

Chapter 2

Palestinian Women and Peacemaking

On a July afternoon in 1999, in a small village outside of Jerusalem, thirty women, ranging in age from seventeen to sixty-five, sat comfortably in a circle in the community room of the beautiful church, joking about their husbands, jobs, and what they ate for lunch. A few took off their shoes to sit cross-legged in the large chairs. The scene seemed reminiscent of any women's club or social event, although this group of Israeli, Palestinian, and German women would never have met on their own accord. They had convened here, in the Arab Christian village of Ein Kerem, for a weeklong conflict-resolution seminar funded by a German human rights organization. I arrived just as Gila Svirsky and Molly Malekar (the director and political action coordinator for Bat Shalom) began to address the group, describing the mission and programs of their organization. Svirsky launched into the history of Bat Shalom beginning with the original meeting in Brussels. The Israeli women, she said, had been motivated by a growing sentiment that the Palestinians "deserved a state of their own."

Here, Sumaya Farhat-Naser, (the director of the Jerusalem Center for Women) sitting to Svirsky's right, interrupted gently: "Not deserve, we have the right to a state of our own," she corrected Svirsky, laughing congenially (emphasis mine). The session continued uninterrupted and the participants, especially the German visitors, seemed touched by Svirsky and Malekar's presentation. Still, Farhat-Naser undoubtedly had picked up on the subtle implications of Svirsky's word choice, whether or not this choice had been deliberate. Both organizations'

directors have personally experienced the political rifts caused by the tension between the two distinct concepts: Palestinians “desert” versus Palestinian “rights.”

Palestinian national and human rights have become the central tenet of the Palestinian peace movement.¹ Like their male counter-parts, Palestinian women leaders hold fast to a rights-based theory, rhetoric, and ideology that stresses entitlement rather than moral desert. The word “deserve,” they feel, implies that they must act in a given way to earn a given reward whereas they believe they are entitled to their land by right and justice. The Palestinian women I interviewed strongly disregarded any notion of peace that lacked a component of justice. They often reiterated the phrase, “a just and lasting peace.” Peace, for them, is a means to the desired ends of justice: Palestinian self-determination and autonomy. And only justice can bring peace. These goals are at the forefront of every political forum or discussion. Currently, the Palestinian demand for rights and justice crystallizes most frequently around specific political “flash points” that the Oslo peace process has not sufficiently addressed: Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories, the Israeli refusal to grant identification cards to Palestinians in Jerusalem, the demolition of Palestinian homes built without a permit, the allocation and distribution of natural resources (specifically water), and the return of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars.

Most of the Palestinian women I interviewed interpreted the task of “peacemaking” broadly, as any activity that furthers the Palestinian demand for

¹ I will argue in Chapter Three that although the Israeli women’s peace movement wants to secure Palestinian national and human rights, Israeli women are not motivated by the same desire for a just peace as Palestinians. Rather, they hold a different moral orientation, based primarily on care rather than on justice. Thus, although Gila corrected herself in this instance, her choice of the

statehood and rights. The majority of the women I interviewed defined a Palestinian peace activist as anyone working to promote Palestinian rights, whether through domestic civil society ventures, women's unions, or labor organization. Defined by their rights-based goals, Palestinian women peacemakers apparently engage in peace activism in the same way that male Palestinians engage in peace activism. Yet the Palestinian women relate to the ethic of justice differently from the Palestinian men involved in peace activism, as a result of their grassroots niche and its specific political objectives.

First, within the context of Palestinian — where Palestinian statehood and Palestinian rights are priorities — the Palestinian women peacemakers, as women, have a particular set of experiences. Having experienced the Israeli military occupation as Palestinian women, they attribute the roots of their political activity to a set of social and political forces different from those experienced by Palestinian men. Both a gendered set of *exclusions* from politics and a gendered *opportunity* to enter into political life have shaped the political status of Palestinian women peacemakers today.

Second, Palestinian women peacemakers are subjects as well as objects of the experience of occupation and subsequent resistance. Although situated within the constraints of a traditional, gender-stereotyped society with a clear national agenda, they also exert considerable agency, in choosing programs and advocating for policies appropriate to the current pre-state, changing political structure of Palestine. The Palestinian women peacemakers that I interviewed work within the

word “deserve” accurately represented her (and other Israeli women's) views that the Palestinians have somehow earned their rights as a result of their national historical experience.

collective discourse of Palestinian nationalism. Therefore, they shied away from any politics of differences between men and women implied by what the western feminists might call the “ethic of care.” They did not like the suggestion that women, more than men, might express empathetic, caring, or maternal attitudes towards other Palestinians or harbor different sets of sympathies towards the Israeli soldiers, government, or civilians.

Third, the Palestinian women are now applying the concept of justice learned in the national struggle to the internal feminist struggle for women’s rights within Palestine. Their feminist goals focus on creating greater legal and social equality for women and helping young Palestinian women gain political leadership training. Although they stated that national and feminist rights have become consonant goals, the Palestinian women peacemakers I interviewed spend most of their energies improving women’s opportunities and institutionalizing equality between the sexes in the Palestinian government and legal system. In this opportune, fluid state-building moment of Palestinian history, the Palestinian women peacemakers work as feminists within the context of the national struggle.

I. Objects of the Israeli Occupation²

The leadership of the Jerusalem Center for Women does not accurately reflect the typical Palestinian woman, encountered, for example, on the streets of

² In my study, I use the women leaders from Jerusalem as representatives of Palestinian women’s movements in general, although other groups exist in Gaza, the rest of the West Bank and in the Palestinian Diaspora. However, as the hub of Palestinian politics in the Occupied Territories is currently located along the Jerusalem-Ramallah-Nablus urban nexus of the West Bank, the Jerusalem activists are generally considered the most mainstream and nationally oriented of the women’s groups. The JCW’s Jerusalem Office coordinates and implements programs for Palestinian villages throughout the West Bank.

Nablus or in the rural villages of the northern West Bank. Instead, they represent a small but powerful population of English-speaking, Western educated, generally less religious women.³ They are professors, doctors, activists, and politicians. All of the women on the JCW Board of Trustees are representatives of the main Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) parties. Many of the JCW board members as well as the directors of other women's NGOs currently serve important roles in Arafat's government. They carefully balance their feminist goals with their continued loyalty to the dominant Palestinian discourse of national unity. For example, Zahira Kamal and Hanan Ashrawi, two members of the JCW Board of Trustees, served on the Palestinian negotiating team at Oslo. Until recently, Ashrawi served as the Minister of Higher Education in Yasser Arafat's cabinet and Kamal now serves as the Gender Department Director for the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. Through the personal experiences shared with me by the Palestinian women I interviewed, I will describe how a unique set of exclusions and openings afforded this small subculture of activists access to both the grassroots and the parliamentary political realm.

Turning Political: The Women's Committee Movement

³ In this section, I describe the effects of Palestinian social and political history on the political experiences of a select group of Palestinian women activists, the self-defined peacemakers who form the leadership of the most prominent women's NGOs, grassroots organizations, as well as the Jerusalem Center for Women. The political experiences of Palestinian women in general, beyond the scope of this study, depend on some of the same exclusions and social forces, especially the traditional role of women in the domestic sphere. See Kitty Warnock's, *Land Before Honour: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories* (New York, N.Y.: Monthly Review Press, 1990) for a social history of Palestinian women under Israeli occupation. See also Julie M. Peteet's, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) for one of the most comprehensive and detailed analyses of women's involvement in the *intifada*.

To arrive at Zahira Kamal's three-level villa in the upper-class neighborhood of Beit Haninah, less than half a mile from the JCW offices, one takes an Arab taxi from Damascus Gate. In striking contrast to the traditionally dressed Palestinian women on the street and in the neighborhood shops, Kamal and the other women in her family (she lives with her mother and aunt) do not wear the traditional head covering, called the hijab. Her nieces and nephew attend an English-speaking private school in East Jerusalem. Kamal is one of the highest ranking, well-known women in Palestinian politics.

