continuities between the state, civil society and the family which Joseph posits for Arab society. A further factor distinguishing the Palestinian context from many Arab states is the fact that the public sector controlled by the Israeli military was not in fact a major source of services or benefits for individuals. In addition, the fact that political authority was vested in an occupying and thus politically illegitimate power did not encourage individuals and families to build links with it; those who did, for whatever reasons, were subject to social censure of varying degrees. It may be added parenthetically that the Israeli authorities did attempt to bolster the authority of village mukhtars (headmen) by requiring that individuals seeking valued permits and other services go through them. The mukhtar, however, was not necessarily a respected member of his community, and the authority of his office was seriously eroded during the uprising. Nevertheless, even in those cases where it was successful as a mediating bridge between the individual and the state, the office of the mukhtar did not represent families primarily, but rather the village community as a whole.

Concerning Palestinians' relationship to the quasi-state authority represented by the PLO throughout the decades preceding the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, the family was not the main vehicle for securing benefits or services from its various departments in the diaspora and in the Occupied Territories. Political connections, through the various political formations and national institutions, were possibly a more powerful factor compared to kinship. The situation after the establishment of the PNA is likely to change, as those influential within the Authority begin to control more of the national resources and sources of privilege and opportunity. Family connections are thus expected to become important for access to these resources and opportunities, and it is expected that women will be largely marginal to this process, dominated as it will likely be by male networks.

If the absence of an indigenous state authority in Palestine precluded a significant role for the family and kinship in the political domain, it paradoxically nurtured familial authority in another. We refer here to what may be termed law enforcement and adjudication, which in some critical areas has remained outside the purview of official bodies such as the police and the courts. For different reasons including the fact that law enforcement was controlled by the military authorities, recourse to the police was restricted; sometimes, when police intervention was inevitable, other, community, agencies such as mediation bodies composed of community notables also stepped in. What is important to note here is that the common law authorizing this mediation and enforcement process does not view the individual as an autonomous agent; suspects or individuals involved in disputes are dealt with through the

¹⁸ Suad Joseph, "Gender and Family in the Arab World," Middle East Research and Information Project, Pamphlet in the Series Women in the Middle East: Image and Reality," 1994, p. 4.



agency of their immediate kin, and in some cases, a wider circle of relatives. Those recognized and designated as the elder males of the family represent the individuals involved and are authorized to resolve the conflict, which is viewed in this system as involving families rather than individuals standing on their own.

This privileging of elder males is one of the cornerstones of the system of patriarchy, which in its "classic" form is rooted in the patrilocal and patrilineal extended peasant household characterized by the considerable authority of senior men over other members of the family, and of senior women over younger women, especially of mothers-in-law over daughters-in-law.¹⁹ Patriarchy, representing a gender and age hierarchy based on the household as a productive unit, has in recent decades been challenged by social transformations sweeping the regions in which it prevails. Wage labor opportunities outside the household (mostly for young men but also for a significant segment of urban women), the rising age of marriage for women, the break-up of the extended family, the rise in educational levels, and rural-urban migration, among other factors, have begun to erode some of the material bases of this system.

In Palestine, where most of these social transformations have begun to make their impact, patriarchy is also facing challenges, both at the ideological and material levels. Households headed by women due to divorce or the death of the husband, or those in which men are away for extended periods, or in which women earn wages outside the home, are all cases presenting problems for patriarchy; the economic independence of sons and their move away from the natal household after marriage also challenge gender and age hierarchies, both in the case of the sons vis-a-vis their fathers and for the sons' wives vis-a-vis their mothers-in-law.

It is important to note, however, that the particular circumstances of life in Palestine, as elsewhere in the Arab world, may also militate against the breakdown of patriarchy and actually strengthen it in some cases. We have already discussed the persistence of the extended family household in functional terms despite the setting up of nuclear family households by married sons. While this arrangement, which is an adaptation to the absence of social security and other state assistance to the elderly, may give sons authority over their fathers, it may also solidify the position of elder sons vis-a-vis their sisters and brothers still at home, thus preserving age and gender hierarchies in another form. In the same vein, while the sons' wives may be liberated from the direct and daily control of domineering mothers-in-law, they may be put in a dependent position vis-a-vis their mothers-in-law if they go out to work. In the absence of adequate childcare facilities, grandmothers are the first choice for the care of their young grandchildren, and daughters-in-law may have to put up with the burdens--and interference in their children's upbringing--that this arrangement entails.

