

Palestinian Women: Is there a Unitary Conception of Rights?

Hilde Kjølseth

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Introduction¹

The aim of this paper is to present ways in which a selection of ordinary Palestinian women view and interpret the concepts of women's rights and women's roles. The term "ordinary" is ambiguous, but Rosemary Sayigh has used it in her distinction between 1) women from notable families involved in charitable social and/or national work, 2) women intellectuals affiliated with professional or political organisations with a clear ideological character, and 3) "ordinary" women (Sayigh 1985). She writes that "[t]he third category is not valid, since there are no 'ordinary' women. Labels like 'uneducated', 'illiterate', 'housewife', and 'traditional woman' are all unsatisfactory and loaded with elitism" (Sayigh 1985:203).

I use the term "ordinary women" in contrast to the women of the urban elite, who dominate Palestinian women's organisations and set the agenda for the women's rights struggle. The ordinary women constitute the grassroots; they are the rural poor who are not affiliated with any organisations, whether secular or religious, and whose views are often not heard. I believe there is a marked difference in how women's rights are understood between urban elite women and their rural sisters. While there might be a general agreement among Palestinian women that their rights situation is not ideal, those who claim to speak on behalf of all Palestinian women seem to have but a vague idea of what the majority of those women say they need and want for themselves. In this paper I present some ordinary Palestinian women's statements and comments on how they understand the concept of women's rights.

The statements demonstrate that most women view the family as the factor which is most important for their opportunity to access rights. Surprisingly few explicitly criticise the Palestinian Authority (PA) for not protecting the human rights of Palestinian women. The idea that the state should be responsible for protecting women's rights and be the addressee of criticism regarding the women's rights situation is not well developed. Instead, access to the right to education and the right to work for these women depends on the family. For instance, the family situation will in some cases decide whether a woman has the right to work at all.

Ethnographic material

The empirical material that forms the basis for this paper is based on interviews (in English and Arabic) with several women, mainly from two villages in the Ramallah district, during the spring of 2004. Most of the informants whose quotes are presented here I got to know fairly well; I spent time with them and their families and conversed with them on several occasions. Others I have met but once or twice. The information was extracted from structured conversations that were usually initiated either by me asking some questions, or by a key informant introducing me to her friends and relatives, and presenting my interests. These conversations took place tête-à-tête or in a group. The setting was informal, in the informant's home or in the home of one of her relatives. To protect the informants' identities, all personal names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

¹ Acknowledgements: this paper has been prepared with a travel grant from a collaborative agreement between the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy (Muwatin) which is funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development and Co-operation (NORAD). An earlier version of the paper was presented to a joint CMI-Muwatin panel at the WOCMES II conference in Amman, 12-17 June 2006. The usual disclaimer applies.

The questions I asked were variations on the following: *"In your opinion, what are women's rights?" "What is your opinion on the women's rights situation in Palestine?" "What do you think of the role of women in today's Palestine?"*. As an immediate reaction to my question, many women initially simply smiled or laughed somewhat bitterly and said "Rights? There are no rights!" When I asked them to specify by asking "Why?", "What do you mean?", "Can you explain that?" they quickly sobered up and their faces became serious. Although most of the women I talked with seemed to appreciate that my focus on them and their lives was genuine and based on friendly curiosity as well as academic interest, a few refused to talk to me. This scepticism is partially due to the fact that many Palestinians are frustrated with what they perceive as a pro-Israeli bias in the West. Portraying Muslim women as "oppressed, suppressed and repressed", as one informant put it, is interpreted as part of this bias. Hence, some took it for granted that I, a Westerner, came with such preconceived notions, and did not see the point in trying to rectify them. Luckily, there were others who took great pains to explain to me how they experienced their situation.

Women's rights - the Palestinian case

Western-based feminism has been criticised for not taking into account the realities of women's situation in the Third World, especially with regard to the history of colonialism and occupation (see, for instance, Jayawardena 1986). Unlike most formerly colonised nations, the Palestinians have not yet gained independence and sovereignty. The Israeli occupation has lasted for nearly 40 years, and is undeniably the main obstacle to all Palestinians obtaining their internationally recognised human rights. The feminist struggle for women's rights has been overshadowed by the far more potent struggle for the right to freedom and independence. Most of the women in my material say that Palestinian women have no rights as long as Palestine is not free. In this sense, both women and men have – or, more precisely, lack – the same rights. Indeed, men are often presented as the ones bearing the brunt of the occupation – they are, after all, the main targets of Israeli aggression through ID checks, detentions, arrests, and even killings:

Women and men have the same problems in Palestine. It does not make sense to speak only of women's rights; we must speak about people's rights. So long as Palestine is occupied, everybody is repressed, not just the women. First, Palestine must become liberated, we must have our own state and make our own decisions, and then we can begin to talk about rights, both men's women's and children's rights.

