

**DEFENDING THEIR LAND, PROTECTING THEIR MEN: PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S POPULAR RESISTANCE  
AFTER THE SECOND INTIFADA**

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**ABSTRACT:** Popular resistance has, following the recent uprisings in different Arab countries, received increased media and scholarly attention. Yet, the role that women and gender play in civil resistance movements remains understudied. In this paper I analyse different forms, contexts and framings of Palestinian women's protest activism after 2000, arguing that their acts can potentially affect social and political change. Although so far unsuccessful in sustaining concrete material changes, women's embodied protest politics, by radically challenging conventional male-dominated political discourse and practice, might provide visionary outlines of a non-masculinist, non-militarist, yet proactive form of political culture in Palestine.

**KEYWORDS:** popular resistance, embodied politics, Palestine, women's activism, social movements

## **INTRODUCTION**

Before the Arab Spring, most scholars considered popular resistance<sup>1</sup> to be non-existent in the (generally understood to be) authoritarian political landscape of the Middle East. If analysts did take note of people's protest actions on the ground, they found them to be mostly sporadic and irrelevant for sustainable political change. The Palestinian case is no exception. Few studies enquire into the potentials of post-Oslo civil resistance as a catalyst for change and, if they do (e.g. Norman 2010), they tend to pay little attention to women's involvement in and gendered aspects of such subaltern politics.

Yet, acts of civil disobedience did and do take place in Palestine and women are involved in them. In this paper I discuss different forms, contexts and framings of Palestinian women's protest activism after 2000. I argue that female resistance activism can potentially affect social (/gender) and political change. Not only does female popular protest activism receive broad social support, but the underlying gender identity of the 'courageous female protester' also challenges reductionist gender binaries of men/protector vs. women/protected that undergird traditionally male-dominated conceptions and practices of formal politics (see e.g. Enloe 1989; Elshtain 1987). A better understanding of women's practical and discursive strategies of courageous action-oriented, yet largely nonviolent, dissident activism thus ultimately might provide visionary outlines of a non-masculinist, non-militarist, yet proactive political culture in Palestine.

Starting with brief methodological and theoretical considerations and a historical overview of female protest since the First Intifada, I discuss methods and organisations, structural context and framings of female popular resistance in Palestine today. I conclude with an evaluation of the social and political transformative potential of these forms of activism, arguing that Palestinian women's dissident political practices not only affect ideational changes at political and social level, but also force us rethink what 'doing politics' means for women living under prolonged occupation.

## **METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: FIELDWORK IN PALESTINE AND THEORIES OF POPULAR RESISTANCE**

The empirical data of this paper was collected during 11 months of field work from 2007-2010 in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> With my base in Ramallah, and later Bethlehem, I travelled regularly

and widely, speaking to and spending time with peace, resistance and day-to-day activists from different geographical, socio-economic, religious, gender and generational backgrounds. I conducted 84 qualitative semi-structured interviews with female (and some male) activists and held five focus groups with usually between 10 and 20 women in Bethlehem, Ramallah, Hebron, and Jerusalem. Additionally, I attended several dozen public political events (political in the widest sense) and spend prolonged periods in family houses, participating in women's everyday life and sharing their daily work, which proved to be among the most fruitful occasions to gain insights into the practices and meanings of women's more informal resistance strategies. While interview partners in formally registered organisations were easy to locate, interviews with day-to-day activists, i.e. with ordinary women who organise loosely and informally in their communities were arranged through friends and local contacts.

Given the internal power-political rivalries and the fragmented nature of the popular resistance scene in Palestine, I was, of course, at times faced with widely diverging explanations of its organisational, structural and ideational context. While local villagers active in protests against the wall or Israeli incursions often contested the leadership claims put forward by the predominantly urban- (Ramallah-)based, professionalised NGO activists, the latter tended to present ordinary people's protest with reference to global nonviolent justice and solidarity movements, so as to link it better to what they perceived would be my, the researchers', world. Generally, however, I found that both Palestinian women and men had no objections to speaking to me, but rather considered the telling of their stories and opinions to a foreign researcher to be part of their political activism (see also Peteet, 1991). Moreover, and contrary to Western stereotypical assumptions that female researchers face problems during their field studies in Arab countries, I found that I in fact enjoyed privileges, gaining easy access to both men and women, and establishing close and informal relationships with women quickly. The more familiar relations with my female informants helped to

gain deeper understandings of the intricate web of political and social power structures that enable and constrain particularly women's activism. Such a in-depth and nuanced picture also proved beneficial to distinguish between more general patterns and particular local specificities in the strongly fragmented popular resistance scene in Palestine.