The history of her interest in political activism and women's issues resembles that of many of her colleagues in the JCW. Every one of the Palestinian women I interviewed explained that her participation in politics directly resulted from her experience as a "victim" of thirty years of Israeli military occupation.⁴ While some had been directly targeted (arrested, detained, or physically injured), others had merely witnessed Palestinian political, economic, and social suffering. For Kamal, a childhood spent under Israeli occupation awakened her political consciousness:

I became interested in the Arab National but specifically Palestinian movement [because] it was my generation that lived with the daily sights of refugees and camps and orphan kids. We had many orphans in my generations. I continued my involvement through secondary school and University, where I was elected

⁴ Often, the experience of occupation was transmitted to the younger generations through stories of its hardships. Yolla Hadidin, director of *People-to-People* (an official grassroots organization provisioned and funded through the Oslo Accords), became sympathetic to the Palestinian national cause even though she herself grew up in Jordan, the daughter of a Jordanian and Lebanese. As a child, Hadidin accompanied her father, a doctor for the United National Relief Work Agency, on his visits to the Palestinian refugee camps outside of Amman. She attributes her current commitment to the Palestinian cause to her experiences visiting the inhabitants of these camps. She would wait with the old women in the makeshift health clinic (a small tent), as they would tell her stories about their homes in Palestine. Yolla Hadidin, interview, 16 August 1999.

president by my classmates of the General Union of Palestinian Students in Cairo.⁵

Kamal became a leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine party during the seventies and eighties. As a female activist within this leftist nationalist movement, Kamal and other second and third generation Palestinian women political leaders in the Occupied Territories created the emergent *Women's Committees Movement*, an umbrella organization for the previously unstructured, independent, party-based women's work committees.⁶ Although the earlier generation's women's work committees had restricted their activities to small scale social and charitable work, Kamal's generation — children of the more radicalized sixties and seventies — put political change on the Women's Committees Movement's agenda.⁷

Specifically, the *Movement's* political work entailed mass collective, but peaceful, protest of the Israeli occupation. For example, on March 8, 1984, the *Movement* organized an International Women's Day celebration in Jerusalem. The

⁵ Zahira Kamal, interview, 3 August 1999.

⁶ These earlier Palestinian women's groups, called work committees, emerged in the late seventies. They were more grassroots and democratic in nature than earlier social welfare organizations formed immediately after the 1967 war. They stressed survival and self-help programs, forming classes to provide health education and training in embroidery, office skills and food processing. They also provided women with day care and literacy training and engaged women in political discussions. The original four women's work committees were each affiliated with four factions of the PLO as follows: The Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (FPWAC) with the Democratic Front with the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees (UPWWC) with the Communist Party; the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC) with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); and the Women's Committee for Social Work (WCSW) with Fateh. These factions of the PLO now correspond to current political parties represented in the Palestinian Legislative Council. See Suha Sabbagh's introduction in *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*, ed., Suha Sabbagh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 1-38, for greater detail of the evolution and composition of the Women's Committee Movement, 7-10.

⁷ By first generation of Palestinian women, I refer to those women who had lived in pre-Israel Palestine and were alive and active during the 1948 War. The second/third generation of activists were generally a young cadre of more political, nationalist women, educated in Lebanon,

women's leadership of four Palestinian political factions sponsored the event: the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation Party (DFLP), the Communist party, and the Fateh party.⁸ The celebration quickly evolved into a political protest, as hundreds of Palestinian women and children successfully circumvented the Israeli roadblocks and checkpoints dividing the West Bank from Jerusalem in order to attend the festivities in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem.⁹ This collective disobedience against the Israeli military reflected the change in the *Movement's* aims, away from pure social work and towards nationalist activism. It also demonstrated an increased societal acceptance and encouragement of women in Palestinian national politics. By the late eighties, PLO leaders, especially in the more populist, left-of-center factions, were encouraging their women's branches to participate fully in the national struggle.

Entering the Public Sphere: The *Intifada* as a National Catalyst

The *intifada* (1987-1991) catalyzed the entrance of diverse sectors of the Palestinian population into political life, bringing women out of the private sphere, their traditional realm, into the public sphere of national political participation. When the *intifada* began in 1987, the already existing *Women's Committees Movement* increased its effort to involve a greater cross-section of Palestinian women, from remote villagers to university students to young girls. Women

Jordan, Syria, Egypt, or the West who were in their twenties and thirties in the 1970s. A post *intifada* generation of younger activists has also recently emerged.

⁸ Sabbagh, 35.

⁹ Amal Kavar, *Daughters of Palestine: Leading Women of the Palestinian National Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 99.

became visible on the streets, confronting Israeli soldiers with demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts, stones, and molotov cocktails. More women volunteered to start sub-committees in their own villages or to found kindergartens and home meetings in rural areas. Other women organized hospital visits to wounded Palestinian activists

The leadership of the JCW and of other women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that I interviewed for this study, gained critical leadership training during the *intifada*. Like Zahira Kamal, Naalah Kourach, a member of the PLO's Fateh branch, was part of the second and third generation of Palestinian female activists, radicalized by the political currents of nationalist fervor in the sixties and seventies. The wife of a leading Fateh party member and newspaper editor, Kourach returned to her hometown of Ramallah after the Christian Maronites murdered her husband during the 1982 siege of Beirut. Although a young widow with three children, Kourach turned immediately to political organizing, becoming the leader of the Association of Women's Committee for Social Work, the women's branch of the Fateh faction. Before 1987, Kourach and her coworkers had struggled to gain legitimacy and acceptance from both Palestinian male PLO leaders and rural village constituents; the *intifada* allowed a break-through in women's participation:

Before the *intifada*, it was really hard for us to be accepted. The village people—men and women—were very suspicious of us, city women, coming into their villages and challenging their way of life. But then suddenly in 1987, the *intifada* started, and more women started coming to us and saying that they too wanted to be involved. Suddenly, what was a political spark had a social effect; people were more encouraging of programs ranging from literacy training to health care.¹⁰

¹⁰ Naalah Kourach, interview, 12 August 1999.

During this burst of activity sparked by the *intifada*, Kourach organized and instructed groups of fourteen year-old girls to throw stones and molotov cocktails at the Israeli soldiers and illegally printed over 5,000 leaflets in what is today the basement of the Ramallah Library.¹¹ In addition, she directed various local Independent Group Projects or (IGPs), home economic organizations intended to wean Palestinians from their economic dependence on Israel.¹² However, in addition to the specific experiences of organizing the resistance, Kourach emphasized that the *intifada* evoked a collective consciousness raising among Palestinian men and women:

Everyone wanted to join the *intifada* at that time. They got hit by the IDF, they got wounded by them, but they weren't afraid. The women thought it was their duty.

The *intifada* successfully undermined some of the lingering objections to women's involvement in political life. Even the most traditional men supported their mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters' participation in the national cause.

¹¹ Kourach sees no contradiction between the violent methods she encouraged and directed in during this period and her current work as a "peacemaker." She interprets the violence as a necessary tool of resistance against Israeli occupation and thus advancing Palestinian rights. This example demonstrates how the Palestinian conception of peacemaking differs dramatically from the Israeli concept of peacemaking that will be assessed in Chapter 3.