Twenty-year-old Bisan lives at home with her parents and six of her eight brothers and sisters. She has lived most of her life in Iraq and Jordan, but she has no problems defining her sympathies. She echoes what the Palestinian nationalist movement, and the Palestinian women's movement with it, has always advocated – national liberation first, female liberation later. Only when the Israeli occupation ends will the Palestinians be awarded the rights all other rights depend on – self-determination and an independent, sovereign state. This is true for both men and women. Many of my informants explained that all Palestinians share the same problems and the same suffering; gender does not matter.

The old and the new

In contrast to this, there are those who actually do claim that Palestinian women have all the rights they need, and compare the current situation with earlier times. Key issues in this respect are access to education, wage labour, birth control, piped water and electricity – in other words, institutions

and appliances that have profoundly changed women's work and helped Palestine change from a so-called "traditional" peasant society to a "modern", industrialised, capitalist one. Umm Ibrahim is a widow of about 70 years of age, illiterate, mother of eight, and grandmother and great-grandmother of many more. She is now almost totally blind, but has witnessed Palestine going through many different kinds of change and has lived through British, Jordanian and Israeli rule and now a stunted attempt at limited Palestinian self-rule. The changes have, as she sees it, had a deep impact on the lives of Palestinian women:

Young women today have all the rights they want. They can work, go to school and marry whoever they want. They don't have as many children as before, and they have all the modern equipment we didn't have. They don't have to work so hard anymore. Their life is better.

Umm Ibrahim equates "rights" with "opportunities", and from such a point of view her positive attitude is justified. Although Palestinians in general tend to look at the past with a sense of longing for a lost paradise (Sayigh 1979), old women from peasant families in general do not miss the hard physical work they spent most of their lives doing. The changes in living standards have been overwhelming, and although they are admittedly poor, most Palestinian households today have a refrigerator (93.5%), a washing machine (90.2%) and a gas stove (98.2%)² – appliances that have made women's lives a lot easier than during Umm Ibrahim's youth. Most of these changes have occurred during the last thirty years. The younger generation are also acutely aware of these changes:

We know about women's rights, we are better educated than our mothers and grandmothers. We watch TV and use the internet, and we are not ignorant. Girls my age don't want to marry their cousins anymore; they want to decide for themselves. Sure, we listen to our parents and do what they tell us, because we know that they have the best intentions and we must respect them. But even parents change – I'm nineteen, but I'm allowed to go live in the female students' dorm. That would not have happened a few years ago, where I'm from. But then the checkpoints weren't as many, and the students could commute every day. That is too difficult now.

Rowan is a 19-year-old undergraduate student. She commutes every week between her parents' home and the Bir Zeit University's female student dorm. Dorm life is strictly supervised – by siblings, other relatives, and co-villagers. Rowan shares a room with her older sister who is engaged to be married, an older brother lives on campus, and several aunts live and/or work in the village of Bir Zeit and are able to "keep an eye on" the young girls. Rowan dresses conservatively, like the average young Muslim Palestinian woman, in *hijab* and *abaya* (a full-length long-sleeved coat that covers most of the body). However, she does not fit the shy and modest, self-obliterating stereotype of a "hijab girl". She is studying English, dreams of travelling abroad and has high hopes for her future.

Rowan recognises the improvements that have occurred in the lives of most women in Palestine. She emphasises what is most important to her – the right to pursue an education, more power to decide one's future with respect to the choice of marriage partner, and, ironically, an increase in freedom of movement which directly contradicts the original meaning of the Israeli checkpoints. While she has been thoroughly introduced to the concept of romantic love through soap-operas and pop music, she herself does not have a boyfriend. "It is against our customs and tradition", she says. Although not unchecked, Rowan is leading a life that Umm Ibrahim scarcely could have imagined.

² Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics: Household Expenditure and Consumption Survey (PECS) 2004, issued in May 2005. The percentages are West Bank numbers.

Rights and family relations

Literature on women and gender relations in the Middle East invariably invokes the family as the prime focus of study if the social relations that structure women's access to rights are to be understood. The family is, on the one hand, presented as the main institution constraining women's access to rights, and, on the other, as the institution where women have influence and control. Most of my informants live in nuclear families, either with their husband and children, or with their parents and siblings. Quite often, married women live in the same building as their elderly in-laws. Some young women also commute between their parents' home and another abode on a weekly basis, and live with family members, in university dormitories or in rented flats for the purposes of work or study.

Several households are female-headed. Quite a few young, married women with children are living virtually alone, either because the husband is in prison, or simply because he works far from home and cannot return home every night. Some middle-aged women are widowed – they married much older men in their youth and quite understandably outlived them – with several minor children. Given the importance of the family to everybody's daily life in West Bank villages, I am not surprised to find that quite a few of my informants name close relatives as the prime keepers of women's rights. A husband is, for instance, supposed to be morally obliged to maintain his wife and children economically. As such, he is often seen as the prime guarantor of certain basic rights in women's lives.