Studied in this way, the Palestinian case study can contribute to the theorisation of gendered popular resistance. Collective nonviolent resistance activism has been studied by conflict transformation scholars (e.g. Sharp 1973; Lederach 1995) who have theorised about nonviolent techniques to transform the structural context of conflict, as well as by social movement researchers (e.g. Mc Adam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Jaspers 1997) who look more carefully at the material and ideational context in which activists operate. Resistance acts have also been of interest to anthropologists and sociologists (e.g. de Certeau 1984; Scott 1985) who strive to identify alternative sites and qualities of transformative agency. Resistance studies are thus characterised by strong fragmentations along disciplinary lines and a multiplicity of definitions, weakening the analytical utility of the concept. Studies of resistance remain 'thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas' (Ortner 1995: 190).

Middle East scholarship has also tended to neglect studying (gendered) subaltern politics through in depth ethnographies, for reasons that can be traced back to Orientalist legacies as well as newly arising political agendas (see e.g. Cronin 2007; Bayat 2010). Some feminist and women's scholarship has made an important exception to this: In Palestine, for example, local political cultures and forms of political agency have been studied more carefully from a bottom-up perspective in the very broad literature on the women's and/or feminist movement.<sup>3</sup> Much of this literature has investigated the

ways in which women's social and political struggles are interlinked.<sup>4</sup> Additionally to the two concepts of nationalism and feminism, Islam and Islamism have more recently entered into the debate on Palestinian women's activism.<sup>5</sup> This article builds on the wide array of empirical and conceptual literature on the Palestinian women's movement, framing the analysis within the three parameters of nationalism(s), feminism(s) and Islam.

I do, however, propose a slightly different approach to studying women's subaltern politics here. Rather than tracing the influences that women's political activism has on the ways in which women articulate and combine their feminist and nationalist struggles (in a Muslim-majority society), I ask how popular resistance is *gendered*. A gendered analysis is crucial for understanding how popular resistance is embedded in wider social, political, economic, cultural and religious contexts. Gender dynamics have a strong impact on protest mobilisation (and vice versa). All social movements use gendered frames to construct collective identities and gender 'is also constructed in movements that do not explicitly evoke the language of gender conflict and, therefore, is an explanatory factor in the emergence, course, and outcome of protest groups' (Taylor 1999: 13). Moreover, female activists, by using their bodies as sites of political engagement, perform and challenge gendered norms of conventional politics. Gender identities are thus not only instrumentalised by protesters to construct collective identities, but they are also politicised and transformed through their various enactments.

In other words, in this paper I am less concerned with the impact that political activism has on women's feminist consciousness and struggles, but rather I study female popular resistance acts from a gendered perspective in order to gain new insights on alternative gendered (and specifically women's) imaginaries, theorisations and practices of politics. I aim to provide a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of Palestinian women's protest activism against occupation and settler colonial

policies by shedding light on the gendered aspects of women's internal politics, their cultural backgrounds, and the framing processes they use, as well as their subjectivities, aims and motivations for taking part in collective civil protest. While relying on insights from feminist perspectives on resistance (particularly scholarship on Palestinian women's resistance), I take inspiration from Fraser's (1992) theorisation of 'counterpublics' and Butler's (1990) conceptualisation of gender being 'embodied' and 'performed.' In using these two theorists, I hope to better understand the social, political and cultural dynamics of Palestinian women's acts of resistance, but also the ways in which their bodily and strongly gendered political practices can widen mainstream understandings of 'the political.'

#### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S POPULAR RESISTANCE IN PALESTINE**

Palestinian women's popular resistance activism was most widespread during the First Intifada.<sup>6</sup> With many men arrested, wounded or killed, women started to take positions as spokespersons in political parties. The majority, however, did not enter official politics, but participated in various forms of informal ad hoc political action. Women's practices were sometimes violent, involving serious confrontations with soldiers, but predominantly they engaged in popular resistance, such as demonstrations, protests, sit-ins or visits to political prisoners. Their resistance was also economic: women often had to act as single providers and their work in the committees or food co-operatives formed the basis for the boycott of Israeli imports. As managers of the household, they were at the forefront of raising awareness and encouraging other women to stop buying Israeli products. On a social level, women's networking, which 'was built on the traditional home visits by women, providing support for prisoners, their families, martyrs' families and all other sectors or individuals affected by Israeli oppression during the intifada' (Jad 2004: 90-91) was equally important. When, for example, the Israeli authorities closed education institutions, women were central in setting up a clandestine education system.<sup>7</sup>

While women normalised (predominantly nonviolent) popular resistance through their political, economic and social *practices*, the male-dominated leadership of the Intifada solidified a shift in the political *discourse* towards nonviolence and nonviolent popular resistance. To reject popular criticisms that nonviolence represents a passive strategy and a form of normalisation (i.e. normalising the abnormal situation of the occupation),<sup>8</sup> activist leaders stressed their adherence to nonviolent resistance as a pragmatic strategy, rather than a moral principle (e.g. Awad 1984). For them, mass-based, proactive popular resistance, as a middleway between the liberationist ideology of armed revolution and the statist-traditionalist strategy of institutionalised steadfastness, constituted the way forward towards Palestinian independence (see Tamari 1991).

