



## **Recovering from Violent Conflict: Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Palestine**

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Living in a conflict area under military occupation is the case I'm addressing today. My representation is that of a community political activist and representative of a Palestinian woman's non-governmental peace organization, the Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW). JCW is a Palestinian woman's/feminist peace center, which is in partnership with an Israeli peace center named Bat Shalom. This partnership seeks to build a just peace.

The current situation in Palestine can be described as war launched by the occupying power against the occupied: against land and peoples' lives. From the opposing side, there are three types of resistance: 1) the non-violent in the form of protest actions, peace education, advocacy and lobbying for peace on the local and international levels, 2) public defiance of the Israeli military presence in the form of stone throwing at soldiers, settlers and tanks and 3) military guerilla fighting and *istishhadi* suicidal bombing of the desperate who believe that they have nothing to lose in the case where their sacrifice for the cause will develop a kind of balance between the mighty occupier and the 36-year-long forgotten occupied.

Before addressing the impact of the last three years on Palestinian life, it is important to highlight the causes that led to the *Intifada* (uprising):

- During the seven years between 1993 to 2000, the number of Jewish settlements built on confiscated Palestinian land were over and above the number of those built during the previous 26 years of occupation.
- Closure on Jerusalem was tightened and Palestinian Jerusalemites were left to make do with 13 percent of the land that they own, which comprises more than 95 percent of Occupied East Jerusalem.
- The Gaza Strip continued to be a large enclosed prison.
- The Palestinian areas were fragmented into areas "A", "B" and "C", and each area was cut off from the other by settlements and bypass roads.
- Houses continued to be demolished.
- The uprooting of trees continued.
- Palestinian business monopolies were established in cooperation with Israeli companies, and functioned only within the framework of total Israeli control of imports and exports to and from the OPT.

- Corruption flourished in different sectors and levels in the PNA.
- There was a lack of implementation of the interim agreements despite never-ending negotiations over matters that had already been negotiated led to despair and mistrust.
- Signed agreements were left un-enforced by the international community/USA.
- Anger mounted with humiliation at checkpoints.
- It was in this context that the bad offer of Camp David was delivered:
- Annexing almost 20 percent of the West Bank (Jerusalem and the surrounding settlements)
- No control over borders
- No recognition of the right of return and agreement
- Demands that sovereignty over Al-Aqsa mosque and Al Haram Al Sharif be shared, the first official such demand since 1067.

At present, what we have is a war of attrition. Who will break the will of the other? In this context a number of questions could be raised. Might Palestinians surrender their right to freedom and self-determination? Might the Zionist establishment, with its expansionist ideology, compromise and give up its control of the 1967 occupied lands, allowing stateless Palestinians to live in a state of their own on 22 percent of historic Palestine? Might the international community take responsibility and intervene to implement the 4th Geneva Convention, United Nations resolutions and international legality? How many Palestinians should be ethnically cleansed and become refugees and how many should be killed on both sides before the international community intervenes for the sake of the two peoples, regional stability and world human and military security? Are conflict and instability aims in themselves, and if so, for whose sake?

One-hundred and ninety checkpoints have been established all over the OT fragmenting Palestinian populated areas into enclaves/prisons. An 18- or 20-year-old Israeli soldier with his M16 gun controls the lives of hundreds in a village or tens of thousands in a city. He can let you pass or not. He implements orders that allow Palestinian women to give birth at checkpoints, lose their lives, lose their babies, give birth at home with the help of a neighbor because ambulances are not allowed during curfew and invasion.

Going to school is another big problem. How does one get there? Small children stand in long queues--sometimes for hours. Still, those who can get to school are lucky compared to those who spent 3 months at home because of continuous curfew, as happened in Nablus last year. Many schoolgirls were forced to drop out because of the difficulty of moving from one area to the other and the subsequent lack of security. There have been cases where female university students gave up their university education because of the decline in family income. Besides, cheap exploitive employment is what is left for the average woman in times when unemployment has risen to more than 65 percent in the Gaza Strip and 50 percent in the West Bank. Seventy percent of Palestinian families live below the poverty line. Malnutrition among children is quite high, especially in the Gaza Strip.