Husbands and Wives

As long as her husband is good to her and treats her well, works to earn money and helps her out with the children, a woman does not have anything to complain about. That is all.

Twenty-five-year-old Feryal is the eldest of seven siblings. She has received what is now considered a standard education for most Palestinians, the *tawjihi*, which is the equivalent of a matriculation exam. A *tawjihi* with good results grants students access to university or college, and is awarded after passing eleven years of compulsory education. In addition, Feryal has taken vocational training courses and now works as a secretary. She speaks English fairly well and interacts with internationals on an almost daily basis. Despite being virtually financially independent of her husband – she earns 2200 NIS³ a month compared to his 1500 – she still hinges women's rights on the relationship between husband and wife.

Feryal could have substituted “husband” with father, or even brother, but she does not; her own father is dead, and her brothers are much younger than she is. Ideally, it is within the husband's power to grant his wife a “good life”, financial stability and physical security, with all the rights she can possibly crave or need. The husband is supposed to be the provider; she is supposed to be provided for. This is clearly not so in the case of Feryal. Many informants, whether they were married or not, portrayed an ideal husband as one who was just and not violent: he should spend time with his family and help out around the house and with the children, as well as work hard and have a steady income. With the economic decline and rising unemployment brought about by the Al-Aqsa Intifada, such an ideal husband is increasingly hard to find. What Feryal says implies that a husband can also be the biggest threat to a woman living a “good life”.

³ 1 New Israeli Shekel – the currency most widely used on the West Bank – was worth approximately NOK 1.50 in the spring of 2004.

Feryal never complains about her husband. He actually works a lot less than she does, and so spends much more time with their toddler son. I never saw him complete any domestic chores; those tasks are taken care of by Feryal or other female relatives. In that respect, Feryal's husband is not much different from the average Palestinian husband. Although Feryal – with respect to her education, position, and wages – is equal to or even better off than her husband, she is deeply troubled by her situation. In her opinion, she cannot afford to stop working. Her widowed mother and minor siblings also depend on her support. Most of all, she resents the fact that she is able to spend very little time with her son. She wants more children, but given the present situation she can see no way to make that happen. She is no doubt happy that she has the opportunity to work – it boosts her self-esteem to know that she is able to take care of her family, and she is therefore well regarded in her community. Despite this, she does not regard herself as her husband's equal – quite the opposite.

Anomalous families

What Feryal says implies that she recognises that a husband can also be the greatest threat to a woman's wellbeing and happiness. Her younger sister Nijme was married at sixteen to a wealthy widower more than twice her age. Economic circumstances prompted the marriage, and Nijme appears content in her grand Ramallah house with her two children beside her. However, Nijme is silently pitied, especially because she is seen as powerless vis-à-vis her husband and his adult children, and regarded as a trophy wife who was married for her beauty and herself married for money. She was not able to finish her education, and has practically no resources of her own to resort to, should the marriage turn sour.

The norm or the ideal Palestinian family has slowly become the nuclear family, consisting of husband, wife, and children. However, many of my informants live in households where this is not the case. As noted above, several households are female-headed for various reasons. Other social practices have led to situations where it is mainly women who end up living all by themselves:

Women's rights? If you have a family around you to take care of you and help you when you're old, you will have rights. If you have no one, you will have no rights. It is hard to be alone, and poor, and old. It is much harder for a woman than for a man.

Huda, now approximately 75 years old, never married. Like many Palestinian women, she stayed at home and cared for her parents until they passed away. By then, Huda was far too old to marry. She still resides in her parents' spacious house, which conforms to inheritance patterns Annelies Moors found in the northern West Bank district of Nablus (Moors 1995). An old, unmarried woman is supposed to live with and be taken care of by her brother and his family, but also has the right to her father's house as a reward for her sacrifice. Though supposed to relinquish that right for the sake of married brothers, Moors found that in many cases women do not do so, since they do not want to co-habit with their brother's family. In Huda's case, the only living brother resides in the US.

Huda, of course, belongs to the generation for whom extended families were the norm and it was unfeasible not to be living in one at any stage in life. She has nephews and nieces who live in the village with their families, and they look in on her once in a while. Still, the TV is what keeps her company almost every night, and she takes most meals alone. She suffers from various ailments – bad eyesight, dizziness, headaches, sleeplessness and general physical fatigue from a long, hard life. Medical expenses are high, and though she is financially secure, she constantly worries over how much things cost. What she most often complains of, though, is loneliness and anxiety, which is hardly surprising, given that she lives in what could quite easily become a war zone.