Popular resistance did not bring independence, but some partial advances. Economically, the policy of self-reliance and noncooperation exercised by alternative social and economic organisations (which were largely sustained by women's groups, such as *In'āsh al-'Usra* or the women's committees) through the creation of food cooperatives, the boycott of Israeli goods and tax strikes seriously challenged the sustainability of the occupation (Andoni 2001: 210). Politically, the Intifada produced a stalemate within the Israeli political landscape by widening the rift between the left and right. On the Palestinian side, confronting the occupation helped achieve unity across factions (at least in the early years) and was crucial for the construction of a national identity, creating a sense of empowerment among Palestinians (Dudouet 2008: 14).

Opinions about the long-term social gender impact of the Intifada vary. While Abdo argues that after the Intifada '[w]hat had been built on both the political-national front and the gender-social front

cannot be reversed' (Abdo 1994: 168), Jad maintains that the popular committees 'were not new instruments through which the status of women was transformed. ... Women's roles in the popular committees became an extension of what it traditionally had been in the society: teaching and rendering services' (Jad 1990: 261). Indeed, women never shared significantly in the Intifada's leadership and after three years, when (religious) conservatives launched backlashes against female activists, their participation declined (Hammami 1990). While alternative gender models did emerge, the general lack of security established the family and local community structures as important social and political institutions to provide protection, thus reinforcing women's domestic, nurturing and caring roles as mothers (particularly, but not exclusively, through newly arising Islamic gender models). Although activists started lobbying for women's equal labour and political rights, they refrained from openly addressing (religious) personal status law and did not criticise gender-discriminatory practices and attitudes in the private sphere.

In the early years after the 1993 Oslo Accords, popular resistance activism decreased substantially, as focus was put on state-building. Many of the former activists became involved in civil society building through NGOs, academic research centres or think tanks. Since the failure of Camp David (2000) the rationale of resistance has gained currency again. Participation in resistance, however, is predominantly restricted to armed resistance by a small number of militants (mainly men) (Andoni 2001). Attempts to revive popular, largely nonviolent resistance as an anti-occupation strategy have been made and, since the construction of the wall in 2002, protest mobilisation has risen, shifting its centres from urban to rural areas, but this newly burgeoning movement remains ephemeral, fragmented (due Israeli policies of spatial control) and without unified leadership.

Several actors have put themselves forward as supporters or even leaders of popular resistance. The political initiative *al-Mubadara*, for example, but also the PA (see Stephan 2007) and several NGOs<sup>9</sup> have endorsed popular nonviolent struggle. Recently the EU and other international funding bodies have shown more interest in funding principled nonviolence projects (EU 2010), while global justice and anti-occupation movements, such as the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) support protest activism. While locally initiated *pragmatic* nonviolent popular protest actions (supported by international solidarity movements) are broadly supported by society, foreign-funded *principled* nonviolence projects are perceived more sceptically and often considered a Western plot aimed at commodifying, weakening and fragmenting the originally mass-based Palestinian national resistance movement (Richter-Devroe 2009).

The popular resistance scene in Palestine thus has undergone a process of localisation, professionalisation, and internationalisation. Women's popular protest action is not isolated from these trends, but it is often more informal, its networks more loose, and its mobilising mechanisms more community-oriented than men's.

## **METHODS AND ORGANISATION OF WOMEN'S POPULAR RESISTANCE**

The main method of popular resistance in Palestine today, besides the boycott, is civil protest, and women play a special role. The Alternative Education Initiative (AEI), for example, organises women-only protests next to the wall, where women hold prayers or sing Palestinian songs, often dressed in traditional attire. Similarly, the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS), a group of international female anti-occupation activists permanently based in the West Bank, supports women's olive harvesting and farming on annexed land. In their more informal ad hoc activism, local women also

regularly make use of creative and symbolic protest techniques, such as silent marches, vigils, walks with candles, women's ululating, etc. Such specific women's or feminist forms of protests were, for example, used by women activists in Greenham Common (Laware 2004), by Code Pink (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2007). Women in Black (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003) have, however, not been employed on a large scale in Palestine.

The main organisations to call for, claim leadership of, and participate in female civil protest range from local groups (sometimes linked to popular village committees), NGOs (sometimes with women-only groups, e.g. AEI, Wi'am, the Holy Land Trust [HLT], The Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign [GPAAWC]), and political parties (particularly Palestinian Women Working Society for Development, *al-Mubadara*), to international groups (e.g. International Women's Peace Service).