¹² Many authors have argued that Israeli occupation entailed economic colonization, impeding natural Palestinian development processes. The situation of women during the occupation reflects the economic exploitation that led to the destruction or transformation of indigenous Palestinian structures: the family, land exploitation and a general proletarianization of the population. In "Palestinian Women Under Israeli Occupation" [in *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, ed., Judith Tucker, 102-126, (Bloomington: Indiana University, in association with the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1993)], Souad Dajani argues that the subjugation of Palestinian women because of Israel's economic hegemony occurred at two levels. First, the women were subject to the wage labor of Israeli employment. Second, Palestinian women's unpaid housework increased. Part of the resistance to occupation during the *intifada* involved trying to shake off economic dependence and integration into the Israeli economy.

From 1987 until today, the Palestinian political climate has *directly* encouraged and in fact idealized women's participation in the national movement.¹³ The occupation has also *indirectly* sparked greater female participation in all forms of communal life, from greater educational enrollment to social work. Indeed, ironically, the gender stereotypes of the Israeli government, especially the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) serving in the West Bank and Gaza, indirectly sparked female political resistance. According to Kamal, leaders of the *Women's Committees Movement* and their constituents had a unique role in protesting the occupation because the Israeli soldiers saw them as less threatening than the Palestinian men:

Sometimes the discrimination between men and women helped us; it gave us more room. They [the Israelis] assume women are not as active. So, the soldiers at a road checkpoint, for example, search only the men in the car, not the women.¹⁴

Although the Israelis still consider women less of a threat than men, two-thirds of the women I interviewed had been arrested or had served jail sentences or in-house detentions. Kamal has served several short sentences in a Jerusalem jail and was under strict house arrest, between sun up and sun down, for the seven years between 1980 and 1987. In general, however, Israeli assumptions of traditional gender roles indirectly facilitated greater freedom and political opportunities for Palestinian women activists.

¹³ See Phillippa Strum, *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution* (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992), for a comprehensive explanation of both women's emergence into leadership roles and the ensuing transformation of gender relations in Palestine as a result of the *intifada*. In one memorable example, Strum describes a demonstration at which women wielding pots and pans attacked an Israeli military patrol and forced the soldiers to release a youth they had arrested.

¹⁴ Zahira Kamal, interview, 3 August 1999.

Kamal, Kourach, and other Palestinian female leaders also said that national resistance to the Israeli occupation has opened other doors for women within Palestinian society. In the past fifteen years, as men have increasingly been absent, arrested, or detained, women's responsibilities in the family sphere have extended beyond cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Women have managed the household finances or those of the family business in the absence of their husbands. Many of the women I interviewed had raised their own children alone or had been raised themselves in households headed by mothers and aunts in the absence of fathers and uncles. The generation born and raised in the past twenty years has been exposed to models of female independence and authority in the private sphere.

In the public sphere, religious and traditional women have been encouraged to leave the home in order to pass out leaflets, start women's cooperatives, and travel to more remote villages, all in the name of the national cause. While Palestinian society still views gender roles traditionally, today "working" in the public sphere, especially for the national cause, is not seen as entirely inappropriate for women.¹⁵

Still at the Grassroots: The Exclusion of Palestinian Women from National Politics

Both Kourach and Kamal emphasized how the national struggle against Israeli occupation, especially during the *intifada*, created opportunities for the Palestinian women leadership to gain experience in the political realm. As a result of the national struggle, the general population became more accepting of women's

¹⁵ Nevertheless, George Rishmawi, the head of Beit Sahur's *Rapprochement Center*, a mixed gender dialogue and coexistence community center, lamented that many of the most active

involvement in politics as well. Many scholars, however, qualify this often-idealized explanation of how the national experience of Israeli occupation has “emancipated” or liberated the Palestinian woman from her traditional role. Both academics and the women I interviewed point out that traditional gender assumptions still greatly limit women’s access to political power in Palestine.

Socially, Palestinian society has become increasingly polarized between those at the bottom and those at the top, between poor village residents and the less traditional and more egalitarian, educated, and urban subculture that characterizes the group of women whom I interviewed. The social freedom, liberal views, and material comfort of the activist elite differ dramatically from the position, attitude, and material wellbeing of the average Palestinian woman.¹⁶ Geographic residence — village, town or refugee camp — often determines the degree of political opportunity and educational and vocational freedom available to a Palestinian woman.

Politically, despite an optimistic “opening,” (the opportunities for women to participate in both the grassroots and the official PLO leadership), a large gender gap still remains in the number of women elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). According to JCW program director May Kasem, Palestinians are now used to seeing women involved in politics and participating in the national struggle in some capacity. Yet during the first national elections in 1994, despite

women are unmarried. Women often retire from “peacemaking” when they marry and raise families. George Rishmawi, interview, 15 July 1999.

¹⁶ Hebrew University Professor Daphna Golan, the former director of Bat Shalom, emphasized this importance: “You have to look at where the female leadership stands in comparison to their society. There is a tremendous economic and social gap between the feminists/activists and the real people in Palestine. This gap is bigger and more of a challenge than in Israeli society.” *Daphna Golan*, interview, 1 August 1999.

“general assumptions about women’s participation in the political arena,” only five women were elected to the eighty-eight member PLC.¹⁷ Many of the women I interviewed tried to explain and understand this evident disproportionate representation in the PLC. Kamal says that women do indeed possess moderate political power in Palestinian society:

We just don’t know how to use our power to struggle for our rights. We are one half of the population but the power of women in decision making is not nearly fifty percent. Until now, women were given their rights in the national struggle. But when it comes to practice, the number of women who come to the decision-making bodies is very unbalanced.¹⁸

The current discrepancy between the small number of women elected and appointed to official office and the number of women in the population contrasts with the great number of women’s organizations and NGOs that continue to flourish at the grassroots. Many of the women I interviewed indignantly demanded equal representation in the PLC and equal power-sharing within the new Palestinian State, especially because women throughout the Palestinian community had participated in the national struggle for statehood and Palestinian rights to such a large degree. The historical success of Palestinian women in overcoming traditional hurdles and in resisting the Israeli occupation has heightened their demands for equal rights – demands that will be the focus of the third section of this chapter.

¹⁷ May Kasem, interview, 19 July 1999.

¹⁸ Of the 330 General Directors, only 28 are women. Kamal is currently the only female minister in Arafat’s cabinet (Hanan Ahsrawi recently resigned to protest corruption among other ministries). Only five female members serve on the eighty-eight members PLC, the parliamentary body. Zahira Kamal, interview, 3 August 1999.

We must assess the current limits to women's political involvement in light of the great achievements for Palestinian women both at the grassroots and in leadership positions within the PLO. The biggest success is undoubtedly the change of attitude among the younger leadership — people like May Kasem — who, in their thirties, see women in political activity as the norm, as natural, complementary, and positive fixtures of Palestinian society. This new generation of leaders assumes women's measurable role in the national struggle, a testament to the change in Palestinian society as a result of the past thirty years of suffering and resistance.

II. Subjects in Pre-State Palestine

In the last section, I argued that Palestinian women peacemakers arrived at political activism in part as a result of their experiences as *objects* of the Palestinian national experience in the past thirty years. Politically, specific openings and exclusions differentiate Palestinian women peacemakers from male Palestinian peacemakers and from their female Israeli counterparts in Bat Shalom. Here, I explore these women's current role as *subjects* of the Palestinian condition in the current pre-state environment during the summer of 1999. First, I ask how these women engage in peace activism, what methods, strategies, and programs they employ, and what constraints limit their choice of strategies. I focus on both the JCW's internal Palestinian programs and its joint programs with Bat Shalom. Second, I ask the Palestinian women peacemakers if their attitudes towards peace with Israel or their methods of peacemaking reflect a more nurturing, empathetic,

or caring moral perspective than the attitudes or strategies of men in the Palestinian peace movement.

What is a Palestinian Peacemaker?

The broad definition of “peacemaker” offered by most of the women I interviewed equated peace activism with any participation in the national struggle to secure Palestinian rights, achieve national sovereignty, or improve Palestinian social, economic, academic, and political conditions. Within this broad definition, a peace activist could refer both to Yasser Arafat and to a member of the *Palestinian Working Women’s Party* who does no more than petition to include rural agricultural women workers in unions.

