



# Feminism and Palestinian Society



By Aida  
Ali Kleibo

# W

we are prisoners of culture. Our knowledge of ourselves, our culture, the world, and other societies is constrained and conditioned by the inescapable filtering grid of the culture into which we are born. Women and men alike are de facto carriers of our cultural value system, aesthetics, morality, and a corollary set of value judgments and stereotypes. Our sense of individuality and our consciousness of our sexual identity, incumbent social role, and social expectations are a partial refraction of our culture in which language, verbal and nonverbal, plays a determinant role.

“Do I look masculine to you? Do I sport hairy underarms? Do I have unpolished nails? Is my hair unkempt?”

Taken aback by my rhetorical questions, the classroom of mixed students hushed to muted whispers after their defensive outburst when I told them I worked in a feminist organization: “Feminism is a Western imposition! Feminists lack femininity, grow their arm and leg hair,

hate men, encourage women to divorce, support abortion, and destroy families” are common misconceptions I have heard.

This interchange took place when I embarked on my first workshop on awareness raising regarding women’s rights and gender equality in a school in 1948 Palestine. In my work capacity in a feminist organization, I have accessed a great number of “Palestinian” schools among the rural Arabs of the north. My experience reveals widespread virulent misconceptions regarding feminism, corresponding hostilities, and a deeply ingrained defensive attitude. Palestinian feminism is generally misconstrued as a colonialist ruse that seeks to undermine traditional Palestinian values, dissolve sexual roles, and promote homosexuality. Feminism as a pernicious Western

The Palestinian struggle for liberation and self-determination will not be limited to a civil rights movement of an Arab minority that asks for equal rights under status quo occupation and apartheid. Palestinian feminists must unite to develop a narrative that reconciles female liberation with the Palestinian struggle for national liberation and self-determination.



import promulgated by mannish women, invariably lesbian, is a common misconception. Worth mentioning is the fact that workshop participants – both girls and boys – recoil and act defensively whenever the word “feminism” per se pops up. Gender equality is a term students prefer to use. Students generally believe that the values of feminism are incompatible with religion, but not the notion of gender equality. However, throughout the workshop I demonstrate the compatibility of religion, mainly Islam, with feminism. On the social level, conformity to collective norms is sacrosanct. The idea that a woman or a man live alone before marriage, let alone engage in premarital sex, is anathema. Homosexuality is satanized; it is construed as a Western import, a form of self-indulgence that undermines family and social values. Resistance to feminism finds many expressions and is symptomatic of the normative gender roles that relegate women to norms that discriminate against them. The challenges that feminists face in advocating for gender equality are further complicated once religion is invoked, as the main assumption is that Islam and feminism are inherently incompatible.

In my view, feminism has no strict rules to impose on women’s lives. Feminists come in all shapes, colors, religions, and ideologies. Through my attempt to allow the workshop participants to rethink their preconceptions after I presented myself to be unlike the feminist stereotype they envision, I was able to attract their attention and pique their interest. I began to explain the notion of Palestinian feminism and the reality that feminism cannot be



confined to one strict definition. Rather, each feminist has her or his own perspective on feminism, and striving for gender equality is the one common factor that unites all feminists.

“But I do not want to enter politics!” objects a female student during the workshop. The distinction between acquiring legal rights in order to assume responsibility and participate in decision-making, on the one hand, and social action, on the other, is anathema for many. Politics is considered the male sphere of action. The nuance that once women have the same rights and opportunities to join politics as men, they should be able to choose to do so but are not obliged to is blurred by a lack of understanding of

feminism. After the workshop, I distributed a survey that seeks to measure the impact of the workshop on the students. Several students responded with, “My understanding of feminism has changed; it is not what I had thought.”