Women's work and women's rights

Being allowed to work outside of the domestic sphere was one of the goals for many early women's rights activists. Many of my informants are working, and recognise that this is a clear improvement compared to earlier times. However, they also link their comparatively fortunate position to family relations:

Whether a woman gets to exercise her rights depends a lot on her family and her husband, but also on herself. The situation for women is getting better, and there is progress in society. My husband always helped out with the children when they were small and I was working – dressed them and fed them. I have worked here [a public girl's school] for nine years, and our children are 10, 8 and 3 years old. It would not have worked out if it weren't for my husband's support. For myself, I have nothing to complain about.

Sawsan, soon to be a mother of four, holds an undergraduate degree in English and is working as a teacher. She is related, through marriage and through blood, to one of the biggest families in the region, with ties to the Fatah party and prominent activists imprisoned or wanted by the Israeli authorities. Her family name gave her away whenever she was made to show her *hawiyeh* (the Israeli issued ID card) at checkpoints. Since her husband has been imprisoned for the second time, she functions as the head of the household – she supports her family by her own meagre teachers' wages, 1500 NIS a month. Her husband used to run a grocery store from the first floor of their home; it is being looked after by his brothers for the time being, so its income is not being diverted solely to Sawsan and the children.

Echoing Feryal, Sawsan expresses gratitude towards her husband for her being allowed to work. She does not explicitly name economic necessity as the reason for working or for being allowed to work – she sees it as progress. She said that she loved her work and self-consciously emphasised the fact that she was not merely teaching young girls English; she was also setting an example by being a young working mother. As almost everywhere else, Palestinian married women working away from home must work double shifts, but this is not always the case:

Palestine has come a long way with respect to women's rights issues, especially compared to other countries in the region. The situation is good. I have worked all my life, with and without children. Now, my husband is the wife [laughing out loud]! He used to work in Ramallah, selling carpets. Since it wasn't his store, he was laid off following the economic depression after the [second] Intifada started. Now he cooks for me, and cleans the house! I mean, of course he does; he doesn't want to be idle in the house day after day.

So says Umm Marwan, a 54 year old headmistress. I accompanied her from her office to her home to fetch lunch for her and the teachers at her school one day. While she and I were chatting in the kitchen, Abu Marwan prepared tea for us while boiling cheese and preparing a bag of olives, oil, za'atar (wild thyme) and bread for his wife to take to work. The couple has a 15-year-old son still living at home, but he spends most of his time at school, studying or hanging out with friends. Umm Marwan, Sawsan and Feryal are examples of one type of working Palestinian woman. Their occupations demand a certain level of education, and lend a degree of respectability and social standing to these women. The fact that they work is socially accepted in part because they have jobs which are deemed suitable for women. In addition, women with these kinds of jobs are in general regarded as more respectable and responsible because they are educated and work – they have

experienced life outside the village and braved the world of men without compromising their honour and dignity.

Women, work and poverty

Not all my informants are pleased about working, though. Some say they work solely to make ends meet, and even then, they experience difficulty in putting food on the table. They do not perceive working outside the home as exercising a hard won right; rather, it is something they see themselves as forced to do out of economic necessity. According to numbers from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 66% of West Bank households lived below the poverty line⁴ in the first quarter of 2004, and female-headed households are generally poorer than households in which men are the major breadwinner (Johnson 2002).

Women's rights? There is no such thing. There are no rights. I work every day, yet I am still poor. You have seen my house, the conditions in which we live. What do you think?! All the money I earn, I spend on the children, yet it is never enough – they are growing and they need new stuff all the time. I wish I could give them more.

Umm Muhammad is the mother of seven children, five of whom still live with her. Abu Muhammad died of illness and old age seven years ago. The two eldest daughters are married, yet often stay over in their childhood home with their children and husbands. Both married daughters contribute to Umm Muhammad's household, providing money and food and helping to pay gas and electricity bills. Umm Muhammad is employed as a cleaner at Bir Zeit University, starts work before her children go off to school and most often arrives home after them. Fourteen-year-old Dima, the eldest remaining daughter, takes care of most of the household chores.

Yes, I work. Women can and must work if they have to. My husband died, so I had to do something. I did not start this business because I wanted to, but I had to make a living for my children. What can you do? My children need me at home, and I have to work. I don't make much money off this small shop, but the goods are cheap and friends and family buy from me to support me.

Ibtisam, a 35-year-old widow with six children, sells clothes from a makeshift store at her home. She established the shop by herself, thanks to a small loan from relatives. The shop is located next to other stores in the village, and is more or less of the same standard – rudimentarily equipped, catering to the needs of the villagers. The stores offer a smaller selection of clothes than can be found in the towns, but the prices are lower. Ibtisam's friends and neighbours describe her as a strong-willed woman, courageous and hard working, sacrificing much for her children, yet they also pity her and her situation. The strange thing, to me, is that she is held up as an example of someone who does not have any rights.