This broad definition of peacemaker includes all those involved in building civil society in Palestine, even if they reject the Oslo peace process or implicitly or overtly support political violence. For example, the members of the social welfare branch of the Islamic group Hamas support a political platform vehemently opposed to the international peace process. A separate branch of Hamas supports political violence intended to derail the peace process. The women I interviewed deliberated about the inclusion of a Hamas activist in their broad definition of peacemaker. They tended to include in their broad definition of “peacemaker” Hamas members involved solely in the social service branch — those who build schools and health clinics in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, for example.

The Hamas example demonstrates that subjective political opinion was embedded in the definition of peacemaking articulated by the women I interviewed. Rather than adopting their definition entirely, therefore, I will use a more limited

definition of peacemaker that combines 1) participation in the national, state-building effort and 2) at least tacit support for the international Oslo peace process and recognition of the State of Israel. It must be recognized, however, that although most of the Palestinian women peacemakers I interviewed *did* support the international Oslo peace process and recognize the State of Israel, this correlation is not the *grounds* for peace activism as they defined it.¹⁹

The Palestinian women's self-ascribed definition of peacemaker is based to a large extent on nationalist sentiment. Palestinian nationalism represents both a collective moral framework and the most pertinent political ideology to most Palestinians. This collective moral framework inspires the work of both male and female peacemakers. Rather than displaying an inclination towards peacemaking different from that of Palestinian men, the Palestinian women I interviewed reported that they chose different strategies and methods from men activists, based on their niche at the grassroots.

The Palestinian women's strategies and methods also differentiate their programs from those of their Israeli counterparts, specifically the women of Bat Shalom. This section will focus on the activities of the Jerusalem Center for Women, exemplifying the strategies and methods chosen by Palestinian women

¹⁹ Many of the JCW members and activists still have great ambivalence about the Oslo Accords, even though the organization as a whole formally supports the accords. Almost all of the Palestinians peacemakers criticized the Accords, either Israel's failure to "keep promises," or Arafat "caving in and giving too much away." This qualified support reflects that public sympathy for Oslo is fading within Palestine. In the summer of 1999, an air of optimism following the Israeli elections seemed to temporarily raise hopes among Palestinians that the Oslo promises would be carried out. According to Palestinian women peacemakers with whom I have been in contact in the six months since, the ambivalence towards Oslo has returned. In stipulating tacit support for the Oslo peace process in my definition of a Palestinian peacemaker, I follow the political position upheld by the American government, which considers the Oslo Accords and subsequent treaties and agreements as the official track of the international Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

peace activists as powerful *subjects* of the national struggle.²⁰ Program director May Kasem divided the JCW's activities into two major components: programs designed for its Palestinian constituents — women from rural villages, refugee camps, and urban centers throughout West Bank and the Gaza Strip — and joint work with Bat Shalom.

Internal Peacemaking: The JCW's Palestinian Programs (and their Limits)

Most of the JCW's Palestinian programs focus on two goals: public education and political empowerment. Public education programs include lectures and workshops that build awareness in the community about gender issues, respect for human rights, and democratic values. Empowerment seminars and workshops are designed to develop leadership skills among Palestinian women from villagers to university students. Ultimately, the JCW hopes to prepare women from all sectors to enter and shape the Palestinian political, social, and cultural spheres.²¹

Consider the June 1999 JCW event that I attended at the Markez Beladneh Cultural Center, a beautiful, Italian-style modern building in downtown Ramallah, the busy commercial center of the West Bank, twenty minutes north of Jerusalem. Twenty-eight women activists of all ages, mostly staff of various Palestinian women's organizations, came together for this daylong event. Trained facilitators conducted conflict resolution seminars and workshops on political leadership. A

²⁰ The Palestinian women interviewed for this study are either affiliated as paid staff or board members of the Jerusalem Center for Women or directors of similar women's political action groups based in East Jerusalem and Ramallah. See Appendix A: Research Methodology.

²¹ The JCW has targeted high school and university level students in particular, focusing on women aged 14-25. They encourage these young groups to participate in ongoing Palestinian-Israeli dialogue activities. See "JCW: Areas of Work," <<http://www.j-c-w.org>>.

recent graduate of the West Bank Bir Zeit University, the youngest participant Gheda Naser (age 22) described the event:

Most of the peace work for women is teaching women leaders how to deal with conflict resolution within Palestinian society. There are different points of view regarding how to build society and forge equality between men and women in the new state.²²

By “different points of view,” Naser meant the internal Palestinian political cleavages that have arisen since 1994. During the *intifada*, the Palestinians were united in their collective goal of shaking off the Israeli occupiers. With increasing autonomy in the past five years, Palestinian factions, once united by their shared nationalist aspirations, have begun to demand a say in shaping the future Palestinian State and society. The women I interviewed cited, for example, the role of religion in the future Palestinian State. Traditional Islamicist groups such as Hamas favor greater incorporation of Islamic law into the new Palestinian constitution (still being created) while secular groups like the DFLP resist. The disagreement over the role of religion in the new Palestinian State has direct repercussions for the future status of women, as Islamic law often enforces strict codes of conduct on women.

When I asked Naser why conflict resolution was not being taught in conjunction with Israelis or in regard to resolving international conflict, rather than domestic, internal conflict, she added,

It is much better and easier to conduct separate workshops and seminars. We have different approaches to leadership and conflict resolution than the Israelis; we have different attitudes and different needs.²³

²² Gheda Naser, interview, 12 August 1999.

²³ Ibid.

Here, Naser highlights an important factor hindering the ability of the Bat Shalom and the Jerusalem Center for Women from planning joint activities. A cultural gap divides the personalities and styles exhibited by traditional Arab Palestinian women (the JCW's constituents) from those exhibited by the secular Israeli women members of Bat Shalom. For example, the Palestinian women are often more reticent to speak up while Israeli women are often quite brazen in expressing their opinions. The Palestinian women's political experience differs greatly from that of Israeli women, who have lived their entire lives in an open democracy.

The women's peace network in Palestine relies heavily on workshops and seminars like the one attended by Naser to build leadership skills and raise political consciousness among women. The *Women's Model Parliament* is a similar program. Young Palestinian women from diverse geographical backgrounds participate in a simulation of parliamentary proceedings, with different committees and legislative issues that range from health care to foreign policy. Three women I interviewed said that workshops and seminars were more attractive program methods to women than to men. The other Palestinian women described this choice of program as a necessity to equalize political leadership experience. They said that women in Palestine require political leadership training to catch up to men. Rather than having any separate inclination or capacity to participate in workshops, women in their view differ from men only in their degree of political consciousness and experience. Traditionally, women have been less encouraged to develop political leadership skills. Thus, the kinds of strategies chosen by the JCW

reflect primarily the social and historical exclusions the women have faced rather than any real or perceived differences in the way the genders engage and think about politics.

To western feminists, political activism frequently implies protesting or lobbying current domestic or foreign governmental policies. However, in Palestine neither the broad definition of peace activism presented here nor the more narrow understanding of peacemaking — i.e. ostensible support for the Oslo peace process and its implicit recognition of Israel and support for normalized relations with Israelis — adhere to this western model. This is because they live in a semi-autonomous, tentative democratic political structure with higher pan-Arab constraints weighing on them. In the negotiation of final status issues such as the delineation of borders, refugees, settlements, and the status of Jerusalem, it would be unrealistic to assume that women or men in current pre-state Palestine could successfully petition their government to be more lenient or conciliatory towards Israel. Individual women may privately hold opinions critical of governmental policies towards Israel. Peace groups like the JCW, however, must cooperate and show solidarity with the political positions of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Legislative Council in order to ensure their political legitimacy.