Women activist leaders express the need for independent women's organisations. Many argue that it is difficult for women to participate in gender-mixed demonstrations due to male control over organisational structures. In 2003, at the initiative of local women, a network of Women Against the Wall from different governorates was founded in Bil'in, a village near Ramallah, in which weekly demonstrations against the wall and an annual nonviolence conference is held. GPAAWC supported the foundation of the network by providing specific training courses for women on boycotting and popular resistance. The aim of the network was to establish a women's branch for each (male-dominated) popular committee in each village so as to strengthen women's voices in the organisational and decision-making structures.<sup>10</sup>

Feryal, a grassroots popular resistance leader in her fifties, originally from Gaza, told me in several extended interviews and informal conversations that she had struggled to challenge control from political and patriarchal sources in her home district of Salfit. She explained that the first two demonstrations against the wall in Salfit, in March 2003 and June 2003, were attended by women only. Later, when more people started to join, men from the local popular committee attempted to take over: 'they wanted to delegitimise us [women] by saying that we work with the internationals...Men always want to be responsible and take the lead in the demonstration, just as they do anywhere else.' Once the protests attracted more attention, fights between political parties, NGOs and other initiatives erupted:

In February 2005 the men organised a demonstration and there started to be problems between the different political parties and other organisations. So then most people and particularly the women didn't want to join the demonstrations anymore. The problem was that now everybody wanted to take the credit for the huge mobilisation of people that *we* [the women] achieved...So we decided to form the Women Against the Wall group, rather than staying with the popular committee. We didn't want to be involved in this fighting. Our women's group is for everyone, no matter which political affiliation.<sup>11</sup>

The initiative to form independent women's branches thus stemmed from an urge to challenge, circumvent and perhaps even transform gender hierarchies (propelled by internal factionalism) in the organisational structures of popular resistance. Despite such attempts, most female protest activism continues to take place on an ad hoc basis, often triggered by specific events. Ilham, a single woman in her forties who lives a simple peasant life and had been at the forefront of anti-wall demonstrations in her village near Ramallah, recalled a spontaneous mobilisation:

We protested the first time when the Israeli army came here and brought bulldozers. It was in the night, people were sleeping. They put a guard at the entrance of the village and they didn't allow anyone to leave their houses...So us, the women, we all went down and we faced them. We wanted to resist them. They were sitting on the bulldozers. We fought with them and looked them eye to eye. We were just with stones. They fought with bombs and bullets and teargas, and they were hitting us. Then one of the soldiers came closer to me and started cursing, shouting and hitting me. One soldier spoke Arabic and he told me: "Put your hands up!" I told him: "No - thank you...We will stay here until our deaths."<sup>12</sup>

While more formal organisations, such as international solidarity movements, NGOs, political parties and even the PA have claimed leadership and credit for women's civil resistance, it is in fact through such informal family and community structures at the village level that most local women become mobilised to – often unplanned and spontaneous – direct action against the Israeli army. Although spontaneous, their acts are, however, not apolitical. To the contrary: they respond to and are consciously enacted by female protesters in a set of specific structural political and socio-cultural constraints.

### **STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S POPULAR RESISTANCE ACTIVISM**

On the political level, the Israeli occupation, the PA and the structural dynamics between them have severely restricted possibilities for female activists. The Israeli policies of fragmentation, separation and mobility restrictions have systematically dispossessed, occupied and destroyed Palestinian living spaces. With the Oslo Accords, the West Bank was split into Areas A, B and C, each having different administrative and security arrangements. Since then, Israeli policies of spatial control have further increased (see e.g. Falah 2005; Hanafi 2009). In 2002 the operation Defensive Shield, implemented

through a comprehensive invasion of the West Bank, house demolitions, mobility restrictions, infrastructure destructions and construction of the wall resulted in massive economic losses and de-development (Roy 2004).

Restrictions of mobility through checkpoints, the wall, road block and curfews have limited contact between activists, making it hard for them to organise and carry out large scale events. Moreover, the army's use of brutal military reprisals through crack-downs on activists and their families, and shooting rubber bullets, live ammunition, tear gas and sound bombs has curbed broad-based participation.

Some interviewees argued that the participation of internationals, but also of women, in protests, might mitigate the army's military responses. However, the great majority of activists who regularly participate in protests contested this claim. Im Fuad, a local activist in her fifties who worked together with Feryal in organising women's anti-wall demonstrations in Salfit, found that gender composition makes no difference:

If there are only women it is easier to keep the demonstration nonviolently. It is the young boys that start throwing stones and that might give the army the 'reason' to fire ... [but in the end] the army doesn't care whether our demonstration is nonviolent or not. They shoot in any case...The army knows nothing about peace and nonviolence.<sup>13</sup>

Other village women active in the anti-wall protests mostly confirmed her observation, but some added that women are less likely than men to get arrested. This allows them to be more

confrontational with the army, making them succeed in defending or even freeing their men from tanks and soldiers.

