

Palestinian Women in the Uprising: From Followers to Leaders

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Context

Palestinians living under Israeli military rule have sustained a popular uprising that has swept the entire population. Already, available evidence indicates that its impact is being felt not only in terms of the weakening of the position of the occupying forces and the political balance of power between the oppressor and the oppressed, but also in terms of fundamental, and possibly permanent, shifts and modifications in the Palestinian social structure as well.

One can describe these historic events in terms of three basic characteristics. The first is the fact that the uprising is encompassing the active support of all sectors of Palestinian society. While it might be true that those appearing most frequently in the streets and on television cameras look somewhat youthful, it is not correct to conclude from these images that the uprising is mostly backed and supported by the youth: about 50 per cent of us are under the age of 15 years, and almost 70 per cent have not reached the age of 30 years. These demographic facts impart a youthful image to the uprising not because it is the youth that have taken over, but because this picture is an accurate reflection of age distribution in Palestinian society itself.

Workers as well as peasants have also been actively involved in creating and sustaining the uprising. Townspeople, rural dwellers, and refugee camp residents have all joined in making these events a considerable success. Even shopkeepers, known previously to have been resistant to political participation or other activities that could jeopardize income generation, have mounted an unprecedented commercial strike, beginning in the early days of the uprising and continuing until this very day, and accounting for a good part of the reason for the continued success of the uprising.

This leads to the second point that needs to be made: the theme of unity not only in a sectorial sense but also at the level of a united political front as well. As is the case with other societies, Palestinian society is not homogeneous. It is divided into classes, although perhaps not well crystallized, into clans, and along gender lines. Such divisions, most notably kinship, have in the past

formed the basis of political authority and allegiance and have manifested themselves in terms of differing ideological political positions and movements not always utilizing democratic means in reaching agreements over issues. Yet despite this background of divisions and tension, the population of the Occupied Territories succeeded in producing and consolidating the United Leadership of the Uprising.¹ This is a political front representing all the major ideological tendencies within the Palestinian national movement and some fundamentalist elements as well.² And although at times grave differences in opinions regarding the form and content of the struggle have appeared and threatened to pit political groups against each other, national political unity has been maintained within the framework of democratic decision-making.

The third important characteristic of the uprising is its political — as opposed to only economic/financial — content. Perhaps quite clearly for the first time, Palestinians are expressing themselves together, and in political terms they have succeeded in putting forth a concretely political agenda and are in the process of formulating a political programme. In essence they are informing the world that their agenda is political. For although the Gaza streets that are so often flooded with sewage provide the setting for unspeakable living conditions, they are not the only item on the Palestinian agenda. In the end, the message of the uprising is that Palestinians will settle for nothing less than legitimate political/civil rights, the right for a Palestinian state and all the national/political and civil rights and securities that come along with statehood.

It is within such a context, the context of a society in a situation of flux — in conditions of substantial revolutionary potential for society at large, and not only in national politics — that we must now examine the way in which the uprising has affected the status and activities of women in Palestinian society.

The Women's Movement

Until about December of 1987, one would have argued that despite all the achievements of the Palestinian women's movement, the status of women, indeed the movement itself, left a few items to be desired. While the women's committees movement³ did succeed in placing issues of concern to women and women's status in society ('feminist?') on the national agenda, it did not fundamentally challenge the division of labour based on gender that is at the core of women's oppression in Palestinian society today. Beginning with 1978 and the creation of the first women's committee, much was achieved in terms of the provision of basic services to women, especially in the rural areas and refugee camps, where the need was highest.⁴ In addition, the committees were crucial in developing the role of women outside the domestic sphere. Central to the more progressive of the women's committees⁵ is the theme of how best to incorporate women into the economy: women in production was and still is a topic of much discussion and controversy. While initial attempts at production were restricted to domains traditionally dominated by women, such as

sewing and embroidery, the women's committees have recently boldly stepped into the sphere of food production, such as pickles, biscuits, and orange juice.

Yet despite these achievements — including the establishment and operation of more than eighty nursery schools and kindergartens in villages, refugee camps, and poor urban neighbourhoods, and the provision of literacy training to hundreds of women — the women's committees continued to suffer the effects of serious handicaps. Those handicaps primarily related to the movement's inability to bring a balance between the national conflict needs on the one hand, and needs of women stemming from their class oppression and their oppression as women by a patriarchal system of social organization on the other. The inability of the women's committees to resist becoming mere extensions of the national political factions inevitably led to the division of the movement into four committees along the lines of the division within the national political arena. This, in turn, led to the sharp curtailment of the ability of the women's committees movement to rally into its midst the large majority of Palestinian women who might have wanted to be active in a Palestinian woman's movement but did not wish to 'drown in factional politics'.