On national issues concerning the negotiations with Israel, the JCW activists do not generally lobby or exert pressure on their government or articulate dissent.²⁴ This point is essential in understanding the great difference in the

²⁴ On issues of women's rights, the JCW does lobby and pressure the Ministry, the PLC and the president. The JCW has also strongly criticized Arafat's government for internal human rights abuses such as the use of death sentence without proper trial and the arrests of recent political

strategies and tactics adopted by the Palestinian and Israeli members of the Jerusalem Link. Like the entire Israeli peace camp, Bat Shalom tries to influence the Israeli government — to make more concessions at the negotiating table, to secure Palestinian demands for statehood, and to grant greater political and human rights to Palestinians. In pursuit of this goal of exerting political pressure on the Israeli government to change its policies, Bat Shalom plans protests, demonstrations, and letter-writing campaigns. The Palestinian goals reflect, by contrast, the situation of the occupied. As Zahira Kamal put it, "For us, people who are losing land, we need different strategies from those who are taking land."²⁵

Comparing Bat Shalom and the JCW's programs on the question of Jerusalem (one of the final status issues in the Oslo peace process) illustrates the different strategies of the two organizations. Bat Shalom is actively engaged in petitioning Ehud Olmert, the mayor of Jerusalem, to change the Israeli policy regarding Jerusalem residency rights for Palestinians. (Jerusalem residency rights of Arab residents are sometimes revoked when they leave the city for a certain time period.) Since its inception, Bat Shalom has staged many protests and demonstrations throughout Jerusalem strongly condemning the Israeli government's Jerusalem policies that attempt to "change the facts on the ground" (alter the demographic ratio of Arab/Jewish Jerusalem residents in Israel's favor leading up to the final status negotiations on this issue). The protests may have contributed to the growing opposition among Israeli statesmen to the Arab

dissidents. For a list of the JCW's current political positions, see "Statements," <<http://www.j-c-w.org>>.

²⁵ Zahira Kamal, interview, 3 August 1999.

residency revocation policy, and also to the recent disapproval of this policy articulated by the new Labor administration, elected in May of 1999.

Although the Jerusalem Center for Women often participates in these demonstrations against the Israeli government, the JCW does not stage equivalent demonstrations to urge its own government towards more conciliatory compromises on issues concerning Jerusalem. For example, such a compromise Palestinian position might accept the internationalization of certain parts of Israeli-controlled Jerusalem or accept the existing suggestion that the Palestinians make Abu Dis, a Palestinian town north of Jerusalem, their primary capital. Instead, all of the fifteen Palestinians I interviewed articulated Arafat's official negotiating position: a rejection of any peace plan that does not make parts of Jerusalem proper the Palestinian capital. Almost two-thirds said they would endorse a shared Jerusalem only if Israel withdrew to its pre-1967 borders.

The strategies and programming styles chosen by the Palestinian women are informed by the stage of political development in pre-state Palestine. The current necessary emphasis on state building means that, for these women, demonstrations and protests would undermine the collective national goals. Because Palestinians have not yet succeeded in their national struggle to achieve statehood, the grassroots peace activists do not find it appropriate or safe to engage actively in protest against their government. Moreover, nearly two-thirds of the Palestinian women I interviewed are affiliated with one of the three main parties of the Palestinian National Council, Fateh, the PFLP, or the DFLP. The overlap between

the grassroots women's organizations and the Palestinian administration makes protests and demonstrations unlikely.

Joint Peacemaking: Limited Work With Israelis

Feminist theorists in the United States have suggested that women, for various reasons, are more likely than men to develop an "ethic of care." This framework would presumably predict that the Palestinian women would extend more understanding or sympathy towards Israelis. Palestinian women would presumably regard Israelis with greater receptivity, relatedness, responsiveness, connected-ness, intuitiveness, feeling, empathy, and caring than Palestinian men.²⁶

Yet the Palestinian women peacemakers I interviewed revealed hesitant attitudes about engaging in joint work with Israelis. After two formal interviews with Palestinian men and talking informally to many Palestinian men and women during the three months that I spent in Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1999, I believe that these opinions cross gender lines. The Palestinian women I interviewed did not express great empathy or concern for Israelis or much understanding of the constraints of the Israeli government. They did not immediately express a common bond with Israeli women as women with shared experiences in a traditional, patriarchal society or as mothers. Instead, both Palestinian men and women defined peace not as a termination of terrorism, arrests, rock throwing, and torture, but as the outcome of justice. The director of the

²⁶ These are some of the adjectives associated with the ethic of care, which will be discussed and developed further in Chapter Five. This ethic is most commonly associated with Carole Gilligan, who argues that women often see morality as a matter of care, in a world that extends through an elaborate network of relationships. See Gilligan, 173-174.

Palestinian Jerusalem branch of the *Women's League of Peace and Freedom*,

Hanan Awad eloquently articulated this definition of peace:

Peace is a goal to achieve justice. Israel has put a postponement on peace, which creates disappointment. Humans rights abuses continue with closures up to six months long. These hindrances to peace create disappointment among the people. We believe as peace as a tool for justice; real peace cannot be when Jerusalem is still occupied and not complete. We will have peace when we achieve sovereignty and then our understanding of our neighbor will be different.²⁷

Awad, in short, put political objectives first. Understanding the other, the critical component of empathy, came second. A poet and journalist as well as a peace activist, Awad envisioned a change of heart only after the political objectives had been met. Then, she said,

Your concept of the other will be different. Tolerance will come later on, when you choose it later, when you put in your heart. You must get your rights first. If not, it means you will forget your past, your history, and you will forget Palestine.²⁸

The other Palestinian women I interviewed reiterated Awad's point that Palestinian political and national rights must precede any greater understanding of and communication with the Israeli occupiers. One woman even traced the sequential steps required to promote tolerance for Israelis among the Palestinian public:

There must be steps: one, withdrawal [from the 1967 Occupied Territories]; two, evacuate settlements; three, implement the Palestinian right of return; and finally, a follow-up [of all of these steps] with a build up of tolerance with Israelis. We have suffered a painful history of massacres and catastrophe. After our painful history, tolerance is only something you can build up with dignity. In terms of the question of tolerance and forgiveness, there should be no tolerance without dignity.²⁹

²⁷ Hanan Awad, interview, 19 July 1999.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Soraida Hussein, interview, 12 August 1999.

The thirteen Palestinian women differed in their attitudes towards joint work with Israeli activists. On one side of the spectrum, May Kasem and all those directly affiliated with the Jerusalem Link recognized the merits of dialogue, both in the moderated dialogue groups sponsored by the Link as well as in the cooperation between the two Boards of Trustees. That recognition motivated their joint work with the Israeli Bat Shalom. Kasem said that the JCW was one of few Palestinian NGOs working jointly on political issues with Israelis. She believed that:

Peace is not only achieved by political leaders. Peace means lasting peace built on a national level and will require conflict resolution.

However, even Kasem, who presented the greatest optimism and support for joint work with Israelis, emphasized the limits to such dialogue:

For the Palestinians, it is very important that there exists some commitment to principles. There must be an agreement on equal rights for each side. We are coming from unequal backgrounds and we must feel that our principles are respected.

Kasem pointed to the question of Israeli settlements as an infringement on the Palestinian rights that must be respected and understood by all Israelis.³⁰ Other women seconded her skepticism about the difficulties of creating a dialogue group on equal footing between two sets of people coming from the starting points of occupier and occupied, oppressor, and oppressed. Twelve out of the thirteen

³⁰ May Kasem, interview, 19 July 1999.

women explicitly talked about Palestinian rights in conjunction with their analysis of peace work.