Both Umm Muhammad and Ibtisam attended only a few years of school and are nearly illiterate. Compared with Umm Marwan, Feryal and Sawsan, who all confirm that they find pleasure and meaning in their work, Ibtisam and Umm Muhammad emphasise the fact that they work out of necessity. Despite their work, they are dependent on receiving additional support from better-off

⁴ As of December 2003, the official Palestinian poverty line corresponded to NIS 1,800 (approximately US\$410) per month for a family of two adults and four children. Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics/The World Bank: Deep Palestinian Poverty in the Midst of Economic Crisis – October 2004, see http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/living/crisist_e.pdf

family members. In this regard, they are no different from very many other West Bank families. Ibtisam and Umm Muhammad blame early widowhood as the reason for their economic situation and hence the reason why they work. There are many widows in Palestine, for a number of reasons. My informants married young, to men much older than themselves. Poverty prevented Umm Muhammad from stopping her second youngest daughter doing the same thing. The girl was sixteen, her husband a widower of almost forty, with children older than his new wife. But he ran three grocery stores in Ramallah. "I just wanted her to have a good life", Umm Muhammad says.

Being wage earners is certainly no panacea for liberating all Palestinian women. Having an education on which future employment may be based seems essential and even a *tawjihi* might not be enough. Eleven years of education is compulsory, and jobs that are deemed socially acceptable to women are scarce. Most women are employed in the education and health sectors, and many fill the lower positions in the PA. An undergraduate degree or at least some training after *tawjihi* may be required. For women like Umm Muhammad and Ibtisam it is too late; even if they could afford to stop working, they would have to learn to read and write properly before being able to start training or education. When economic necessity forces women to work, they quite understandably do not experience it as progress.

Women's education and women's rights

General access to education was one of the first rights won by women's activists. At first, it was granted only to the daughters of the bourgeoisie, but later it was extended to encompass the lower classes, at least in name. Palestinians pride themselves on being the highest educated people in the Arab world, and often boast that "even our girls are encouraged to go to university". This has often been related to the occupation – when the predominantly peasant population was driven from its land and lost its livelihood, many invested in education, a more mobile "commodity". The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) set up schools for both girls and boys in the refugee camps. At present, secondary education is mandatory for both sexes, and there are currently more women than men at Palestinian universities.⁵ Even if it may be the parents' sincere wish that all their daughters receive university education, the economic situation does not make it feasible to put seven siblings through an undergraduate degree.

I have more rights than my sisters. We are five sisters, and only three of us can study. The other two have to work. My family cannot afford to put all of us brothers and sisters through university.

Shukriyye is 22 years old, engaged to be married and an undergraduate student. Her elder brother is also at the university, as are two younger sisters. Shukriyye is a gifted student and the pride of her parents. She aspires to concluding her education with a Master's degree, and her parents insisted that this right should be included in her marriage contract. This implies that Shukriyye will have the right to demand divorce if her husband denies her the right to continue her studies. Regulation of women's rights to divorce in Palestine follow the Jordanian Personal Status Laws, which have their roots in Islamic Shari'a laws, and education rights have not traditionally been a part of the marriage contract.

When I told this story to other informants, their reactions were mixed. Some thought it was a good idea and a good example of how women today have a very strong position in Muslim Palestinian

⁵ In the academic year 2004/2005, there were 67,658 female and 61,479 male students. The previous year, 2003/2004, 8807 female and 6439 male students graduated from Palestinian universities. Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics - http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/educatio/educ9.aspx

society.⁶ They also pointed out that this was one of the positive aspects of the Muslim marriage system; it is based on a written contract between two families and is widely regarded as being safe for women. Other informants reacted negatively, saying that putting the right to education into a contract would not have been necessary had women's position been stronger. Some believed that, given the social stigma of being divorced, it was unlikely that Shukriyye would press her claims. If there were children involved, it would be virtually impossible; after divorce, the custody of the children passes to the father. What mother would prioritise a Masters' degree over her children? Once the children started coming she would probably have to give up her studies anyway, for one cannot study and be a good mother at the same time, many claimed. Curiously, many of my informants did pursue an education while having young children.

What about Shukriyye's not-so-fortunate sisters?

I don't mind that I have to work while my sisters go to university. I understand that we cannot all study, and I prefer to have a job even if it isn't paid very well. Not everybody finds a job when they finish school. I consider myself lucky that I have a job, even if I have to get up at 0400 hrs in the morning sometimes. There has been little work recently, though, since fabric has been hard to obtain.

