

The Role of Women and Women's Movements in the First Intifada

DOMINIKA MISKOVA, University of Exeter

Abstract

Women's involvement in the First Intifada triggered numerous questions about how and to what degree women would be emancipated in the future. This essay describes and analyzes women's involvement in the First Intifada in 1987 and the contributions of women's movements such as the Women Work Committee or Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees, which emerged during or after the Intifada. It discusses the possible reasons why, despite their significant involvement in the Intifada, Palestinian women did not reach gender equality. It does so by discussing the limitations of women's emancipation, such as the fact that women still stuck to their traditional gender roles, the prevalent elitism and classism in women's committees, and the rise of Islamist movements towards the end of the movement, which was often violently enforcing the traditional gender roles. The essay also analyzes different ways of reporting women's activities and the issues regarding underreporting or only describing their involvement in the movement in correspondence with their traditional gender roles. It analyzes these factors as potential causes for the women's position barely changing after the movement. Finally, this essay argues that even though the First Intifada was joined by masses of women and impacted their perception in Palestinian society, it did not bring long-lasting systematic changes and gender equality.

keywords: First Intifada, Women's Participation, Women's Movements, Gender Equality, Women's Emancipation, Palestine

Background: History of Women's Liberation and Women organisations

There is a history of the Arab Women Liberation Movement, represented by various women movements throughout the Middle East emerging in the first half of the 20th century, however, these efforts for women's emancipation were limited by religious tradition and patriarchy.^{1,2} There were attempts to improve the position of women in the Arab world, particularly among women writers such as May Ziadeh, a Lebanese-Palestinian author, who is considered a pioneer of Oriental feminism, and Hafny Nasif, an Egyptian feminist author. However, women did not hold social and political positions before the 1960s, which limited their ability to have a wide societal impact. In 1964 Palestine, the *Palestinian Liberation Organisation* (PLO) was founded, followed by the very first women organisation *General Union of Palestinian Women*, which was established as a PLO's body in 1965.³ The women's organisation aimed to improve the rights of women and make them more active in the movement for Palestinian liberation.⁴

Women organisations were crucial as they connected Palestinian women and helped spread political awareness among communities. There were several women's organisations active in the Intifada, which in Arabic means rebellion or uprising, enabling women to become engaged in the movement. Women in these organisations were mobilised by meeting and discussing issues and how to actively participate in the fight for Palestinian liberation.⁵ Following the International Women's Day March, another significant organisation, *Women Work Committee* (WWC) was established in 1980.⁶ The WWC addressed issues such as gender roles and the place of women in the fight for the Palestinian liberation, but were also focused on improving their communities.⁷ Then, between 1980 and 1982, organizations emerged: *Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees* (UPWWC), *Palestinian*

Women's Committee (later the *Union of Palestinian Women's Committees*), and *Women's Committee for Social Work* (WCSW). These committees aimed to include as many women as possible in the national movement, which proved essential in the Intifada as they were able to significantly increase the number of women who were politically active and actively resisting.⁸ After 1987, even more women's organisations were founded, such as *Higher Woman's Council*, (1988) *Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committee*, and *Union of Voluntary Women's Societies* (both 1989).⁹ Later, in the early 1990s, the *Palestinian Federation of Women's Action Committees* also emerged from *Women Work Committees*.¹⁰ These newly founded organisations helped Palestinian women to unite under a common goal of liberating Palestine and ultimately increased their political impact.

Reporting on Women's Involvement and Possible Gaps in Reporting

The lack of reporting on women's involvement in Intifada was one of the key factors as to why Palestinian women were not further emancipated after the movement. Most of the academics who reported on the Intifada were men with a tendency to center their writings on male activists and their perspectives. Rex Brynen, for instance, in his book *Echoes of the Intifada*,¹¹ wrote about the Intifada while omitting women's involvement. His book explores a range of topics related to the uprising, yet it ceases to address women or gender-related issues.¹² Another male author, Eitan Alimi, presented a similar narrative. His book about the First Intifada mentions women and women's organisations, but it does not deeply analyse their specific struggles.¹³ Further, despite women making up approximately half of the Palestinian population,¹⁴ they are often only mentioned among other minority groups like youth or students (an example of this may be seen in the Eitan Alimi's text