On the other end of the attitudinal spectrum, Soraida Hussein, the Director of Education for *Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling* (WCLAC), articulated a more pessimistic opinion of joint work with Israeli women and Israeli NGOs, and conflict resolution seminars with Israelis in general. A popular NGO in Ramallah whose work focuses solely on women's issues in the West Bank and Gaza, WCLAC organizes programs to promote legal literacy and legal representation. Hussein directs educational programs aimed at familiarizing Palestinian women with laws of divorce and marriage. Rather than focusing on resolving conflict with Israelis, Hussein emphasized the greater need to focus on internal Palestinian civil society building and women's issues. She responded strongly to my question about the productivity of dialogue groups or joint activism with Israelis:

I cannot work with a partner and pretend nothing happened and pretend the future is bright and put on a cheery smile to talk about the future work. I would rather spend my efforts to put on a cheery smile and talk about a bright future in our own society, talking with other Palestinians. They [the Israelis] should know what me, my family and my whole society has been through and then we can work it out [together]. It's painful but true.³¹

While Hussein's disillusionment with joint work represented a more uncompromising attitude than that expressed by most of the Palestinian women I

³¹ Soraida Hussein also expressed the most anti-Oslo sentiment among all of the Palestinian women I interviewed: "Oslo made things worse...because now control by Israeli over Palestine has been legalized and agreed upon by the Palestinian people.... Before, there was a clear relationship of victim-hood between the occupier and the occupied. Now Oslo has changed this relation, making us equal bargaining partners — but we cannot sit down at the table when we don't control our water, our air fields, when we don't even have numbers and status about our own population." Soraida Hussein, interview, 12 August 1999.

interviewed, her demand for consciousness-raising among the Israeli public was reiterated by many other women. Many felt that limited dialogue and joint work with Israelis could be beneficial if the Israeli public became more sensitized to the Palestinians' past experiences and current situation. The Palestinian women wanted the general Israeli public, rather than just the small subculture of Israeli peace activists, to achieve a greater level of understanding, sympathy, and recognition of the suffering of the Palestinian people. One of the most consistent complaints presented by the Palestinian women regarding the Israeli women peace activists focused on their lack of power to effect change within the Israeli political mainstream. "They don't deliver," was how one Palestinian interviewee described the general disillusionment felt by the Palestinian peacemakers towards the Israeli female activists.³²

Why We Do What We Do: The Palestinian Response to the Gendered Ethic of Care

As mentioned above, the primary challenge in applying the western ethic of care paradigm to explain the work of Palestinian peacemakers involves the definition of "peacemaker" as understood by these women themselves. Here I present three competing interpretations given by the Palestinian women when I asked them to respond to what I call the "ethic of care hypothesis" — the idea that women, in comparison to men, might display different skills or tendencies in their peace activism in Palestine. In my question, I clarified by referring to a narrow definition of peace activism — as any activity supporting the goals of the Oslo peace process, whether internal state building endeavors or joint work with Israelis.

³² Hanan Awad, interview, 29 July 1999.

Often within the course of a single interview one woman would offer two or more explanations or responses to my question on the ethic of care. Not only was there little consensus among Palestinian women about why women might be inclined towards peacemaking, but each woman individually seemed to be grappling with this question.

The first kind of response the women I interviewed offered involved a description of some form of essential gender difference in conduct and engagement with peace activism. More than half of the thirteen Palestinian women mentioned an inherent difference between men and women that would make women more likely to advocate and organize activities supporting the Oslo Accords. Sama Aweida-Liftawi, for example, offered anecdotal support for the feminist theoretical analyses of mothering. She said that she “[had] not believ[ed] in peace” until the birth of her baby boy, “when the conflict became personal and entered my home. I started worrying for his safety and thinking about ending the violence.” According to Aweida-Liftawi, the act of mothering forced her to re-evaluate her political positions.³³ Siam Barghouti voiced a similar response. She said that women suffer differently from war-time experiences and thus would be more inclined towards peace activism:

Women suffer doubly. She is suffering directly, for herself, and then also for her friends, sons and daughters. When she loses lots of sons, it is really hard. So for all of these reasons, women want to stop war and want peace. Not any peace [but] peace with justice, an independent state and authority.³⁴

³³ Sama Aweidah-Liftawi, interview, 24 July 1999.

³⁴ Siam Barghouti, interview, 31 July 1999.

This “gender difference” response proposed that the roles that Palestinian women assume as mothers and homemakers increase their interest in peace activism, as opposed to the roles of father, son, soldier, or breadwinner assumed by men.

Three of the women referred to the specific skills that women might use to enhance peace activism to a greater degree than men. Zahira Kamal registered the strongest support for the ethic of care hypothesis, listing specific, typically female skills that women bring to peacemaking: skills in communication, relationship building, and consensus building. She also identified certain relevant traits as typical female — being talkative and emotional and displaying “feeling towards others.” In acknowledging these specific skills, she also said that they did not compensate for the constraints limiting Palestinian women’s access to political power.³⁵

The majority of the Palestinian women’s responses to the ethic of care question revealed that they themselves had grappled with the issue. May Kasem, for example, acknowledged the idea, prevalent in the academic literature, that women might employ “more daring and creative approaches to conflict resolution.” She cited her organization’s 1997 Sharing Jerusalem project, a coordinated effort of Bat Shalom and the Jerusalem Center for Women. The Jerusalem Link’s choice of such a program — complete with tours, cultural events, and discussion — exemplified the creative approach to which Kasem referred. The radical political message underlying the program — that Jerusalem could be shared as two capitals for two states — was a daring political statement for the time. However, Kasem

³⁵ Zahira Kamal, interview, 3 August 1999.

seemed uncomfortable with the implicit essentialist nature of the generalizations tied to the ethic of care, “From my own perspective and experience,” she said, “I do not always see women committed in such a [daring and creative] way.”³⁶

Over the course of their interviews, most of the women, including those who had registered some support for the ethic of care hypothesis, also raised doubts and some skepticism about this hypothesis. Most of the women doubted the assumption, implicit in the ethic of care, that women would be more caring and peaceful than men in the international context, even if they believed that women would display more care in the context of their own homes or work places. The Palestinian women were uncomfortable with the notion that women would display a gendered attitude towards the national situation. Because, as mentioned earlier, the Palestinian nationalist discourse focuses on common sentiment, there is no room for a politics of difference introduced by inter-societal divisiveness.³⁷ For example, Aruri thought that a ethic of care generalization unfairly assumed that men — as fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons — could not or would not display care or understanding, or be as interested as women in ending the violence. The four youngest Palestinian women I interviewed (all under thirty) were far more skeptical about the implications suggested by the ethic of care hypothesis than the women ages thirty and above, who had been leaders during the *intifada* period and earlier.

³⁶ Both Kasem and other Palestinian women articulated the most frequent criticism of the ethic of care, the fact that it did not allow or explain the inclinations or behavior of women who were militant, violent, or in the Palestinian case, anti peace process. May Kasem, interview, 19 July 1999.

³⁷ These politics of sameness and collective national aspirations contrast sharply with the Israeli political emphasis on differences. The contrast in the Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers’

The second kind of response offered focused on the different arenas that women and men choose for their activism. Five out of the thirteen women I interviewed mentioned that women in Palestine were either more capable or more experienced than men at implementing change through grassroots organizations. Naalah Kourach emphasized that while men and women share the “same feelings towards the national struggle,” women have more motivation than men to work from below. She attributed women’s preference for grassroots work to their ability to:

enter many places in our communities, in our villages. We can go anywhere. Women succeed more than men in getting into [different] places.³⁸

Awad also described the mobility available to women activists as opposed to men activists. Their ability to cross socio-economic, occupational, and religious boundaries within Palestinian society facilitated women’s work on the grassroots:

There are women in Palestine in farms, in refugee’s camps, in political work. There are intellectuals and scholars. We can build on our own role on national and international levels.³⁹

The burgeoning number of Palestinian women’s groups on the grassroots in the past decades supports this second type of response to the “why women?” question I posed to the Palestinian women. The major problem with this line of explanation involves the reasons that Palestinian women peacemakers have found their activist niche at the grassroots.⁴⁰ Women’s gravitation towards grassroots

political discourses will be addressed in Chapter Four as the clash between two distinct peacemaking models.