The preceding discussion has touched upon the issue of women's status within the household, and it is to this which we now turn. A number of factors help determine women's status--and particularly authority--within the household. Age and marital status are

¹⁹ Deniz Kandiyoti discusses these and other characteristics of "classic" patriarchy (the clearest instances of which are found in North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, and southern and eastern Asia) in Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective," in Nikki Keddie and Beth Bacon, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 31.

two important determinants of women's status; a young wife is decidedly at a disadvantage compared to an older one, especially a mother-in-law, and unmarried women in most cases have less authority than married ones, although an older unmarried woman with access to some resources such as income may acquire considerable status within the household. Divorced women, unless they have adequate resources, are among the more vulnerable, and may be almost totally dependent on their fathers and brothers in financial terms. The number of children--especially sons--a woman has is another determinant of status, not only vis-a-vis her husband's kin but also in terms of longer-term security after the death of her husband. It is not clear that education and employment outside the home necessarily contribute to enhanced status for women within the household, especially in cases where male income-earners are present and are viewed as the principal breadwinners of the household. Possession of property and wealth (from either inheritance or the *mahr*), however, could be a considerable asset to a married woman, not least vis-a-vis her husband and his kin; many women use what leverage this provides to enhance their decision-making and other powers within the household and even beyond into their husbands' families.

Traditional Norms and Values

It may seem paradoxical that Palestinian society has often been conceived as being at the vanguard of other Arab societies in political terms while at the same time being described as deeply traditional. Two kinds of writings have generally underlined the "traditionality" attribute of Palestinian society: the small number of works dealing with aspects of social organization such as kinship and the family, and the growing body of works on Palestinian women. The latter, while documenting the role of women in the political struggle, particularly during the uprising, are nevertheless largely informed by underlying assumptions about tradition and its determination of women's status and potentials. Palestinian scholarly and popular discourse has also contributed to this conceptualization of society, and the idea that "traditional norms and values" govern behavior and limit women's freedom and opportunities has become part of the commonsense understanding of gender relations.

It is important to note two features of explanation of social practices and behavior by reference to "traditional norms and values." First, it seems that it is almost exclusively confined to the case of non-Western societies. The assumption appears to be that non-Western, and particularly Middle Eastern, societies are still under the grip of traditional value systems while the industrialized Western nations have liberated themselves from them. Second, the reference to norms and values is almost invariably produced when matters concerning gender relations, roles, and identities are at issue.

How can we understand social practices and behavioral patterns that appear on the face of it to be dictated by traditional values and norms? For example, how do we explain the apparent disenfranchisement of women in the inheritance of property? Why is women's work outside the home not accepted? How do we explain the preoccupation with women's fertility and the preference for male children? Why is marriage within the kin group socially desirable? Why are women adopting "traditional" dress codes?

To address these and other questions we must first appreciate the fact that norms and values are historical constructs above all, that they are in no society "handed down" from generation to generation without undergoing redefinition and reformulation. This process of alteration

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is itself conditioned by changing social realities, and reflects the struggle between different social groups and segments in pursuit of their particular and common interests. A prime example is the presumably timeless "honor code" believed to regulate women's conduct in Muslim Middle Eastern societies. Even a casual acquaintance with social practices and values in these societies reveals that the meaning of "honor" has changed considerably over the past decades, as has what constitutes the violation of the honor code. Practices and conduct which were viewed as constituting a grave violation of the code decades ago do not produce similar reactions today. Furthermore, contending social and political groups are constantly negotiating the definition and boundaries of honor, as is evidenced by the different codes of dress and conduct adopted by Islamist and non-Islamist women. Even Islamists, interestingly, have reinterpreted supposedly fixed honor codes such as those forbidding the mixing of men and women by adjusting them to the exigencies of modern life, such as women's participation in the labor force or the attendance of school and university.