Participation in protest activism is certainly highly dangerous for women, just as it is for men. Some families thus discourage their sons and daughters to participate. Lama, originally from Al-Askeri refugee camp in Nablus, has four boys, is a former employee in a Ramallah-based NGO, and was very active in the First Intifada. She contended:

Resistance without organisation is a mistake. There is no organisation in this resistance, just someone says that there is the army in the street, so we all go out and throw stones...[In the First Intifada] we were all still very small, [but now] we grew up. Now I got married, I got children – I started to think. I am not prepared to let my boy go out and throw stones so that he dies because of the stone. Not because I reject the resistance, or because I have forgotten about our cause – no, to the contrary: [As a mother] it is within my possibility to start a new generation which is aware, open-minded, which understands and can think right...not just throw stones and sacrifice themselves. The days and nights that I raised my son for 18 years - how can I forget them, [just] to say that I am defending my land?<sup>14</sup>

Her account points to the existence of a multiplicity of conflicting resistance discourses, practices and regimes. This lack of unity and security – which is an intended result of long-term Israeli occupation policies – has curbed people's, and particularly women's, trust in official political institutions, often leading them to seek security and protection not from the state, but in smaller socio-political units, such as the family, local community or women's groups. Such grassroots (independent) women's and other civil society initiatives, which win their support through building

alternative informal institutions or support systems, have, however, been actively curtailed by the PA (see e.g. Jad 2004). The PA's claim to leadership of anti-wall demonstrations thus is considered a hypocritical publicity show by many local activists (see e.g. Audeh 2007).

Additionally to (gendered) political structures, mobilisation is constrained by social and cultural norms. Among my interviewees, some – but remarkably few – mentioned cultural and social factors as a reason for women's scarce participation in protests. Among those who did, the trend towards social conservatism was seen to be a result of the rise of political Islam, 'tradition,' 'normalisation', 'westernisation', and/or the political and economic effects of the occupation.

At least half of the secular, mainly urban-based, women leaders of NGOs or women's branches of political parties I interviewed identified the rising influence of Islamic groups as a major cause for increased restrictions on women. Supporters of this argument claimed, for example, that Hamas brainwashed women into voting for them in the 2006 election by promising socio-economic support, but that in reality they were used as tokens and have no say in decision-making. Such arguments were also brought forward by women of the leftist factions, as well as those sympathising with the Islamic movement against the nationalist-secular Fatah. Depending on their political leaning, women (and men) would thus brand either the Islamic or the nationalist-secular groups as patriarchal, accusing them of tokenism and only symbolically and sporadically granting women access.

A similar dynamic was evident between urban and rural activists. While the great majority of urban middle-class (and mostly professionalised NGO) leaders found conservative patriarchal 'traditions' in the rural areas to be a crucial factor barring women's public political agency, village women, or

activists working predominantly in rural areas, stressed that peasant women have a long history of active involvement in the resistance. Salwa, a young feminist activist who has a higher education degree in gender studies and now works with women in a village in the Hebron district, argued:

In the cities women are the least empowered. Their husbands are rich and they can therefore put more pressure on their women. He can put her in the house and say: "I give you everything, so you don't need to go out."...In villages women have to go out and they have to work. They have to feed their family. They are very strong.<sup>15</sup>

Such generalised differentiations between secular and religious, and town, camp and village do not reflect today's reality, but they are nevertheless held up to demarcate boundaries and hierarchies. While rural and camp women as well as those sympathising with the Islamic movement tend to emphasise their active involvement in the 'resistance,' contrasting it to what they perceive as the western-influenced depoliticised 'normalisation' agenda of urban secular leaders, the latter sometimes stress the need to eradicate 'backwardness' and 'modernise' peasant and religious women in order to free them from patriarchal 'traditions' (see also Jad 2004).

All of my informants agreed that Israeli occupation policies constitute the major cause for women's weak protest mobilisation. Israeli policies directly curb activism through harsh military repression, spatial fragmentation and mobility restrictions and indirectly through heightening insecurity (thus enforcing patriarchal restrictions on women's mobility as 'necessary' protection from gender-specific violence and potential sexual harassment) and increasing poverty (thus forcing women's preoccupation with issues of survival rather than resistance). Suad, a prominent women's activist in

the FIDA-affiliated Palestinian Federation of Women's Action who was very involved in the First Intifada, explained:

We used to go to demonstration in the thousands, but now people worry about the economic situation. There is an increase of poverty, unemployment, loss of hope for peace, the checkpoints, and the daily violations. In such a situation, how do you want to reduce women's burden and, at the same time, encourage their political empowerment, that they have a voice and a role?<sup>16</sup>

Economic and political empowerment is a necessary precondition for increasing women's spaces for agency. Israeli occupation policies and military reprisals in combination with the PA's patriarchal and hierarchical nature have fostered social conservatism and internal fragmentation, thus raising barriers to female public political action. Within this context, women's bodies and their behaviour have increasingly become battlefields upon which political rivalries are played out. While social and cultural norms without doubt play a role, cultural references can thus not be isolated from the wider political and social context in which actors construct and instrumentalise them.