³⁸ Naalah Kourach, interview, 12 August 1999.

³⁹ Hanan Awad, interview, 29 July 1999.

⁴⁰ See Frances S. Hasso, “The ‘Women’s Front:’ Nationalism, Feminism and Modernity in Palestine,” *Gender & Society* 12, no. 4 (August 1998) for a compelling argument about the growth of a unique women’s nationalism as a result of their grassroots emphasis. In line with the second

organizations could perhaps be explained entirely by their historical exclusion from the “power sources,” the PLO leadership positions. As described in Part I, women have been left out of higher level negotiations of the peace process because of traditional gender bias (note the dearth of Palestinian women at Oslo).

Alternatively, women’s tendency to participate in grassroots activism could result from a different understanding of peace than men. Women could perhaps understand that peace is forged not only by official declarations and agreements, but through long-term, substantial processes, including socio-economic ameliorative changes, enacted on the ground. Aweidah-Liftawi, director of the *Women’s Studies Centre*, including the Feminist Research Library, presented this hypothesis by suggesting that Palestinian women, as opposed to men, understand that “negotiations do not necessarily equal peace. Negotiations are not the whole story.”⁴¹

The third kind of response offered to the question, “do Palestinian women engage in peace activism differently than men?” focused on the different goals chosen by women peace activists. Because of the historical exclusions of women from health care, marriage laws, education, and the market, many of the women felt that their choice of legal, educational, and health projects (as opposed to more political, power aspirations) resulted from a need for “historical catching-up.” This kind of response emphatically rejected any implication of deep difference based on gender. Hussein said her choice of programs and strategies had “nothing to do with

group of responses offered by the women I interviewed, Hasso suggests that women’s commitment to work on the grassroots allowed them to gain political power and facilitated a “fruitful coexistence between nationalism and feminism,” 459.

⁴¹ Sama Aweidah-Liftawi, interview, 24 July 1999.

being a woman itself, but rather has to do with how we think that education can make changes in the coming period.”⁴²

After offering this third kind of response, the women typically began explaining why the thrust of their peace efforts now focused less on national issues of statehood and more on internal Palestinian women’s issues. These internal issues include both creating new programs for women’s health, education, and political leadership training and petitioning the Palestinian legislation for gender equality. This attempt by the women I interviewed to explain their current focus on women’s rights within the self-ascribed identity of “peacemaker” will be the focus of the next section.

In general, the lack of consensus among the Palestinian women (and sometimes even within one individual response) offers inconclusive evidence regarding the western feminist notion of the ethic of care. All the women agreed that if women *do* go about peacemaking differently than men, their differences are generally the result of the forces which have constructed the role of women in Palestinian society — including historical, social, cultural, and national forces — rather than any innate difference between men and women. Although many of the Palestinian women entertained the viability of the ethic of care hypothesis, they also registered strong ambivalence about its implications. In contrast, the Israeli women peacemakers I interviewed, as I will discuss in Chapter Three, tended to embrace the implications of the gendered ethic of care to a greater degree than the Palestinian women that I interviewed. While the Palestinians primarily objected to

⁴² Soraida Hussein, interview, 12 August 1999.

the disunity that the gendered ethic of care might suggest, the Israeli women did not oppose the suggestion that men and women might engage in peacemaking differently. While the Palestinian understanding of peacemaking focuses on the collective, the Israeli understanding is more individualized. When the Israeli women emphasized the individual nature of peacemaking, they allowed for factors such as gender that might influence an individual's political principles.

III. A Discourse of Group Rights: Bridging Feminism and Nationalism

The first section of this chapter detailed Palestinian women's experiences as *objects* of the national struggle. Their involvement in political activism at both the grassroots levels and within the PLO leadership resulted from the historically particular exclusions and opportunities afforded to women, especially the subset of well-educated liberal women, by the Palestinian experience under Israeli occupation. The second section first revealed the nature of the Palestinian peacemakers' internal programs, as well as the constraints dictated by the current political status or climate of Palestine. As *subjects*, the Palestinian women also expressed varying opinions about joint work with Israelis and the merits of fostering tolerance between the traditional enemies. Finally, they also explained their own roles as peacemakers variably. Whether arguing for inherent differences in women's abilities, tactics or attitudes, or expressing the different capabilities of the two genders within the social construct of gender in Palestine, they disagreed among themselves about the motivations driving women's peacemaking efforts in contrast to those of men.

In this third section I shift —as the women’s energies themselves have shifted — to focus on the Palestinian women’s efforts to build a strong state and civil society. Each woman I interviewed independently and personally distinguished between the two rights to which she is committed — national rights (working towards a Palestinian State) and women’s rights (within the Palestinian society). Many women began their interviews by immediately separating national goals from feminist goals. Although historically Palestinian women peacemakers when facing these often-competing sets of goals have ranked the national goals higher in priority, in the current pre-state society, women’s rights have surfaced as the dominant, consuming set of goals. The emphasis on justice that has permeated the struggle for national rights for the past thirty years and throughout the Oslo process has influenced the discourse that now permeates the struggle for women’s rights. Women who have long petitioned in the name of justice for the creation of a Palestinian State, the return of refugees, and the dismantling of settlements are now using the same kinds of arguments to petition for justice within their own society. The demand by the Palestinian women peacemakers for societal gender equality within a traditional Arab society follows from their equal participation in the national struggle.

The Palestinian women peacemakers I interviewed are working on two kinds of feminist projects. First, they are creating and directing new social, cultural, political, health, and educational structures to advance the situation of Palestinian women. Second, they are directly petitioning for equal provision to women under the Palestinian laws and legislation currently being drafted. The

Palestinian women peacemakers' ability to implement both of these projects successfully depends on the historical circumstances of Palestine today. The political culture of change, openness, and fluidity that has resulted from the Oslo peace process has fostered state and civil society building and has allowed a moderate pursuit of these two feminist projects.

Ranking Competing Rights

Ten out of the thirteen women I interviewed chronicled the change in priorities from securing national rights to securing women's rights. Until the post-Oslo period (1994-1999), they said, Palestinian women focused primarily on the national struggle. Soraida Hussein best articulated the rationale behind temporarily putting the women's rights' campaign on hold:

Until now, women decided to focus only on the national struggle. We thought it was selfish to work on women's rights. So many people were being killed, the towns were under curfew, someone was always going to prison and everyone was being rounded up. It was very difficult for a women activist to worry about women's rights during such a time.⁴³

Until now, petitioning for women's rights (or the rights of any special interest group rights) would have been perceived as disloyal to the collective struggle. The *intifada* depended on a united population to resist the occupation, as did the beginning of the Oslo state building process, from 1993-1995.⁴⁴

In 1999, by contrast, a different situation confronts the women activists. A current of change, flexibility, and openness permeates the new post- Oslo political culture. The Palestinian women I interviewed now included various feminist

⁴³ Soraida Hussein, interview, 12 August 1999.

⁴⁴ Few programs were initiated to promote gender equality during the *intifada*, except for those that encouraged women to join militias and party cadre ranks. See Kwar, 234.

projects in their general conception of the national struggle. These projects range from petitioning for women's rights within the Palestinian Legislative Council, to adding amendments in the new constitution, to creating less sexist educational curricula, to establishing a Gender Ministry in Arafat's government. Women's rights are now somewhat more acceptable as a goal for political activism. The Palestinian women thus included working for women's rights as an integral part of current peace activism, defined broadly. Promoting feminist equality under the law and creating structural means for women's advancement through civil society ventures (the two major feminist projects) will help shape the future Palestinian State.