The second handicap afflicting the committees movement relates to the first and deals with the thoroughly secondary nature of the role of women in politics. It is indeed ironic to note that while the primary emphasis of the committees movement had been in the area of moving women into the national political arena,⁶ their role up until December 1987 did not in fact, by and large, go beyond the status of second-class citizens, relative to men. Men made the decisions and women executed them. In this sense, women were in working-class positions relative to the men who assumed control over the political decision-making machine. No wonder that this state of affairs was predominant, given that even some of the most active leaders of the women's committees movement still had not challenged the division of labour based on gender in their own households. What we then saw was the phenomenon of women active politically, leaders of the women's sector working in politics most certainly beyond the domestic sphere, but at the cost of continuing to assume the ultimate responsibility for domestic work. In other words, what was happening is not unknown elsewhere in the world: women began work in two jobs and not just one, because women continued to fail in challenging the division of labour between them and their husbands at home, and between them and their leaders in the very national politics for which they were allegedly neglecting the women's issue.

Perhaps such a state of affairs was inevitable, in view of the big gap separating the worlds of men and women in terms of basic political and social skills. It might even be true that there were exceptions to the above description, for there must have been some women who did succeed in meeting the challenge. But they were few, and represented individual action, as opposed to a trend within a movement aware of the need to challenge all forms of exploitation in an interactive way that does not negate the primacy of the national question.

The Impact of the *Intifada*

The seeds of potential change were there, however, and came in the form of the uprising. While Palestinian society was undergoing decisive transformations in the period preceding the uprising, the uprising itself led to the magnification of such changes and the creation of new ones. The old norms, forms of behaviour, and role models have all been challenged. Old and young, bourgeoisie, workers and peasants, men and women, all have joined the ranks of those on the rise. The population has been transformed: it has been empowered. And the women hit the street. Portraits of otherwise ordinary women who were facing assaults upon their communities and themselves and who were reacting to these assaults began to emerge:

The theme underlying the portraits here is one of open defiance of the occupation on the one hand, and active defence of community and individual life on the other. We see rural women, women living in refugee camps, and a middle-class woman from a town responding with a striking similarity, despite their different circumstances. Defiance of the occupation and defence of the community: the twin watchwords of women today in the Occupied Territories.⁷

Accounts of changes taking place in the way women are relating to the events of the day and even to the way they normally relate to each other and to their families began to be noted in women's committee publications:

One overwhelming fact emerges from these stories and reports, and that is that a remarkable change has taken place in the way these women relate to each other, to their families and to the events in which they are caught up. The participation of women in the recent uprising has been comprehensive, direct and active. They march side by side with their fathers, husbands, and sons, in every aspect of the struggle. Their participation crosses all lines of age and class; family and factional differences have been erased. They have become united, just as the Palestinian people has been united. Through suffering and a common cause.⁸

Thus, although some of the descriptions of these changes in women's status and activity under uprising conditions tend perhaps to paint a slightly rosy picture of reality, they remain a reflection of the radical shift in the level of participation of women in public political life. In a relatively short span of time, women moved from thoroughly secondary roles — as backup to men and having been primarily preoccupied with provision of services — to major actors in the field of politics and the resistance to military occupation:

For the first time, we are seeing women participating in various ways in resisting occupation . . . in ways that we think were not possible before the uprising. Women are now very active in neighbourhood committees. Their experience and organizational skills are facilitating these committees' work in providing services to communities. But they now participate as leaders, and not only as service providers.⁹

And . . .