mentioned above).¹⁵ Both of these male academics, and others, did not interview female participants and centered their reporting around male narratives only. In reality, authors such as Philippa Strum or Islah Jad, female academics who focused their research on the women's involvement in the movement, found that women actively participated in the First Intifada by leaving their homes, becoming politically engaged, and fighting for Palestinian rights.¹⁶ Zahira Kamal and Muharram Barghouthi, a male academic (2016; cited in Nasser & Khatib¹⁷) acknowledged the contributions of numerous women who were active in unions, political parties, and various committees. Jad further describes Palestinian women throwing rocks, burning tires, building roadblocks and violently confronting the Israeli army.¹⁸ In her book, Cheryl Rubenberg interviews numerous Palestinian women finding out more about their active participation.¹⁹ As evident from the examples mentioned above, women authors are generally more likely to report on women's activities and their involvement. To understand the women's involvement in the movement, it is therefore salient to acknowledge the possibility of gaps in reporting often created by (however not exclusively) male academics, who often do not take women's experiences into account. On the other hand, Barghouthi, as a male Communist leader, also acknowledged women's contribution in the Intifada, specifically mentioning their activities in the Committees, political parties, and unions.²⁰ It is therefore essential to acknowledge the tendency of many men to underreport women activities, but it is equally important not to ignore men who were keen to acknowledge women's contribution to the movement.

As many women's activities during the Intifada were underreported, they were less likely to be publicly acknowledged, which may have also hindered their further emancipation. This is because their traditional work, such as taking care of

children or teaching was "invisible," when compared to work traditionally done by men (protesting, fighting), and so by not acknowledging the breakthrough that they have done, the society was still limiting women to their traditional roles, maintaining their traditional social status. Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, even when women were active in committees, they did not hold the leading positions. Thus, again, their contribution was less likely to be acknowledged. There was no one capable willing to fight to make it be acknowledged. As a result, despite the importance of the work done by Palestinian women during the Intifada, they were never sufficiently valued for it.

Secondly, despite the rise of women's organisations since the 1960s and 1970s, Palestinian women were still not entirely liberated because of the patriarchal society implementing that the sole role of women should be to be mothers and housewives. This patriarchal perception hindered their ability to take on other roles and consequently their emancipation. Despite their political emancipation, Joost Hiltermann argues that women were usually only referred to in relation to their male relatives or were only mentioned alongside children and elders in writing.²¹ Moreover, as Peteet in Hiltermann's text explains, political activity among women was often restricted to girlhood.²² The women who were not (yet) married or the ones who already had children old enough to run households were most likely to be involved in the committees.²³ Strum similarly argues that even when WWC started to create unions and organise, single women usually joined it as married women were often prevented from doing so.²⁴ Women often left the unions and committees when they got married or pregnant.²⁵ Other women in Rubenberg's book also report women's participation and activism being stigmatised.²⁶ On the other hand, there are also instances, when women's husbands did not object to their wives' activities.²⁷ Generally speaking, however, there was

progress in the women's involvement during the Intifada despite taboos about their societal roles.²⁸

Failure to Address the Gender-Related Issues

Another factor hindering women's emancipation was the fact that even though women's organisations and committees helped women to unite, gender-related issues were not addressed.²⁹ Islah Jad believes there may have been two main reasons why gender-related questions were not raised: firstly, because they were not a priority at the time, and secondly, because it was feared that they would break the unity of the movement.³⁰ Similarly, to the women's committees, the questions of gender were not addressed by the *Unified Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) communiqués*.³¹ There was small progress as the women managed to introduce a women-inclusive report, stressing that both men and women were involved, but the writings did not properly account for their contributions.³² For instance, *communiqués* (which were leaflets issued by UNLU helping to organise the Intifada and unify Palestinians fighting for a common goal³³) had either avoided the topics of gender or presented Intifada as a male movement supported by women.³⁴ Another instance of the women's committees not addressing women's issues is found in WCSW, where, as one former member claims, exclusively politics was discussed.³⁵ Even though women's organisations and committees existed and were active during the Intifada, they often omitted gender-related questions to preserve the unity of the movement and those which were believed to be more important political issues.

Due to the unprecedented circumstances, Palestinian women were able to extend their social and political roles. However, Jad argues that women's role in the committees often became an extension of their traditional roles.³⁶ Women were most likely

to participate in educational committees or home economy, thus extending their traditional roles of housewives and child-carers.³⁷ In contrast, the guard committees, which have later become the basis for the strike forces, were predominantly male.³⁸ Furthermore, when the Israeli defence minister, Yitzhak Rabin, made participation in committees illegal in August 1988, it disproportionately affected women and further marginalised them.³⁹ In that respect, Intifada may have brought unprecedented high women's involvement. However, despite transgressing their gender roles, they did it only in terms of what was acceptable at the time. It also needs to be stressed that their transgression of gender roles was understood to be temporal and unique given the unprecedented circumstances. Farha Kan'an,⁴⁰ claims that during Intifada, it was accepted for women to move and even sleep outside their households, which would have been uncommon before. It can be argued that violent confrontations of the Israeli army⁴¹ or women's representation in unions, committees and political parties⁴² may also be understood as the transgression of their traditional roles. Therefore, the traditional women's roles were breached during the Intifada, but in many instances, this was understood to be temporal and justified by the unprecedented circumstance and hence did not last.

