For the Common Good? Gender and Social Citizenship in Palestine
Author(s): Rita Giacaman, Islah Jad and Penny Johnson
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While most actors involved in policy formulation pay at least lip service to building democracy in Palestine, few have focused on the issues of citizenship and social entitlements. The Palestinian National Authority must now play an active role in determining the social rights of individuals and groups. The question is whether such policies will be based upon a politicized system of claims and favors or on universal citizens’ rights and entitlements taking gender and other social divisions into consideration.

For almost half a century, to be Palestinian has meant the absence of formal citizenship, and the rights and duties it confers. While important elements of citizenship previously resided in membership in the Palestinian community and its institutions, the coming of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to Gaza and Jericho in the summer of 1994—with its limited powers, patchwork jurisdiction and dependence upon Israeli and international goodwill—opens a new era in which the contours of Palestinian citizenship are being shaped and contested. While citizenship normally is conferred only by states, the transfer of authority by Israel to the PNA over health, education, tourism, taxation and social welfare—and more recently over West Bank towns and villages included in the Oslo II agreement—creates circumstances in which residents living in PNA jurisdictions have developed a relationship to the PNA analogous to that of citizens and their state.

Citizenship in Palestine, whether defined in political, social or economic terms, is still fundamentally at question, with deep implications for women and society as a whole. One emerging conflict with serious implications for women is between individualized and clan-based entitlements, whether in terms of political representation or social allocations. President Arafat’s determined revival of traditional and often discredited forms of clan-based leadership and mediation, as witnessed by the appointment of a presidential consultant...
for clan affairs, a staggering rise in the number of mudhbaras (village chiefs) in Gaza, and the promotion of clan associations for political representation in municipalities and other bodies excludes women from participation, as surely as it undermines political parties and the development of the institutions of civil society. While the PNA asserts the right to impose taxes on individual citizens, the basis and nature of citizens’ entitlements is still highly fluid.

Despite political polarization, the Palestinian women’s movement, with other social and political groups, is actively negotiating rights with the Palestinian National Authority. Their main focus has been governmental representation: to date, despite a few high-level appointments (most notably Um Jihad as the Minister of Social Welfare), women are poorly represented in ministries, commissions and almost all policy-making bodies. This focus, due in part to the overwhelming amount of international attention given to the Palestinian elections, has resulted in the somewhat odd but wide-spread phenomenon of “democracy workshops.” Citizenship, however, is not merely equated with voting or representation in governing institutions; thus the high voter turnout in the elections of January 20, 1996 is not the answer to the dilemma of Palestinian citizenship.

If we examine other aspects of citizenship, we return promptly to contradictory terrain. One of four research teams engaged in collaborative research now underway in the Women’s Studies Program at Birzeit University has been reviewing, from a gender-informed perspective, research, reports and policy documents that address “social entitlements and social support.” One obvious and early conclusion of the team has been that central aspects of public policy usually designated as social welfare issues—social and income security, old age benefits, social services, public housing, unemployment and occupational welfare—have not been the subject of extended analysis, debate or policy-making. Of equal importance, an underlying social philosophy of citizens’ rights to basic social services has not been developed in these documents or in the broader society.

Instead, a dominant trend seen in recent policy documents, such as the series of World Bank reports entitled “Developing the Occupied Territories: An Investment in Peace,” is to give priority to relatively short-term economic development. This is in response to the serious crisis in (male) employment and reflects the assumption that promoting economic development will secure support for the peace process, as well as ensure stability and legitimacy for the new Palestinian National Authority. Here, economic improvement, primarily through stimulating private investment and creating new and sometimes temporary labor markets (primarily for unskilled male labor), is seen as the key to political progress.

This short-sighted formula has serious implications for women. While economic strategies (jobs and investment) that complement the political agenda are of great importance, such market-oriented strategies are not a universal panacea; they also create new problems and divisions in society. Without social support for those excluded from the market economy, individual or state security and well-being is unlikely to be achieved. This is particularly true in the present period as Palestinian society emerges from a prolonged and debilitating period of conflict, occupation, and low-intensity warfare, in which the population’s political, economic, and social welfare has suffered sustained damage.


The authorship of the entire study, written in Arabic, is given only as the “PLO’s Department of Economics and Planning,” but the general editor is known to be distinguished economist Yusif Sayigh. The section examined here constitutes only a 40-page portion of this massive 1000-page study.

**Master Plan, No Master**

Before turning to the text, it is helpful to review the context in which this document was produced. Regrettably, the document has been poorly-circulated even within the ministries and policy-making bodies of the Palestinian National Authority.