Adhering to the call by the United National Leadership, the UPWC played an exceptional role in the formation of neighbourhood committees. The initial work included social visits to the families, coordination with other women's committees and grassroots-organizations in each respective neighbourhood. Neighbourhood committees with almost similar structure have been formed in a lot of neighbourhoods. They consisted of different sub committees such as education, agriculture, health, guarding and storage sub committees.¹⁰

This stepping up of the activities of women's committees took place in an atmosphere where neighbourhood committees were taking root and flourishing as one of the more important forms of struggle against occupation during the period of the uprising. Perhaps not so unlike that in which Palestinians responded to the terrible state of chaos that engulfed the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the mid-1948 to 1950 period in Palestinian history,¹¹ they were once again responding to the conditions of the uprising by organizing and co-operating at the grass-roots level, and not only at the top. Various types of popular co-ordination and neighbourhood committees developed early on in the uprising, certainly as early as February of 1988.¹²

Central to the thinking on neighbourhood committee action is the theme of Palestinian self-reliance, most clearly spelled out in the directives of Communiqué 18, which called for a whole range of measures, including the resignation of the employees of the civil service — controlled by the Israeli military, refusing to pay taxes, organizing and reinforcing neighbourhood committee structures in health, agriculture, education, and other avenues of life, all aimed at breaking the ties with the Israeli infrastructure and developing independent Palestinian institutions instead.¹³ In such an atmosphere of national strife and revolutionary potential, the calls of the leadership were for all sectors of society to join in the struggle for liberation, and women notwithstanding. These circumstances obliterated divisions (whether class or gender ones) normally found in society, although perhaps temporarily, and allowed previously docile and inactive sectors of society, especially women, to locate for themselves useful participatory roles in the uprising that are sanctioned by the political leadership and therefore accepted by their communities.¹⁴

Yet, two additional factors appear to have facilitated the process of catapulting the women's committees and their constituencies into national political leadership positions. In the first instance, organizational experience, generated by creating, building, and developing the women's committees movement at least since 1978,¹⁵ if not earlier, was producing a generation of women capable of full participation in political life. Previously the domain of men, political activism and leadership required from women the acquisition of skills that they could not have possibly acquired with their continued confinement within the domestic sphere. The women's committees movement came into being at a crucial point, providing women with the platform within and around which they could slowly develop these organizational and political skills (such as speaking, writing, outlining political positions, delineating strategy and

tactics, to name only a few), in an atmosphere relatively free from the threatening competition of experienced men. And so they learned!

The second factor was the question of timing. The right moment came when, increasingly, thousands of men were being placed indiscriminately in Israeli gaols and detention centres.¹⁵ A cadre and leadership vacuum was thus created. Armed with these newly acquired and needed skills, the women simply moved in and took over. Ever since then women have assumed important, if not crucial, positions within the neighbourhood committee structures. More importantly perhaps, available evidence does indicate that, increasingly, women are being incorporated into the political decision apparatus.

Conclusion

This dramatic move of women into mainstream national politics — as leaders in their society and not only as executors — was not free from burdens and negative consequences, despite the readily visible benefits. For this rise in the political status of women's committees was accompanied by an even firmer shelving than before of the 'feminist agenda'. Additionally, this rise into political power is increasingly making it very difficult indeed for women uncommitted to an ideological stream and non-factional women to participate democratically in the activities of the women's committees movement. For this rise into power seems to carry with it the primary consideration of a struggle for power among the different factions rather than the continued concentration of efforts on the further development and consolidation of the women's committees movement as equal partners to men in political, economic, and social life. Such positions already appear to be squeezing out the role and the voices of 'independent' women, the majority who are not linked ideologically or otherwise to any one of the national political groupings of the day.

In the final analysis, it appears that we need to reiterate what has already been stated many times before: during periods of struggle for national liberation, active participation of women in public life — be it in political leadership or in economic or social life — does not necessarily guarantee the continued radical transformation in the conditions of women and their status in society in the period after liberation. We must draw on, and learn from, the experience of our Algerian sisters, who ironically signalled the beginning of their own downfall after liberation by calling for conformity to Arab-Islamic culture in the process of protecting the family unit.¹⁷ And the lesson to be learned there is that while Palestinian aspirations for a secure future are linked to national liberation, hopes for a better society are integrally linked to the liberation of all its sectors, including women, from all forms of exploitation.

1. Note that the first written communiqué of the United Leadership of the Uprising — directing and co-ordinating uprising activities — was published as early as 8 January 1988. (The United Leadership of the Uprising in the Occupied Territories, *Nida'* 1, 8 January 1988, in Arabic.)