Based on my analysis of Palestinian society, a general rejection of feminism and objections to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are attached to a fear of the “other.” Historical traumas produced by colonization, displacement, and occupation make Palestinians wary of further foreign intervention in the guise of feminism that is perceived as a pernicious Western ruse to impose cultural hegemony. In this

overall context, the concept of an “authentic self” versus the Western “other” becomes the focal point. The opposition between Arab culture and values, construed as authentic, and Western human rights, understood as the other, is a problematic that challenges Palestinian feminists who are accused of advocating “licentious debauchery” انفلات أخلاقي. The idea that human rights safeguard marginal social groups has not yet become part of society’s consciousness. For genuine social change to occur and in order to develop a culture that accepts individual diversity, several underlying political factors must be addressed to bring about social change. In this article, I will not delve into these political factors, as this is a very complex and extensive topic.

Palestinian women in Israel are trapped between two fires: Palestinian tribal collectivism and chauvinism on the one hand, and systematic state discrimination on the other. With the increase in levels of violence and the spread of organized crime within Arab society in the north, sexual and gender-based violence are on the rise as well. The situation is exacerbated further because the police and governmental bodies do not fulfill their role of preventing or fighting crime in Arab/Palestinian society in Israel. The disparity in solved cases regarding Arab and Jewish women is evident. In many domestic violence cases in which the abuser is identified and the woman has filed an official complaint, no steps are taken to protect the woman if she is an Arab. And if steps are taken due to the high risk on her life, she is taken to a shelter where the majority of social workers are Jewish. Their lack of cultural sensitivity as well as

the existing language barrier make it almost impossible to provide Arab women with the support they need to integrate into society after having lived in shelters. It is worth mentioning that most Palestinian women who have left their villages when in danger and gone to live in government shelters tend to relocate to mixed cities after they leave the shelter. Given that the programs in shelters and transitional homes are developed for Jewish women, Palestinian and Jewish women never start out on an equal footing. As such, a program that fits the one will not fit or aid the other. This further adds to the obstacles faced by Arab women in being able to take advantage of any opportunities or rights they may be given.

Palestinian women in Israel are in need of empowerment and support in understanding their rights. Most alarming is the absence of Palestinian women in the Israeli labor market, where their rate of participation is extremely low: only 26.3 percent are integrated workers, compared with around 65 percent of Jewish women. The economic and emotional empowerment of Arab women is essential in the struggle to fight gender-based discrimination and achieve equality.

The overall situation is further complicated if we look at Arab women within the entirety of Palestine: the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza, and occupied 1948 Palestine. In each scenario, women are faced with varying political and cultural challenges that impede their independence and freedom and discriminate against them.

Within the context of the occupation and the struggle for Palestinian identity and self-determination, Arab society must work on awareness

raising in order to be able to develop and maintain an equitable society, uniting Palestinians, both men and women, in their struggle for self-determination as a Palestinian nation. We cannot overlook the impact of the *Nakba* and continuous occupation, poor socioeconomic conditions, high crime rates, economic and political violence, a large population of internally displaced refugees, ethnic cleansing, and decades of oppression, all of which have a prolonged effect on the fabric of Arab society. These are important factors that hinder social change, cause the rejection of change, and prevent criticism of social norms.

It is the challenge of Palestinian feminists and activists to develop a feminist discourse that integrates national liberation in the struggle for social change and gender equality. It must be made clear that women's liberation is mutually inclusive to the liberation of the Palestinian people. Although I discuss systematic Israeli state discrimination against Arab women, I do not attempt to ask for a civil rights movement that demands equal rights for Palestinians in Israel. Rather, ensuring equal rights for the occupied nation is Israel's obligation under the conventions of international law and the laws of armed conflict, in addition to implementing CEDAW in Israel with respect to Palestinian women. It is critical for Palestinian civil society organizations, in occupied 1948 Palestine and in the entirety of Palestine, to continue to raise awareness regarding women's rights, human rights, and gender equality in order to prepare a generation of Palestinians able and eager to fight for gender equality as a prerequisite for national liberation.



Artwork by Malak Matar.

*Aida Kleibo is a Palestinian, Jerusalemite, feminist, and human rights activist. She holds a bachelor's degree in human rights and international law from Bard College and a master's degree in nonprofit management and leadership for social change from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.*

SCAN  
TO SHARE