Rania is one of Shukriyye's two younger sisters, who work as seamstresses in a small factory. In addition, the sisters have a sewing machine in a closet-sized room at home, where they work occasionally for friends and relatives. Among other things, they make clothes, pillowcases, and hair bands. The reason why Shukriyye was chosen over Rania to go to university was because Shukriyye's *tawjihi* grades were better. Rania admits that she never paid very much attention to homework and studying, and she emphasises the fact that Shukriyye deserves the right to study more than she does. Rania claims that she does not have the interest and diligence to be a successful student. The family, however, depends on the income generated from the two seamstresses – their father is virtually unable to work due to a heart condition. The pressure to succeed is definitely high on girls like Shukriyye and the above-mentioned Rowan. Not only are their parents making a huge economic sacrifice and unable to afford having any of their daughters fail or not complete their education; in the case of failure or bad results, the girls' morality is also questioned – for what have they been doing instead of studying, up in Bir Zeit?

Women, nationalism, and the Palestinian Authority

So far, I have pointed out that some Palestinian women see access to wage labour as a right which has positive implications for them, despite having to sacrifice time with their children while working. They work not so much because they have to as because they want to – indeed, they have been studying in order to be able to get a job. Most jobs open to women demand some kind of education besides *tawjihi*, such as teaching, nursing, and secretarial work. Palestinian nationalism presents the ideal woman as one who, by giving birth and bringing up children, reproduces and educates the nation. In line with this discourse, appropriate jobs have been defined as jobs that are an extension of traditional household and domestic chores. Women do not in general have access to the relatively well paid unskilled jobs men have – a man waiting tables in a restaurant in Ramallah can make more money than a teacher. The social pressure on Palestinian women to avoid contact with unrelated men prevents them from working as waitresses or in similar positions.

⁶ It is worth noting here that it is far easier for both Muslim Palestinian men and women to get divorced than it is for most Christian Palestinian men and women.

The PA is extending the nationalist narrative to the family; national heritage is seen as residing in the family and the traditional roles of women, and the maintenance of the family in a fairly traditional form contributes positively to the national plan and puts a brake on liberalisation. In addition, the strengthening of family ties is not just a matter of deliberate choice, but can be a response to political oppression (Warnock 1990). Liberated, literate and educated women can be seen as essential to the well-being of the state – such women are needed to ensure that future citizens are of the best quality. In a nationalist narrative, then, the education and liberation of women is a means, not an end, and it is not necessarily invoked for the well-being of women.

Although few of my informants explicitly criticised the PA when it came to their rights situation, some form of critique may be implied. When widows such as Umm Muhammad and Ibtisam describe how they are forced to take low-paid jobs to make ends meet, for instance, they imply that they have no faith in the government being able or even willing to help. Programmes exist to help widows and other needy persons, but few know about them. More often, the poor receive help through religious institutions such as *zakat*, or through charitable societies and international food donors. Prices of daily necessities such as electricity and gas are exorbitant, and people like old Huda are afraid to spend any money. Because of all her ailments, a lot of Huda's money goes towards paying for medical checks, tests and expensive medication, even though she never seems to be given the help she requires. The fact that none of my informants openly criticise the PA can be attributed to the fact that none of them saw the PA as being responsible for their rights situation. Others had just given up:

I'm not really interested in politics. I'm sick of it. What good does it do us if we're activists anyway? We're not heard. In this situation it does not matter what we do. I'd rather go shopping, be with my friends and listen to music like young people in Europe and America do. It is a shame that it is so difficult to live the life I want here. It is easier for me to go to Amman than to Jerusalem – can you imagine that?

Munira, a student of 22 and engaged to be married, is lucky enough to carry a Jordanian passport. Some Palestinian citizens do, which means they can move somewhat more freely between the West Bank and Jordan, and also inside the West Bank. Many young Palestinians of both sexes appear to be more interested in fashion, movies and music than politics and the occupation, and their main concern for the future is how to get a well paid job or how to get out of the country. Munira claims not to be interested in politics, and insists that it is her right not to care. Interestingly enough, though, she links women's rights – consciously or not – to politics and the PA. Young people's experience is that there is little room for activism or engagement for young people within the official PA channels unless one wants to join one of the armed militias. It seems to Munira that political activism only ever means trouble, and indeed, one of the girls in her class had just been arrested by the Israeli army, suspected of "terrorist activities".

Many women are deeply disappointed with the *Sulta*,⁷ especially those from the generation before mine. They feel betrayed; so much was sacrificed, and so much lost, and they gained nothing. The *Sulta* is not democratic; it is a club for old men. They are afraid of losing their power, so they do not let anyone in, neither young men nor women. I believe the situation for women in Palestine has become worse than before, especially since the Islamist movements seem to be becoming more powerful, and the *Sulta*.

⁷ Palestinians generally refer to the PA as "*as-Sulta*", meaning "the authority", after the Arabic term "*as-Sulta al-Wataniyye al-Filastiniyye*", the Palestinian National Authority

I include Gina's statement as a contrast to my other informants. Following Rosemary Sayigh's definition, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Gina does not fall into the category "ordinary woman"; she is, rather, an "intellectual". She is 29, unmarried, holds a Master's degree and works for an international organisation in Ramallah. Her family is part Christian, part Muslim. She has lived in Latin America and in Europe, where she has relatives, and speaks five languages. Gina presently lives in Ramallah, socialises with other female intellectuals and secular liberals, and criticises the PA along the same lines as the leading Palestinian feminists do.