2. It should be noted here that the fundamentalist movement — composed of several trends and ideological tendencies — has had differing attitudes towards the activities of the United Leadership of the Uprising. While some groups have had close ties to some elements within the leadership, others have operated independently. One such grouping, known as *Hamas* or the Islamic Resistance Movement, was issuing directives to the population as early as January 1988 and calling for general strikes on its own even as early as February 1988 (in, for instance, *Hamas, Islamic Resistance Calls You for a General Strike*, Communiqué of 11 February 1988, in Arabic). The relationship of such groupings to the United Leadership of the Uprising is ambiguous to this day, varying from willingness to go along with majority decisions to attempting to up the ante whenever the balance of forces appears to favour independent action.
3. The women's committees movement, alternatively described as the new Palestinian women's movement, is a movement calling for the liberation of women from all forms of exploitation and the improvement in women's status politically, economically, socially, and culturally. (For instance, see *Women's Work Committees in the Occupied Territories, Bulletins for December, 1983*, Jerusalem, January-February 1984 — in Arabic — and *Working Women's Committees, Bulletin of Palestinian Working Women's Union in the West Bank and Gaza Strip*, Jerusalem, August 1983 — also in Arabic.) In contrast to the old, centralized, town-based, and middle-class dominated women's charitable society network, the committees are characterized by a decentralized committee structure at the grass-roots level — from the bottom up. Primarily the initiative of progressive women, they tend to be more politicized than the old network, calling for more active participation of women in society.
4. The committees were especially active in the areas of literacy education and child care. For example, from no nursery school and kindergarten services in the rural areas in 1980, the women's committees had succeeded in establishing at least 80 such centres by 1988.
5. Of which there are four, one representing each of the four major ideological streams in the Palestinian national movement.
6. In fact, on many occasions and when questioned by the author, moving women into mainstream politics as the primary agenda in times of national liberation was the justification used by more than one women's committees leader to explain the relative neglect of problems and issues pertaining to women's oppression.
7. The Palestinian Union of Women's Work Committees Newsletter, *Special Issue, Women in the Uprising*, 8 March 1988, p. 2.
8. Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees, *Palestinian Women's Role in the Uprising. Eye-Witness Accounts*, Jerusalem, March 1988, p. 1.
9. This is a quote obtained by the author in discussion with one of the newly emerging leaders of the women's movement. Note that the uprising produced new faces of women in leadership posts.
10. Union of Palestinian Women's Committees in the Occupied Land, *Newsletter 1*, July 1988, p. 2.
11. This is the period when the British mandate authorities retreated from Palestine, leaving the Palestinians without a central structure or system of government to take charge of the organization of life and to care for the influx of Palestinian refugees from what had just become the state of Israel. Interviews (conducted by the author) with ordinary citizens-turned-activists during this period reveal responses similar to present-day reactions to the lack of proper basic central services. They also reveal patterns of political and social activism in the form of neighbourhood committees that are close to the present neighbourhood committee method of resistance. For an interesting account of one such group's activities during the 1947-1950 period see N. Jacir, *Communiqué of the Arab Women's Union; Its Two First Aid Stations and Activities, 1940-1950*, Jerusalem, 1950 (in Arabic).
12. Those committees include shopkeepers, educational, health, agricultural, food storage, sanitation, and neighbourhood security committees, among others. It should be noted that co-ordination committees for neighbourhood committees and sub-committees also came into being around this period too, making themselves felt on more than one level, including the publication of leaflets and communiqués directing and co-ordinating the activities of particular sectors of society. Just as an example of earlier publications we list here the communiqué of the Coordination Committee of the National Popular Committees of the Uprising in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, published under the title of *Let Shultz Be Met with Boycotts and General Strike and Protest Demonstrations*, February 1988, in Arabic, and the communiqué of the Higher Coordinating Committee for All the Educational Sectors in the Occupied Arab Land, published on 4 March 1988 in Arabic, among many others.

13. The United Leadership of the Uprising, *Nida', No Voice Rises Above That of the Uprising, Communiqué 18*, 28 May 1988.
14. Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees, *Palestinian Women's Role in the Uprising. Eye-witness Accounts*, March 1988.
15. 1978 was the year when the first women's committee was established in Ramallah, the West Bank.
16. Since the start of the uprising and up until 30 June 1988, 'more than 17000 Palestinians have passed through Israeli prisons, including approximately 2000 administrative detainees.' The Palestinian Union of Women's Work Committees *Newsletter*, 30 June 1988, p. 9.
17. F. M'rabet, 'La Femme Algerienne, Suivi de Les Algeriennes', Paris, 1969, p. 108, quoted in M. Salman, 'Arab Women', in J. Rothschild, Editor, *Forbidden Agendas, Intolerance and Defiance in the Middle East*, al-Saqi, London, 1984.