Different Perceptions of Women's Movements

Palestinian women's movements were led by mainly "middle-class urban elite."⁴³ When the WWC was established in 1978 in Ramallah, it was by young university-educated middle-class female activists.⁴⁴ Its founding members were predominantly women already active in various political organisations.⁴⁵ One woman recalled joining the UPWWC for some time but later left because of its elitism.⁴⁶ Even though the newly emerged women's movement reacted to the oppression of women, it did

not appeal to many due to the lack of inclusivity. Women leading them were usually middle-class and university-educated, making women from other socio-economic backgrounds underrepresented. She further criticises the leading women not treating new younger members respectfully and not allowing them to express their opinions.⁴⁷ On the contrary, other academics such as Islah Jad⁴⁸ and Nadia Nasser & Ghassan Khatib⁴⁹ claim that when the Intifada began in December 1987, women across all social classes were joining. Palestinian women (especially women from refugee camps) participated in demonstrations in thousands. However, their direct involvement in the committees was rather rare.⁵⁰ Even though women from all social classes participated, the women's movement was still led by the middle-class urban movement and therefore was not truly intersectional. Arguably, even when women managed to escape the patriarchal restrictions and were allowed to join the movements, they were often discouraged by the elitism prevalent in women's organisations.⁵¹

Another issue hindering the women's emancipation was the rise of the Islamist movements such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the *Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas)* which was according to Muhammad⁵², caused by the "instability and lack of political leadership," prevented further gender equality and women's emancipation.⁵³ The Islamists on the rise advocated for the enforcement of the dress code (veiling).⁵⁴ In the name of religion, women were increasingly often forced to marry early and stay at home.⁵⁵ The "culture of women's modesty" was gaining popularity, mainly in Gaza.⁵⁶ In her article, Hammami⁵⁷ describes the "hijab campaign" in Gaza as "vicious," further criticising the little support women wishing to maintain their freedom of choice received from the progressive men or UNLU. Therefore, it can be argued that the rise of Islamist movements hindered further women's emancipation, calling for the return to

"traditional values". Even when *Hamas* celebrated the women's achievements in Intifada, it only reinforced their traditional roles.⁵⁸ Hamas' statements, therefore, did not reflect the actual scale of women's involvement in the movement, limiting their actions only to the tasks already associated with womanhood and, even worse, imposing Islamist fundamentalism which further controlled women.

Conclusions

Women undoubtedly actively contributed to the First Intifada. This piece named the women's organisations and committees, which played a crucial role in the emancipation of Palestinian women as they enabled them to organise and become politically active. Furthermore, this paper discussed the experiences of individual women and analysed the different ways in which they contributed to the national movement. The text proved that there was a progression in women's emancipation, as before Intifada, the Palestinian women tended to be completely isolated from politics.⁵⁹ Thanks to the unprecedented situation women could extend their social and political roles and became actively involved in the movement. However, as this paper demonstrated, despite their active participation in the Intifada which challenged their traditional gender roles, this shift was temporarily, and the Palestinian women did not manage to secure gender equality. Furthermore, the rise of the Islamist movements during and after the Intifada deteriorated all improvements and acquired positions. The limitation of this paper is that despite its aims to identify some general trends in the women's movement during the Intifada, it must be acknowledged that individual women's experiences differed, and it is difficult to explore all of these experiences accurately. The author of this essay believes that this may also serve as a preposition for further research as women's activities

during the movement are still often underreported or wholly omitted.

¹ Arenfeldt, Pernille, and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, editors, "Arab Women's Movements: Developments, Priorities, and Challenges." *Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformations from Within*, American University in Cairo Press, 2012, pp. 7–42.

² Hanan, Awwad. "The Palestinian Woman and the Revolution." *Peace Research* 25, no. 3 (1993): 71-104.

³ Peterson, Janice, and Lewis, Margaret. *The Elgar Companion to Feminist Economics*. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001 pp 220.

⁴ Rubenberg, Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank. Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001; 212-3.

⁵ Hanan, "The Palestinian Woman and the Revolution," 71-104.

⁶ Jad, From salons to the popular committees: Palestinian women, 1919-1989, 132.

⁷ Cohoon, Melinda, "Palestinian Women of the Intifada: the Women's Committees, 1987-1988" (2014). University Honors Theses. Paper 88, pp. 12-13.

⁸ Ibid, 132-3.

⁹ Rubenberg, Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank, 212-3.

¹⁰ Jad, Islah. Uprooted Nation, Stateless Nationalism: Palestinian Women's Activism in Context. In *Palestinian Women's Activism: Nationalism, Secularism, Islamism* (pp. 1-25). Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press (2018). doi:10.2307/j.ctv14h56f.6, 19.