When speaking about the conditions of Palestinian women, I recall Martin Luther King's speech on the three evils that challenge humankind: war, poverty and racism. All three are applicable in this case. Palestinian women have the most to lose. They are losing their beloved family members, their houses, trees, and limited income. They are the care takers and family saviors who face all different kinds of pressure and oppression. Palestinian women live not only the racist oppression of Israeli military occupation, but also the social oppression of the existing patriarchal culture and lack of gender sensitive policies on the part of the PNA.

In this climate, what has been the role of the Palestinian women's movement (made up of grassroots organizations affiliated with the different political factions of the PLO, specialized NGOs and women's charities). They follow different lines of thought and consequently have trouble agreeing on political and social priorities. I can't pretend that the Palestinian women's movement has managed to develop broad collective strategies to rebuild what successive Israeli governments have destroyed, in relation to the condition of women in the last three years, and move ahead with a clear women's agenda (with mechanisms) aimed at mainstreaming gender in policy making in relation to development, resistance strategies and participating in future negotiations.

The decline in the power of the Palestinian women's movement may be linked to the process of depoliticization and demobilization of Palestinian society that occurred in the Oslo period. Women's institutions lost much of their relations with women at the grassroots level. Women political activists and the NGOs that represent them (mainly the elite) advocated for progressive laws, worked on a constitution, provided empowerment programs and supported women candidates in the elections. But they haven't managed to link the social struggle with the political struggle, building a vision and a program of action to lobby for inclusion in decision-making at a time that nearly all sectors of society have been marginalized.

Saying that, I can't but highlight the fact that during current *Intifada*, the priority has been survival. Women's groups and NGOs have been very much involved in providing humanitarian aid and support. They also provide counseling programs for the traumatized, document violations of human rights with a focus on women's rights, disseminate information and advocate in partnership with those Israeli peace groups with which there is political agreement on a just peace and security for both sides on an equal basis.

With relation to the latter, it is important to discuss the Jerusalem Link, a joint women's venture for peace. The Jerusalem Link is the umbrella body of the Jerusalem Center for Women on the Palestinian side and Bat Shalom on the Israeli side. Both were established in 1994, aiming at institutionalizing and continuing the process of political dialogue towards a just peace that has clear political principles that are in conformity with international law, in line with concepts of social justice and human security, and based on values of equality, justice and freedom.

Our joint vision for a just peace is this: a Palestinian state on the land occupied in 1967, sharing Jerusalem with Occupied East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, dismantling settlements and a just solution for the question of refugees according to the related United Nations resolutions. We believe there is a partner because there is a

will. We have developed an approach that recognizes the asymmetry of power between occupied and occupier; we are developing communication and a work mode that can develop trust, which is an issue of critical importance for coalitions across the divide to last and develop. Strengthening your partner is a key element in joint peace work that moves from one issue to the other, for example, from refugees to racism, historical narratives, anti-militarization, feminism and on to nationalism. It is important to note that our joint experience has paved the way for developing a new initiative, the International Women's Commission (IWC). The IWC is a tripartite commission which has as its main goal the implementation of United Nations Resolution 1325, for including women and their perspectives at the negotiation table, and making sure that women's rights and needs are addressed. Consequently, the day after a settlement is reached will be a better day for women on both sides.

Bearing in mind the political turmoil we live in, the patriarchal social realities, the deteriorated economic situation, the backward educational system, I believe human security goals to be achieved and for women to have the power to change things in that direction, a number of conditions should be met: there should be active and responsible participation from the international community towards implementing international legality, ending the Israeli military occupation in all its forms and then embarking on a process of radical democratization of political life, economy and culture so that women and men can fulfill their power to act as citizens.

Concerning globalization, Palestinians live on the periphery of the economic side of globalization. Israel has always been a buffer zone for Palestinian economic development and interaction with the world. However, we are very much affected by the politics of globalization, in particular the mono-polar world order. This is an order that encourages militarism, narrow nationalism, hegemony of the powerful and religious extremism—all of which produce insecurities, injustices and the oppression of women.

Alternatives here may include:

- Globalization from below, international networks of the grassroots to struggle for justice, social justice, peace and the rule of law.
- Not limiting ourselves to the current NGO structures, developing vibrant civil societies
- Investing in awareness-raising programs on the importance of active citizenship and achieving participatory democracy that supports the values it hold dear
- Investing in education, especially that of women

Finally, I believe that justice is the agenda. We in Palestine need you, and we need to work with you for the good of all. Let's work together to achieve a human security that means: living in dignity and letting the other live in dignity and letting all of our potential flow freely for the good of all under the rule of law.