## **FRAMINGS OF WOMEN'S POPULAR RESISTANCE**

To gain social support, local leaders emphasise their pragmatic (rather than principled) approach to popular nonviolent resistance. Adnan, a father of four whom I visited several times in his village near Ramallah, where he is a prominent leader of anti-wall protests, stressed that

We chose nonviolent resistance here not because we are angels, but it is a strategy...We are the victims in this conflict - so it would be stupid to play the criminal and take up arms, as the outside world wants us to. With nonviolent resistance the

world understands us as humans...we resist the wall all together and we do not talk about political or ideological debates.<sup>17</sup>

Such a pragmatic non-ideological approach to popular resistance is often considered to be more inclusive, gender-friendly and democratic. Scholars have argued that nonviolent civil action is especially attractive for women because it constructs inclusive collective identities and is less hierarchical than conventional political arrangements.<sup>18</sup> While Feryal in Salfit would not support such an argument, women in Adnan's village (including Ilham) identified the egalitarian and praxis-oriented nature of the protests as strongly mobilising. During a focus group with eight women, all stressed the close relations, trust and equality between protesters:

We set a very good example with everyone participating in the resistance. It was all very practical and everybody participated as volunteer. There were no personal aims. All the women in the village knew that Adnan's wife and his daughters and sons participate in the resistance and therefore they also went.<sup>19</sup>

Local activists emphasise the inclusive and action-oriented nature of popular, largely nonviolent resistance to rebuke commonly held associations of nonviolence with elitist or western agendas of normalisation. This representation might, of course, have little to do with the actual reality of (still largely male-dominated) protest politics on the ground (see Feryal's account), but, it highlights that local leaders want to re-establish popular, largely nonviolent resistance as an indigenous and socially as well as politically progressive strategy. The performative element of protest action, i.e. the fact that it is often performed to 'please' different audiences, is particularly well illustrated if gender-specific framings are taken into account.

Resistance is commonly associated with the male 'just warrior', while nonviolence, peace and the nation is symbolised by women's 'beautiful souls' (Elshtain 1987). In the Palestinian context, analysts of popular activism, particularly the anti-wall protests, often put women protesters in the spotlight, preferably presenting them visually through photos or films.<sup>20</sup> The main two femininity constructions which female activists themselves use (and often merge) to frame their civil resistance are the (more relational, and often dubbed 'traditional') mother figure, associated with peace and nonviolence and the (more independent, and often claimed to be 'modern') female political activist, more strongly connected to protest and resistance.

The mother figure is central to Palestinian political culture.<sup>21</sup> Discourses of motherhood are politicised in nationalist steadfastness discourses which elevate mothers as social, cultural and biological reproducers of the nation, but were also upheld by many ordinary women I spoke to. In such 'mother politics' (Cockburn 2007) women politicise the domestic sphere by presenting their domestic duties and reproductive roles as a form of political activism, and domesticate the public sphere by basing their political activities and entry into the public sphere on their domestic role as mothers (Peteet 1991: 175 - 203). Many ordinary women stressed that as mothers, it is their responsibility to take part in political action to prevent youth radicalisation and ensure the survival of family and community. Ilham, for example, emphasised that she had no other choice but to protect her land: 'If the soldiers come and take my land that means that I have nowhere to live. I have no home. So what can I do? I have to go out and defend my land.' Stressing her role as protector of the land (i.e. her means of subsistence), Ilham also emphasises her role as main provider of her family. By arguing that they need to defend their land women thus launch a discursive challenge, even if indirectly and without lasting change, against the gender construction (and superiority) of the male provider.

Ilham pushed this discursive challenge even further by stating that women must not only defend their land, but also their men:

Everyone, including women, have to resist as much as they can. If they had resisted that much [as we did in our village] already in 1948 then perhaps it would have turned out differently ... We women help the national cause and our men – what should they do without us? ... I told the other women that they have to defend their husbands and their sons, because what should she do if the soldiers take them or if they die? She needs them.

Although framings of popular resistance might thus often stick closer to social gender norms that associate femininity with nonviolence or motherhood, activists challenge patriarchal gender norms not only through their actual political practices (in which they encroach upon a political space traditionally controlled by men and associated with masculinity), but also discursively. Their double claim to defend not only their land (and thus the means of subsistence, a role traditionally associated with the male *provider*), but also their people (thus challenging men's, particularly leader's, role as male *protectors*), of course, does not constitute a strategic feminist agenda to transform gender regimes and ideologies. Yet, it nevertheless shows that ordinary peasant women, such as Ilham, through their involvement in protests articulate new female political subjectivities in which they underline their active roles in social, political and economic life in Palestine.