The existence of a “Master Plan” implies an ability to implement policy recommendations. In the current Palestinian context, the Palestinian National Authority is only one of several actors shaping economic and social policies. International aid agencies, state parties and the United Nations—equipped with a battery of policy papers, situation analyses and needs assessment reports that inform their donor strategies—play an important and increasing role in the area of socio-economic development. These agencies often shape policies without adequate coordination among themselves, and without essential consultation with local organizations and experts.

Providing an array of services, Palestinian non-governmental organizations—with differing explicit or implicit social and economic policies—have played a significant role in sustaining Palestinian society throughout the years of occupation. These NGOs now strive not only to maintain a service-delivery role, but to participate in policy-making on a national level. Other actors include local political movements, parties and social forces, both progressive and conservative, while Israel continues to set the parameters and Jordan plays a low-key, but significant, role.

With the possible exception of conservative and fundamentalist forces and some important non-governmental organizations, among them women’s groups, these major actors have yet to begin to articulate a social agenda. At the same time, neither an explicit legal framework nor an implicit social contract regulates or defines the relationship between the PNA and its citizenry.

**Social Support**

Existing social support in Palestine functions on multiple levels through household, kinship and informal social networks, NGOs and political parties. Highly developed Israeli social
security, health and welfare systems offer benefits to Palestinian residents of Jerusalem while Islamic zakat (alms) committees, and to a lesser extent churches, provide complementary forms of support.

One major international agency, UNRWA, is still largely responsible for the social welfare of the Palestinian refugee population. Both inside the autonomous areas of Gaza and Jericho and in the limited transfer of powers in the West Bank, Palestinian authority now extends to social welfare, education and health, although the scope of the authority is limited to some extent by the previous powers and responsibilities of the Israeli civil administration. The World Bank’s 1993 assessment of social security services available to Palestinians as “patchy, inequitable and inadequate” is still very much the case.

In terms of existing social support, an irregular and politicized system of claims and favors, characteristic of PLO political culture, continues, alongside the development of bureaucratic structures, to be an important modus operandi within the PNA and political factions. This system reflects the wider informal networks of social support and mutual claims that have sustained Palestinians (although not equally) and helped them manage daily life under occupation. These networks can and do extend beyond family and kin even though family and kinship networks continue to be central to individual and communal social support.

In order to construct equitable and effective public social policies in Palestine, it is important to look more carefully at these family-based networks, rather than to assume their continuous and unproblematic presence in Palestinian society. This assumption obviously guides the World Bank’s characterization of the Palestinian household as a “shock absorber” that will continue to absorb economic shocks in the future, including a possible decline in real wages.

There are several important points to consider here. First, Palestinian households have already sustained a series of severe economic shocks, including the effects of the intifada, the Gulf war and periodic Israeli closures of the Occupied Territories. It should neither be assumed that their absorptive capacity is “infinitely elastic,” nor that such strain on households and their individual members constitutes a desirable or normal state of affairs. Second, existing stress on the household has severe repercussions for women, who “devise and implement survival strategies for their families, using their unpaid labor to absorb adverse effects of structural adjustment policies.” Third, family networks are not equally accessible to all households or members of society. In a 1993 study, Geir Ovensen analyzes how Palestinian households have dealt with the dramatic decline in male participation in the labor force caused by Israel’s continued exclusion of Palestinian workers from the Israeli labor market. Ovensen posits a “family employment network” whereby other employed family members compensate for an individual’s loss of employment. Ovensen then makes a highly relevant point:

The ‘family employment network’ hypothesis cannot, of course, apply to households where no members are labor force participants. Because of their small size and low labor activity, most female-headed households fall outside the private ‘social security system.’

Given these realities, it is more appropriate to view family-based social support as being in crisis, rather than as constituting a stable status quo. Clearly, publicly provided social welfare services are urgently required to relieve some of the pressure on households.

Towards National Social Policies

The question remains whether the Palestinian National Authority, with its limited resources, will take upon itself the formulation and execution of social policies on a national level. Will the PNA focus primarily on the coercive and policing functions of a state—as in post-colonial societies elsewhere in the developing world—leaving the development of social policies and services to international aid and non-governmental organizations? Or will it play a central and active role in determining the social rights of individuals and groups? Will social policies and programs be constructed on the basis of concepts of citizen’s rights and universal entitlements, or through notions of charity? And finally, will these policies take into consideration gender and other social divisions in society in terms of rights, allocations and claims on social benefits?

The document under review cannot answer all these questions, but it can serve as a useful starting point for public discussion and policy analysis. The social welfare section of this “master plan” is impoverished, perhaps because numerous chapters on economic issues take precedence. In the introduction to the section, the author does give priority to issues of social welfare:

As for the Palestinian state, all efforts need to be doubled to reach the minimal accepted standard to deal seriously with the problems of health, education, social welfare, occupational welfare, and local community and family services... the state should consider this a priority because developing this aspect will reflect positively in other social, economic and political sectors in Palestine.