¹¹ Brynen, Rex (Ed.). *Echoes of the Intifada: Regional Repercussions of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (1st ed.). Routledge, 1991. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429046469>.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Alimi, Eitan. *Israeli politics and the first Palestinian intifada: political opportunities, framing processes and*

contentious politics. Oxon: Routledge, 2007.

¹⁴ Knoema. "Palestine Male To Female Ratio, 1950-2020 - Knoema.Com". Knoema, 2021, <https://knoema.com/atlas/Palestine/topics/Demographics/Population/Male-to-female-ratio>.

¹⁵ Ibid, 154.

¹⁶ Strum, Philippa. *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution*. Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books (1992): 79.

¹⁷ Naser-Najjab, Nadia, & Khatib, Ghassan. *The First Intifada, Settler Colonialism, and 21st Century Prospects for Collective Resistance*, 2019. *The Middle East Journal*, 73(2), 195.

¹⁸ Jad, *From salons to the popular committees: Palestinian women, 1919-1989*, 133

¹⁹ Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank*.

²⁰ Naser-Najjab, Nadia, & Khatib, Ghassan. *The First Intifada, Settler Colonialism, and 21st Century Prospects for Collective Resistance*, 2019. *The Middle East Journal*, 73(2), 195.

²¹ Hiltermann, Joost. R. *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1991): 201.

²² Ibid, 171.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Strum, *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution*, 59-60.

²⁵ Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank*, 214-17.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 57.

²⁸ Hilterman, *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories*, 171.

²⁹ Jad, *From salons to the popular committees: Palestinian women, 1919-1989*, 132.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hasso, Frances S. *Resistance, Repression, and Gender Politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press (2005): 122.

³² Ibid.

³³ Urban, J. Kristen. "Blueprint for a Democratic Palestinian State: UNLU Communiqués and the Codification of Political Values for the First Two Years of the Intifada." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1994, pp. 69.

³⁴ Hasso, Frances S. *Resistance, Repression, and Gender Politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan*, 122.

³⁵ Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank*, 222-3.

³⁶ Jad, *From salons to the popular committees: Palestinian women, 1919-1989*, 135

³⁷ Ibid, 133-5.

³⁸ Hammami, Rema. Women's Political Participation in the Intifada: A Critical Overview. In: *The Intifada and Some Women's Social Issues: A Conference Held in Jerusalem on December 14, 1990*. Ramallah: Women's Studies Committee of Bisan Centre for Research and Development (1991):121.

³⁹ Hasso, *Resistance, Repression, and Gender Politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan*, 121.

⁴⁰ Abu Nahleh, Lamis. Six Families. In: Lisa Taraki, ed., *Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance and Mobility Under Occupation*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006, 171.

⁴¹ Jad, *From salons to the popular committees: Palestinian women, 1919-1989*, 133-4.

⁴² Naser-Najjab, & Khatib, *The First Intifada, Settler Colonialism, and 21st Century Prospects for Collective Resistance*, 195.

⁴³ Jad, *Islah. Uprooted Nation, Stateless Nationalism: Palestinian Women's Activism in Context*, 1.

⁴⁴ Strum, *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution*, 59.

⁴⁵ Jad, *From salons to the popular committees: Palestinian women, 1919-1989*, 138.

⁴⁶ Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank*, 216.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jad, *Islah. Uprooted Nation, Stateless Nationalism: Palestinian Women's Activism in Context*, 24.

⁴⁹ Naser-Najjab, & Khatib, *The First Intifada, Settler Colonialism, and 21st Century Prospects for Collective Resistance*, 195.

⁵⁰ Jad, *From salons to the popular committees: Palestinian women, 1919-1989*, 135.

⁵¹ Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank*, 216.

⁵² Littlewood, Charlotte. *Silencing Palestinian Women / Thearticle*. [online] TheArticle, 2020. Available at: <<https://www.thearticle.com/silencing-palestinian-women>> [Accessed 16 December 2020].

⁵³ Jad, *Islah. Uprooted Nation, Stateless Nationalism: Palestinian Women's Activism in Context*, 24.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁵⁵ Littlewood, Charlotte. *Silencing Palestinian Women*.

⁵⁶ Hasso, *Resistance, Repression, and Gender Politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan*, 124.

⁵⁷ Hammami, Rema. Women, the Hijab and the Intifada. *Middle East Report*, 1990. (164/165), 24-78. doi:10.2307/3012687, 24.

⁵⁸ Naser-Najjab, & Khatib, *The First Intifada, Settler Colonialism, and 21st Century Prospects for Collective Resistance*, 195.

⁵⁹ Hilterman, *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories*, 171 ; Strum, *The Women Are*

Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution, 79.