Women also borrow from Islamic discourses. Ilham, like many other women, referred to the Prophet's wife, Khadija, as an Islamic example of a strong resistance woman:

Men might say it is shameful for women to join the demonstration. Why would it be shameful? We want to resist. We want to defend our land. In the times of the Prophet Khadija also went to fight. So it is wrong to say it is shameful. Why should it be only natural for men? Women help men in their resistance and women are just as strong.

Ilham is not an active member or even supporter of the Islamic movement. Her reference to religion thus, although employed to support her political agency, is not ideological, but rather is embedded in her everyday practice of Islam. Female activist leaders, like Feryal, might utilise Islamic principles more strategically. She explained to me how she contested male activists' claim to leadership of the anti-wall protest:

In the demonstrations I took the loudspeaker twice and said through it: "*Allahu Akbar* – let's go to *jihad!*" As a result everybody came out to see and join. They wanted to see this woman who is saying "*Allahu Akbar*" and calling for *jihad*. At the same time this was their language, so they felt more ready to join...I use Islam to mobilise people. When they hear *Allahu Akbar*, they know it is something important and they come out of their houses to see.

In the case of Feryal, who had originally presented herself to me as a convinced communist, the use of Islamic slogans is employed strategically: tapping into the normative systems and discursive repertoire of ordinary women she hopes to mobilise them for (and legitimise their) political action.

Besides Islam, many female activists bring up human and international rights discourses to explain their activism. While more professional urban leaders mentioned concrete UN resolution and international law, day-to-day activists referred predominantly to their national and human rights

(self-determination, dignity, protection, etc.). Their selective appropriation of transnational rights discourse offered them a way to connect to the global justice movement and thus opened a channel through which they could make their voices heard and understood internationally.

There is, however, also a negative effect to the increased significance of international solidarity movements: many Palestinians now consider organised demonstrations a mere performance in which Palestinians play the role that foreigners expect of them.<sup>22</sup> Lama put that scepticism aptly:

[Protests] have become now in our society like rituals, like a wedding or a birthday party ... All year we stayed silent until World Peace Day on 20<sup>th</sup> September. So then Peace Day comes and what do we have to do? A group of Palestinians has to go to stage a sit-in at the wall in Ni'lin, another group of Palestinians has to go and stage a sit-in at the wall in Gaza. But what about the rest of the year? Between the Peace Day 2008 and the peace day 2009? What have we done? Nothing. This is a real shame.

Similarly to her critical analysis cited earlier, Lama here stresses the existence of multiple, contradictory and competing resistance discourses, practices and actors - this time focusing not on the discrepancies between family and nationalist institutions, but between the local and the global. Female nonviolent activism in particular has been tooted by international circles as a 'modern,' 'gender-equal' and 'civilised' way to engage politically. It is not that surprising then that local activists selectively borrow from human rights, mother politics and religious discourses, and make use of 'traditional' vs. 'modern', 'foreign' vs. 'culturally-authentic' or 'normalisation' vs. 'resistance' paradigms to meet local, national and international expectations. Because of (rather than despite) this careful hybrid framing, they are able to build stronger platforms of support.

## CONCLUSION

Although popular resistance has so far failed to bring about concrete material changes, it has launched a forceful challenge to established norms of female political agency in Palestine. As a 'counterpublic', female resistance constitutes an unconventional political practice through which activists express alternative political identities and imaginaries. For Fraser, subaltern counterpublics 'are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser 1992: 123). Women's political practices of dissent strive to publically and informally subvert and resist power differentials and injustices. The specificity and importance of particularly Palestinian women's popular resistance actions as 'counterpublics' center on two main points:

Firstly, women's popular protest actions reformulate, repoliticise and enact new femininity constructions of women as courageous, heroic citizens. Although the mere fact that women invade political spaces traditionally defined as male does not necessarily mean that they gain (or want to gain) rights in the private sphere, their acts carry important gender-specific meanings and implications. 'For women,' as Cockburn (2007: 177) states clearly, 'because of the way women are often reduced to the body and routinely sexualized, putting the body in play has a special meaning'.

Adnan provided a telling description of women performing new gender models in the anti-wall protests in his village, asserting that it was 'the first time that we saw women playing the role of the *hero*. It was clear that now their role is more than just to cry after their lost ones. Women were resisting together with the rest of us. They were very active, in the front lines.' Using their bodies as shields, female protesters question and provide alternatives to both the nationalist-patriarchal reduction of women to wombs and essentialist accounts of women as nurturing peacemakers. By

defending their land, their means of subsistence, their family, community, nation and even their men, female activists reject the narrow binary association of the heroic life of public action and politics with men and masculinity, and the everyday life of nurturing and care with women and femininity (see e.g. Elshtain 1987; Enloe 1989). Although citizenship remains theoretical in the Palestinian quasi-state, women through their political practices and narratives reveal this exclusivist association of citizenship with the courageous male citizen. Doing so, they make – even if indirectly – claims for equal rights as citizens.