In the preceding paragraph, however, the following rather bleak view of fiscal feasibility is given:

Ensuring social equity to all and the welfare of the individual and society is impossible in the prevailing conditions. Thus, it is the state’s responsibility in the interim period to achieve a substantial degree of care and social welfare, especially for low-income and poor classes.

The contradiction between these two adjacent paragraphs is not resolved by any clear statement of priorities in resource allocation within the PNA or any conceptual framework of citizens’ social rights and entitlements. The recommendations on social welfare are essentially eclectic. With careful reading, however, one notices both serious omissions in meeting the needs and rights of specific groups, especially women, within the population, and an implicit structure for social entitlements that is gendered and discriminatory.
Rights and Needs

Secure entitlements (social security, retirement and unemployment) are derived primarily from market productivity and are seen as the deserved benefits of the individual’s economic contribution to society. A second tier of social care deals with vulnerable groups, defined variously in the document as orphans, the poor, “women in special circumstances,” prisoners, families of martyrs, refugees, and the disabled. The elderly are placed in both categories. Vulnerable groups are defined by need, sometimes cited as in “extreme poverty” or as “special hardship” cases. Elasticity in defining destitution and the fact that the list of vulnerable groups varies throughout the document reflect the instability of the entitlement.

This broad division between entitlements by right and welfare allocations by need has been identified in a variety of social welfare systems. The division is fundamentally gendered in that women’s non-market contributions to society—through informal economic structures, the household, care-giving or the broad processes of reproduction and socialization—are not acknowledged.

In the Palestinian context, “secure” entitlements remain relative, given that the document does not clearly delineate the role or commitment of the PNA to the provision of social support. Emerging from an entirely different context than existing welfare states, the social role of the PNA cannot be assumed. Is it based on providing services to all citizens? The majority of Palestinians have suffered serious consequences from the occupation, and, consequently, deserve wide and comprehensive social support.

In the PLO document, such questions remain unanswered or ambiguous. For example, although the document begins by stressing the urgent needs of refugees and martyr’s families, they are not specifically included in the special social programs, or even in the proposed budget. Policy is not derived from a stable set of well-defined social rights and entitlements.

Basis of Equality

While the document begins by reiterating the importance of achieving equality among citizens, a later elaboration reveals that equality is defined in political and regional terms, without regard to the serious class and gender inequalities in Palestinian society. Under the section entitled “The Basic Goals of the Program,” the first goal is given as “Male Retirement and Female Old Age.” When issues of entitlements or citizens’ rights arise, they are linked primarily to paid labor. A clear example of this approach is found in the discussion of retirement entitlements, where the document states:

There is no law that gives the family of the deceased the right to acquire his salary upon retirement, or in the case of death before retirement. Retirement benefits differ from old age benefits, as the worker spent long years in work, and has the right to live the rest of his life secure and content.

On the one hand, the policy clearly bases its retirement/social security model on the right of workers to live in security and dignity for the rest of their lives, identifying older people as a social category that has specific rights. On the other hand, the family of the deceased worker has no right or claim to this social support, and old age benefits are a lesser entitlement than retirement funds. That is, the right for service provision, security and dignity is based primarily on paid work, excluding most women in their old age and negating their important and complex non-market contribution to socio-economic development. Given that most women in Palestine do not currently participate in the formal labor force (according to most published statistics, women’s participation in the formal labor force has declined since 1967), the policy’s old age pension model—which has elements of citizens’ rights—is undermined by its unequal treatment of different social groups.

Women in “Special” Circumstances

If and when women are considered in the document, they are reduced to the category of “destitute” requiring assistance in order to alleviate severe life conditions, or in relation to male “workers,” “martyrs” and “prisoners.” Under the sole section on “Care of Women in Special Circumstances,” the document reads:

Women play a crucial role in Palestinian society, especially among the poor classes that suffer from extreme poverty. Many women support their families; in some cases women are partial supporters of a disabled son, and in other cases they support their families completely in the case of a martyred husband.

While ignoring the complex and varying life circumstances of women (none of whom, it is assumed, are divorced, abandoned, or even single), the document reenforces the assumed status quo, where women’s needs and existence are viewed solely in terms of their linkage to men, family and kin. It assumes that women only work when a male provider is absent. Even within the limited framework of “poor classes,” such work is viewed as exceptional (when a husband is martyred or a son disabled), although the document states elsewhere that 44 percent of all families in extreme poverty are headed by females.
When women are highlighted, as in this section, it is in the context of their family responsibilities. The document neglects examining the needs of women at different stages in their lives, such as girls and teenagers, who are not fully integrated into the extensive recreational program that constitutes a sizeable part of the proposed budget allocations. The impetus for this program and for the accompanying focus on social counselling for youth seems geared towards dealing with “idle youth” and “juvenile delinquents,” individuals who are clearly male and pose a threat to social and political stability. Recommendations for school counsellors, however, and for colleges or training centers to provide counselling are worth pursuing in order to help both male and female youth confront social problems, as well as expand their opportunities for growth and positive development.