Second, we must consider the possibility that certain values and norms are group- and class-specific and not generalizable at the level of whole societies. How the process of generalization takes place is itself a subject for investigation since it may become clear that a host of factors come into play in the designation of values and norms as universal. Women's seclusion in the home, for instance, has not been the practice for the majority of women in Middle Eastern societies, whether in rural or urban areas, since one of the main requirements for seclusion is the freedom from labor in the field, the neighborhood or other public spaces.

Third, even assuming that social practices are in some general way "governed"--or explained--by traditional norms and values and are seen as such by individuals in the society involved, it is still important to ask what other, more concrete and material factors may also account for those practices. Doing so will dictate placing traditional values, norms, and attitudes within the overall context of the material conditions and social relationships prevailing in society. It will also assist in making us more sensitive to the fluidity of social practices as they are conditioned by changing material circumstances. It may be added that such an exercise would also be intellectually more satisfying, since attributing diverse social practices and behavioral patterns to some timeless and amorphous body of "traditions" hardly satisfies the criteria of scholarly rigor.

Despite the rather abundant literature on Palestinian society, very little work has been done to investigate the issues raised above. Using the pioneering research of Annelies Moors in the Nablus region, we shall illustrate the usefulness of the approach suggested above to the study of property relations and inheritance in Palestine. It has been often noted that Palestinian women (and most Muslim women, for that matter) are denied their right to inherit family property due to prevailing norms considering it improper or unacceptable for daughters to claim their inheritance. What are the social realities that lie behind these norms and beliefs?

Moors first considers the basic facts, and finds that not all women are denied or do not try to claim their inheritance share. The crucial factors determining whether women do or do not receive or claim their share are marital status, social class, and position in the family. She points out that the presence or absence of contending heirs is central to whether or not women refrain from claiming their inheritance. Brotherless daughters (and their widowed mothers) show the most interest in claiming their share; daughters from wealthy families are

also in a better position of inheriting some of the family property. In the case of the majority, that is, married women from families of modest means who do have brothers, the situation is dramatically different. Here, sisters refrain from claiming their share in favor of their brothers as part of an optimizing strategy: being ultimately dependent on their kin for their socioeconomic security, it makes sense for women to do so in order to highlight their kin's obligations towards them. Moreover, not claiming their inheritance would also enhance their brothers' status and indirectly their own vis-a-vis their husbands' families; the support women can get from their kin usually influences their position in their husbands' house.²⁰

The preceding discussion has brought to light a final point which is important to recognize when considering the situation of Palestinian women. For even though we speak of Palestinian "women," we must realize that women's status, opportunities, power, and lifestyles are conditioned by their class, where they live (town, village, or refugee camp), the amount of education they have, the size of their families, their position within the family life cycle, their marital status, and finally, their age.

Conclusion

The Palestinian society which constitutes the context for this profile of Palestinian women is a complex and textured social reality. Decades of social transformations--some cataclysmic and devastating in their impact, others more gradual and subtle--have shaped current realities. Palestinian society is also entering a new stage; new arrangements, institutions, and forces are certain to affect the shape of things to come, not least in the political and economic spheres. It should be kept in mind, however, that many of the social, economic, and political dynamics which prevailed in the period prior to the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority will continue to make their impact on society. Economic dependence on Israel, for instance, will most likely be a major feature of the coming period, given the absence of an economic infrastructure capable of providing employment, stimulating production, and supporting trade. Lack of sovereignty over land and other basic resources will be another major factor severely limiting the possibilities of major social transformations in economy and society.

Politics in the wider sense of the term are possibly the one arena where the new political arrangements and institutions will provide the context for new and different forms of organizing, struggle, and the exercise of power. Advocacy politics, absent almost altogether from Palestinian political life until the establishment of an indigenous authority, will more likely engage new and existing political and social formations such as parties, NGOs, and women's organizations. The much hailed "experiment in democracy" will also be put to the test, as the various sectors of Palestinian civil society take up the battle for responsible government, citizens' rights, basic freedoms, and social justice. Finally, the question of the final status of the West Bank and Gaza will be one of the issues which will engage contending political and social forces.

²⁰ Annelies Moors, "Gender Relations and Inheritance: Person, Power and Property in Palestine," in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, I.B. Tauris, 1996, pp. 69-84.