Secondly, women's popular protest actions as radical, yet democratic, acts of dissent, challenge conventional political practices which restrict Palestinian people's political expressions to (corrupted) institutionalised channels, such as voting or membership in political parties. More specifically, Palestinian women's popular protest methods, although technically not much different from men's, point to the importance of informality which characterises grassroots politics under occupation, but is even more specific to women's ways of doing politics in this context of interlinking political (occupation) and social (patriarchal) restrictions. If women go out to protest they confront and trespass not only restrictions set by Israeli occupation policies, but also internal patriarchal norms and forms of control. The fact that most of women's activism in Palestine today is spontaneous and based on informal local women's, family and community structures (rather than formal political networks and institutions such as the state, political parties or NGOs) does not make it irrational, ineffective or a-political. To the contrary: given the strict control by Israeli occupation authorities and/or Palestinian male leadership, women's political spaces must remain unofficial so as not to be undermined. In this specific context women's strategising to organise and participate in irregular, informal and ad hoc protests is highly political.

In sum, female popular resistance provides a radical alternative to mainstream politics, on the one hand, and male-dominated social and political culture in Palestine, on the other. In order for activists to move forward with such a potentially visionary agenda of a non-masculinist, non-hierarchical, non-militarist yet proactive political culture, what is needed is a more unified strategy. Under the current Israeli settler-colonial regime and the PA's control over civil society) initiatives (particularly women's) such a project seems difficult to achieve – but political change, as recent events in the Middle East show, is not always predictable.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘popular’ (or ‘civil’), rather than ‘nonviolent,’ resistance here to reflect its usage by local activists. Palestinians tend to describe their (largely nonviolent) popular protest and boycott activism as *al-muqawmah ash-sha’biyya* (popular or civil resistance) in order to distinguish it from principled nonviolence (*la ‘unf*). The latter is often associated with a Western agenda aimed at ‘pacifying’ (and thus weakening and/or commodifying) Palestinian popular resistance (see also Richter-Devroe 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted mainly in Arabic, some in English and carried out predominantly in the framework of my PhD research on Palestinian women’s peacebuilding and resistance activism. I spent only 2 days in Gaza; the findings presented here are thus relevant for East Jerusalem and the West Bank only.

<sup>3</sup> For major works on women and gender relations in Palestine see Abdo (1994), Fleischmann (2003), Galvanis-Grantham (1996), Hammami (1990), Hasso (2005), Giacaman, Jad and Johnson (2000), Jad (1990, 2004, 2005), Peteet (1991), Sayigh (1992), Sharoni (1995), Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2009) and Taraki (2006).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Abdo (1994), Galvanis-Grantham (1996), Jad (2004), Peteet (1991).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Al-Labadi (2008), Jad (2005). For studies on Islamism and feminism more broadly see e.g. Moghissi (1999) or Badran (2009).

<sup>6</sup> For earlier studies on Palestinian women’s activism see e.g. Fleischmann (2003) or Jad, (1990, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> See Abdo (1994), Jad (1990, 2004), Jean-Klein (2003) and Hiltermann (1993) for detailed studies on women’s participation in the First Intifada.

<sup>8</sup> Creating conditions of co-existence through cultural, political, social or economic cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis without acknowledging and attempting to transform the fundamental power asymmetries between occupier and occupied are rejected by the majority of

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Palestinians as normalisation, as normalising the occupation and submitting to colonial rule (see Mi'ari 1999; Andoni 2003 or Richter-Devroe 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Most organisations have websites. See e.g. [www.musalaha.org](http://www.musalaha.org) (Musalaha), [www.aeicenter.org](http://www.aeicenter.org) (The Arab Education Initiative), [www.holylandtrust.org](http://www.holylandtrust.org) (The Holy Land Trust), [www.alaslah.org](http://www.alaslah.org) (The Palestinian Conflict Resolution Centre Wi'am) or [www.stopthewall.org/](http://www.stopthewall.org/) (GPAAWC).

<sup>10</sup> Interview GPAAWC, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Interview Feryal, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Ilham, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Im Fuad, 2008

<sup>14</sup> Interview Lama, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Salwa, 2008. See also Jad, 2004 for a study that aims at recuperating particularly peasant women's contribution to the Palestinian national struggle.

<sup>16</sup> Interview Suad, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Interview Adnan, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> See Costain (2000: 179), Beckwith (2002), Cockburn (2007: 179).

<sup>19</sup> Focus Group B, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Much of the documentation of the anti-wall demonstrations in Budrus, for example, has stressed the strong female participation, often presenting the local leader's, Morrar's, daughter, Iltizam, as new model actor for the anti-wall movement (e.g. Bacha, 2010)

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Hammami (1997), Peteet (1991) or Al Botmeh and Richter-Devroe (2010).

<sup>22</sup> See also Jean-Klein's (2002) analysis of "political audit tourism" during the First Intifada.