Conflating the needs of women with the needs of children, one of the few special provisions in the document is for birth allowances, given in the budget at 90 dollars per child. In the absence of other social support for children and families, this pro-natalist policy needs further examination, not only for its impact on women, but on overall future economic development. Fertility rates in the West Bank and Gaza are high (roughly seven births per woman in 1992, with a higher figure for Gaza), and the population in already-congested Gaza is projected to double within the next 17 years. In terms of other benefits, the recommended maternity leave of two months falls short of the World Health Organization’s recommended leave of three months. One positive feature is the proposal to underwrite one-third of the nursery costs of working mothers; the costs, however, are not reflected in budget allocations.
In general, the fulfillment of women's needs is relegated by the document to charitable societies and women's groups, which falsely assumes that such groups have limited their role to caring for other women in situations of dire poverty. Women's groups are assigned the care of "women in special circumstances" and women's organizations are urged to establish centers for traditional craft production, as well as other small-scale income-generating projects. This recommendation does not take into account the considerable experience of the women's movement in these areas nor the economic failure of many of these projects, emphasizing the need for more innovative and mainstream economic strategies for training and integration of women into labor markets. In this way, the document tends to erase the history of the Palestinian women's movement and its role not only in service provision, but also in the development of innovative models for social development, in organizing and mobilizing women, and in contributing to the current human rights/democracy debate.

Control or Participation?

The document emphasizes the central role of the Palestinian National Authority in controlling the policy-making and planning process. Planning here is seen as a mechanical, technical procedure rather than a continuous process requiring the participation of different social actors, including women. The author envisages the PNA as the planner and the executor, with non-governmental organizations assigned varying responsibilities in providing services. The recommendation for a "consultative council" of non-governmental organizations, if redefined, is one way in which the lessons learned in other developing countries, especially the Arab World—where policies failed precisely because they were imposed from above—could be taken into consideration.

Another disturbing feature is the document's assessment of Palestinian NGO social service provision under occupation—where women have been principal actors—as primarily faction-based, unprofessional and requiring state control. While political factionalism exists, this assessment homogenizes a very rich experience and fails to understand the importance of the local NGOs' contribution to the development of a social service infrastructure key to the struggle against the occupation. More importantly, it fails to realize the significance of NGOs in developing innovative and effective programs for service provision, and in promoting democratization and community action essential for the growth of civil society—aspects in which women's NGOs and their individual participants have been central. In particular, the women's movement has been a leading force in widening and redefining social, rather than private, issues and needs—a perspective that can greatly contribute to the development of social citizenship.

In Palestine, the objective constraints of the transitional stage, the newness of the PNA, and limited state and national resources are limiting factors. For almost the same reasons, however, it is a critical time for setting foundations: specifically for equitable social policies, and more broadly for social citizenship and a democratic vision of Palestinian society.

While most actors involved in policy formulation give at least lip service to building democracy and citizenship in Palestine, few have focused on the development of the constituents of citizenship and a system of universal social entitlements that recognizes the social rights of citizens, addresses inequities in society and assigns responsibility for social welfare and protection. Gender relations are deeply entwined in all aspects of this project; the quest for democratic relations between state and citizenry cannot be divorced from the search for more equitable gender relations.

Endnotes

2. In the recent elections (January 20, 1996) four women were elected to the 88-member Palestinian National Council.
4. In examining similar networks of social support in the Lebanese context, Suzel Joseph poses a contrast of "relational rights," gained through investment in relationships and an active process of negotiation and mediation. While we have questions about the implications of placing these non-formal systems of claims within a rights discourse, her observations are helpful in analyzing the Palestinian context.
8. The numeric data provided in this section is unrefined, sometimes incorrect and often does not incorporate readily available information. This is particularly disturbing given the persistent Palestinian criticism of donors for publishing inaccurate information and statistics that pre-empt national policy formulation.
10. Here, in fact, another definition of a contribution to society is formulated, which is that of struggle and sacrifice for the national cause. This definition could be read negatively (political/cultural) or positively (recognition that all have contributed and should be equal citizens).
11. Achieving equity in social services provision involves the division of services in such a way that all benefit regardless of political affiliation or geographic location.