The situation for women is not good everywhere. It is worse for the refugees, and for the people in Gaza. In Al-Fawwar [a refugee camp south of Hebron] women are really suffering. Refugee women have more children, smaller houses and less money, and the camps are more often raided by soldiers. I teach women and children's rights [at school] sometimes, and the girls are always interested. They think it is very important and are eager to learn. We try to install in them the thought that they have a right to decide for themselves what to do with their lives. Right now we're doing an early marriage campaign.

Thus says Luma, a 26-year-old Master's student of social sciences who also works as a teacher. She comes from a respectable family, and she and her three sisters – two of whom are married – are well educated and work as teachers. Several brothers are living and working abroad, in the Gulf or in Egypt. Luma wants to do a PhD when she has completed her Master's degree, preferably in Europe. Her father wants her to go to either Egypt or the Gulf, where she can stay with one of her brothers. Nevertheless, Luma regards herself as very fortunate, and sees herself as someone who can make a difference in the lives of other girls and women. According to her, the girls she teaches need to be made aware of their possibilities to fully realise their potential. The way Luma sees it, girls and women have rights, on paper, codified in religious and secular laws, yet that is going to do them no good as long as they do not know about them.

In the girl's school where Luma works, awareness of the problems related to early marriage is part of the curriculum. Most women's organisations in Palestine are united in this campaign, since getting married at an early age often means having more children, fewer options for pursuing an education, and a greater imbalance in the relationship between husband and wife. This, in turn, affects the next generation, further exacerbating gender inequalities. Women's activists are lobbying the Palestinian Legislative Council to codify 18 years as the minimum marriage age for men and women. However, increasing poverty and insecurity tend to work against these efforts, and as long as the Israeli occupation continues, codifying a minimum age might not lead to changes in practice.

Women's rights and the occupation

The Palestinian people have no rights as such as long as the Israeli occupation continues. Despite having elected their local and national assemblies by universal suffrage, the government that rules Palestine is not sovereign and does not govern a coherent, independent territory. Furthermore, the present Palestinian authority was originally designed to be a transitory one by the Oslo agreements that brought it into existence – it was supposed to rule until the "final status negotiations" were well underway. These negotiations have never happened, and the PA continues its existence while losing a little more of its legitimacy every day.

In Bisan's village, eight men and boys and two women have been killed by the IDF over the last two and a half years, and she does not doubt that this will only lead to more violence and hatred. In fact, she expresses a willingness to perpetuate that violence herself:

If a child sees his father, mother or brother killed, he will want revenge. He will want to put on the explosive belt and go to Israel and blow himself up. It is natural – I would do it, too; girls are no different from boys in that respect.

Women have traditionally been cast as the victims of the violence of the occupation, not the perpetrators. A female “war hero” of the occupation is a martyr’s wife or mother. Interestingly enough, a man left widowed when his wife is martyred is never referred to as “the martyr’s husband”. It is considered honourable for women to have given birth to a martyr, and mothers of martyrs have a special standing in the community and in the nation.⁸ Women rarely become suicide bombers, and when they do, their motives are generally questioned, especially by the Israeli and Western media. A common explanation has been that they do it to escape violent and abusive marriages, or are even forced by their husbands to do something they really do not want to do. For Bisan, however, carrying out an *'amaliyye*⁹ is not a gender-specific action, but something one does out of personal motives relevant for both men and women.

Other informants, such as Amina, have more peaceful views on how to resist the occupation:

I think everybody has the opportunity to make something of themselves, even here [in Hebron]. I know many people are very poor and suffer a lot, but we must clench our teeth. Giving up is like handing them [the Israelis] the victory and handing them our country. Women and men have the same responsibility, and should have the same opportunities. Maybe women have to work harder than men to achieve their goals, but it is what you must do.

Amina’s age is hard to judge since she is wearing the *niqab*, a veil leaving only her bespectacled eyes uncovered. This conservative dress is rare in the West Bank; even in Hebron, which is regarded as a very conservative town, it is uncommon. Amina is unmarried and training to become a doctor at a private hospital in Hebron. She speaks English relatively well. She lives with her family in a poverty-stricken neighbourhood in central Hebron, where Israeli settlements and IDF camps surround Palestinian homes. Amina’s home has been attacked and raided by settlers and soldiers many times, and the family now lives there part time, merely to keep it occupied in order to avoid soldiers or settlers taking it over.