Moreover, many of the women articulated a sense of urgency regarding the current climate of change that is supportive of the feminist projects.⁴⁵ Now, as laws are being drafted, women can help "mold the structure."⁴⁶ Many women feared that once the Palestinian State is officially declared, the current open political culture of change might dissipate. They also recognize growing opposition to their feminist projects, due to the increasing political strength of socially conservative, Islamic opposition groups, namely Hamas. Greater Hamas

⁴⁵ By supportive, I do not mean, "encouraging." The women in this study pointed out that the new Palestinian government under the leadership of the PLO has not even attempted to make equal space for women in government or political power. It is the political climate of change — rather than the more traditional, sexist policies of the PLO leadership — that is supportive. See Rabab Abdulhadi's "The Palestinian Women's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics and Challenges," *Gender & Society* 12, no.6 (1998): 649-673 for an alternative argument. Abdulhadi argues that while women's social movements have emerged strengthened from the experience of the *intifada*, they have been subverted by the environment hostile to social movements induced by the post Oslo period. Abdulhadi concedes that while the Palestinian National Authority has attempted to "usurp the autonomy of the Palestinian women's movement," it has also imposed certain constraints on Palestinian women that have "produced the sense of urgency and focused much of feminist activism on advocacy, legislation and coalition building," 669. The women I interviewed articulated the sense of urgency and the foci of activity described by Abdulhadi.

⁴⁶ Soraida Hussein, interview, 12 August 1999.

influence within the Palestinian legislative bodies in the future could greatly undermine the activists' efforts to further women's rights and social equality on issues such as education, labor, dress, marriage, and divorce.⁴⁷ Thus the Palestinian women I interviewed conveyed the importance of working quickly before "time runs out."⁴⁸

Putting Women's Rights on the National Agenda

A national discourse of justice and rights brought both female and male Palestinian peacemakers to the negotiating table with the Israelis during the Oslo peace process. The process began with the historic 1993 Madrid peace talks and culminated in the 1995 Oslo II (Declaration of Principles) agreement signed by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. The Palestinian women peacemakers have imitated this exact process, pursuing justice and rights through the creation of a principled document, as they shift their (primary) focus away from national issues and towards the internal social goals of women's rights in Palestine. On August 3, 1994, the women's committees' leadership and members of various Palestinian NGOs convened in an East Jerusalem hotel and presented the "Draft Document of Principles of the Women's Rights" (also known as the Palestinian Women's Charter, see Appendix C). The Charter enumerated women's contributions and sacrifices to the national cause:

⁴⁷ In "Gender and Politics under the Palestinian Authority," *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXVII, no 2 (Winter 1999): 38-51, Nahla Abdo concludes that the situation of women has advanced little since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (the PA) in January 1994. She cites structural impediments — including a general conservatism in society (including women's groups) and the formal bureaucracy of the PA in its attempt to become a nation state — as preventing women's advancement.

⁴⁸ Zahira Kamal, interview, 3 August 1999. She and two other Palestinian interviewees echoed the refrain, "we will not be another Algeria," vowing not to allow their interests to be subverted to political processes, as occurred in Algeria following independence.

The Palestinian women's struggle has been depicted over the decade of the Palestinian national struggle as an immeasurable contribution in all spheres; women were martyred and thousands imprisoned. Palestinian women were forced to delay many tasks associated with their social position and instead focus all their attention towards the issues of the national and political struggle. — It is time that the issue of women's legal rights in all aspects becomes a cornerstone for building a democratic Palestinian society.⁴⁹

This charter mirrored the sentiments of the Palestinian women whom I interviewed in 1999. They said that, since they had “proven themselves” through their participation and leadership in the national struggle, they could now themselves expect and demand equal rights. Specifically, women's legal status under current Palestinian law — a combination of Jordanian, Egyptian, and Islamic laws — presents a source of concern to the women peacemakers. Soraida Hussein directs a legal literacy program at *the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling* (WCLAC), where she organizes education seminars throughout Palestine to familiarize women with their rights under Islamic law. Hussein gave me one example of a misunderstood Islamic law. According to Hussein, although the official inheritance law provides for a division (although an unequal division) of inheritance between sons and daughters, eighty percent of the time the inheritance goes entirely to the males of the family.⁵⁰ The women's emphasis on

⁴⁹ “The Declaration of Principles on Palestinian Women's Rights,” third draft, General Union of Palestinian Women, Jerusalem. From Sabbagh, 251-254. See Appendix C for a reprint of this Declaration. The body of the text stresses three main areas where women seek equality: political rights, civil rights, and (taken together) economic, social and cultural rights. The order of the rights as presented in the text reflects the concerns of the authors. The right to vote and run for office is the first and foremost right presented in the text, reflecting the fear held by many of the women they will become disenfranchised in the political arena now that their participation in the struggle for national liberation is no longer necessary. Naalah Kourach said that the Palestinian women's declaration of principles used both the Algerian women's charter as well as that drafted by South African women as models. Naalah Kourach, interview, 12 August 1999.

⁵⁰ Soraida Hussein, interview, 12 August 1999.

legal literacy and legislative change has arisen in response to the current open political climate and sense of urgency.

The women peacemakers fear that their opportunity to mold the legal foundation of the new Palestinian State will be limited. A few pointed out that in Arab societies laws often limit the status of women. Women's rights in other Arab countries have been difficult to secure precisely because changing laws is often a bureaucratic and nearly impossible process. By contrast, the women pointed out that in the pre-state current structure of Palestine, where the basic laws are being drafted,

We are trying to create the jurisprudence. That means to be aware and involved in all drafts of all laws, to publicize the written laws, [and to] encourage public debate in newspapers, meetings and at workshops.⁵¹

Accordingly, the Palestinian peacemakers I interviewed devote the majority of their time, resources, and efforts to two political projects. First, they organize political consciousness raising workshops for women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations. They also create leadership training seminars for young women (the *Women's Model Parliament* is a good example).⁵² Second, they petition for gender equality in the new governmental bodies and laws. According to the directors of the *Women's Affairs Technical Committee*, the *Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling*, and the *Women Studies Centre*,

⁵¹ Zahira Kamal, interview, 3 August 1999. Soraida Hussein also said that women have been involved in drafting 65 amendments of the basic laws to include more egalitarian policies.

⁵² Naalah Kourach said that the workshops are often successful in impacting a broad cross section of Palestinian society. As a result of mass workshops in villages, cities, and refugees camps that taught and encouraged political participation, ninety-five percent of the Palestinian women voted in the first Palestinian election in 1996. The *Women's Affairs Technical Committee*, an official body of the Palestinian Legislative Council of which Kourach is an executive committee member, organized the workshops. Naalah Kourach, interview, 12 August 1999.

“peacemaking” now requires exerting political pressure on the newly formed Palestinian Legislative Council (including its five female members). These women activists demand commitment to gender equality in the formation of the new Palestinian laws.

Rather than being seen as a goal competing with the national struggle, women’s rights have now become the new focus of the national struggle for the Palestinian women peacemakers. Using the same justice and rights-based ideas conceived during their participation in the national movement, these peacemakers hope to promote the advancement of women within the new Palestinian State and society before it is too late. The Palestinian Women’s Charter described above, for example, adopted the same political strategies used in the national movement — demanding justice and equity through a written declaration of principles. Thus, the dual goals of national and women’s rights currently consume the Palestinian women peacemakers. This sets them apart both from male peacemakers in Palestine and from their Israeli colleagues in Bat Shalom.

The Palestinian women’s peacemaking activities and their political model — based on a discourse of collective Palestinian rights and justice — contrasts with the model envisioned by the Israeli women peacemakers, the subject of the next chapter.