Unlike most of my other informants, Bisan and Amina do not speak directly about their own lives and experiences. Bisan has never had any of her relatives killed, and Amina, though not rich, has ample opportunity to make something of herself and her life. While I think all my informants would to some extent agree with both Bisan and Amina that the Israeli occupation is one of the main reasons their lives are difficult or even downright miserable, they do not say so. Instead, they focus on their everyday experiences and immediate situation, relating my questions of women’s rights directly to their lived lives. This, I think, is partially related to the fact that the individual women do not necessarily view the occupation as something that affects them directly and personally. They refer to the effect the occupation has on their husbands, brothers and sons, and see themselves as being affected only in a secondary way. The only exception may be the cases where women have to give birth at checkpoints because Israeli soldiers do not let the ambulance pass. Such incidents receive considerable attention, including from the authorities. The reason for this is clear – these incidents are related to women fulfilling their national role as mothers.

⁸ Among Hamas’ few female candidates in Gaza for the 2006 parliamentary election, the biggest celebrity was Maryam Farahat (aka Umm Nidal), the mother of three martyrs. Another candidate, Rasha al-Rantisi, was a martyr’s wife.

⁹ *'Amaliyye* is the Arabic word for “operation”, both in medical terms and when it comes to political-military actions which are not necessarily suicide missions.

Conclusion

Initially, I referred to Rosemary Sayigh in order to define “ordinary” women. As I have pointed out, the “ordinary” women included in this paper are not necessarily illiterate, uneducated, or housewives. In fact, except for Huda and Umm Ibrahim, who are old women, none of them fit those categories. My informants are engaged in paid labour, study, or both. Even if Ibtisam and Umm Muhammad are illiterate, they support their families with their work. This observation supports Umm Ibrahim’s claim that there have been substantial changes in the lives of Palestinian women during the last seventy years. Does that mean that women have, as she says, more rights?

If all my informants had been living seventy years ago, they would most probably have worked in agriculture, helping to till the land of their fathers or husbands, processing the harvest of olives and grapes, cooking, cleaning and caring for children. In other words, they would have worked. The fact that women work and contribute to their families is thus nothing new, but the form in which it happens, is. Palestinian women now not only can have an education – they are generally expected to have one.

Before today, educating daughters could be seen as a waste of money, but now many families strain their finances precisely in order to allow their girls to go to university. A university education is necessary if a girl wants to find a good job, and the competition is hard. Sons have always been expected to help their parents financially in old age, but daughters must increasingly fill this role; their brothers may have trouble enough supporting their wives and children. Married daughters are seen as morally obliged to help maintain their conjugal family, and can instead be called on to help parents. In sum, women may have been given a wider range of opportunities, but they do not necessarily have more real choices.

Uneducated women such as Ibtisam and Umm Muhammad seem to have even fewer opportunities than their educated sisters do. The fact that they are widows seems to have forced them to enter the lowliest end of the labour market open to women. They could have relied solely on the charity of family members and benevolent organisations, but that would have meant an even more miserable life than the one they now claim to lead. Both women do take pride in being able to provide for their children by themselves – I remember, for instance, the satisfaction with which Umm Muhammad showed me the brand new clothes she had bought her youngest daughter for the Ramadan feast.

Most Palestinian women, whose lives are lived a long way from the corridors of power at PA headquarters *Muqata’a* in Ramallah, have difficulty in perceiving the state as a support or a threat to their rights. Their main recourse to support and constraint is still the family. It seems clear that, at present, poverty and insecurity are the main challenges most Palestinians have to fight every day, and that battle is in many ways led by the women. Throughout the decades that Palestinians have fought for independence, women have been taking on more than their traditional share of responsibility for the upkeep of the family because men have been injured, imprisoned, in hiding, in exile or dead. Recently, however, this has become more difficult due to the dire economic situation and the increase in violence brought about by the al-Aqsa Intifada. Although women in general have more options to choose from with regard to education and work, their actual scope for agency is restricted by poverty and insecurity. My informants’ statements show that whether a woman sees her opportunities as “rights” depends to a great extent on the actual level of choice she experiences.

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SUMMARY

Palestinian women's participation in the resistance against the Israeli occupation, most notably during the first Intifada (1987-93), has been characterised as broad and active, particularly at grass roots level. This participation gave rise to claims for gender equality and more social and political power for women. This paper is based on fieldwork conducted mainly in two villages in the Ramallah district in the spring of 2004, and concerns "ordinary" Palestinian women's views on what women's rights are and how they perceive their own rights situation. The term "ordinary" in this respect refers to rural women outside of political organisations, whether secular or religious. These women do not participate in any of the many women's rights advocacy groups that exist in Palestine. My material shows that while there seems to be an agreement among women that their rights situation is not ideal, there is neither a consensus as to what women's rights are nor how such rights can be achieved. Furthermore, there is a marked difference in how women's rights are understood between women belonging to the urban elite and their rural sisters.

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