

Executive Summary:

Occupation and Patriarchy

The Role of Women Human Rights Defenders in Palestine

Júlia Fernàndez Molina

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This report; titled "Occupation and Patriarchy: The Role of Women Human Rights Defenders in Palestine," is as a result of intense field work. The development of the report included conducting 14 semi-structured interviews with women human rights defenders and women›s rights organizations in Palestine. All interviewees were familiar with peaceful (nonviolent) resistance strategies used to confront the Israeli regime of military occupation.

Work done by

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Executive Summary

"At the end of the day, we do not want this occupation to look more pleasant and more beautiful. We want to end this occupation, have our own state and independence, and naturally build our society like any other people in the world. For me, the critical point is to end the occupation, not make it more convenient. And so, I do not need support in terms of making the situation of women human rights defenders better. Perhaps I want to stop being a human rights defender." (S. F. Addameer)

The serious human rights violations that Palestinian civilians suffer, which are caused by the apartheid regime of the State of Israel, makes it necessarily inevitable to research and thoroughly examine the role of Palestinian women in the conflict, as a component of the social and organizational fabric of Palestinian civil society. It is also crucial to study the strategies these women adopt to constantly contribute to defending human rights within the context of popular resistance and peaceful (nonviolent) strategies. In the process of studying these women's role, it is important to take into account the gender and rights perspective of the double violations of rights these women are subject to in this context: Violations committed by the occupation, and the patriarchal dominance in the Palestinian society.

Since 1948, Israel has established a system of apartheid through military occupation, expropriation of land and the establishment of a structural regime of violence that violates the civil and political rights of Palestinians. Additionally, this regime violates International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law.

This policy of separation and apartheid affects the daily lives of Palestinians at all levels, namely, the provision of resources, restrictions on health services, education and access to decent work opportunities. This situation is exacerbated in the Gaza Strip, where a serious humanitarian crisis has been imposed for more than 10 years.

In this context of violation of rights, the vital task of human rights defenders who are silenced, attacked, imprisoned and even killed by the occupation forces shall be highlighted within a setting of total criminalization of the right to protest.

In addition, the Palestinian National Authority increasingly shows an authoritarian and repressive attitude toward activists, human rights defenders and journalists.

In this situation, the defense of human rights becomes absolutely necessary and is crucial to the realization of peaceful (nonviolent) resistance, which is considered as an essential tool to confront the structural oppression.

It has become clear in the Palestinian context that peaceful (nonviolent) civil resistance has been fruitful in terms of the common goal of the national liberation process, despite the fact that it has experienced fluctuations from its inception until now. Currently, peaceful (nonviolent) popular resistance has gained momentum, though not as high as it was during the first intifada; when it had broad community recognition.

In the framework of peaceful (nonviolent) activities used to defend human rights in Palestine, various measures are employed, such as academic and work strikes, awareness campaigns with key actors at the local, national and international levels, documentation of violations of rights, peaceful demonstrations, media campaigns with alternative discourse through social media platforms, in addition to trainings on human rights and International Humanitarian Law. For example, documenting violations of rights is vital in areas such as Nabi Saleh or Hebron, in addition to providing legal, psychological, and social support to families of Palestinian male and female prisoners.

It is also important to create alternative discourse that enhances the role of women as a catalyst of social transformation and cohesion in the national liberation process. Moreover, it is essential to understand gender through a holistic lens that requires differential approaches and treatment of women human rights defenders. Therefore, forming discussion and dialogue groups between women and young people of both sexes, where experiences can be shared and strategies with a gender perspective shall be developed, is essential.

As mentioned earlier, although it is true that peaceful (nonviolent) resistance has had more significant periods than the current one in the Palestinian context, one cannot ignore the fact that in areas such as Nabi Saleh, for example, or other rural areas, the peaceful protests are usually led by women who face the Israeli soldiers in a nonviolent manner.

The context in which male and female human rights defenders work is far from improving, lacks protection, and has no recognition of the significance of their work, on the contrary, it is usually delegitimized. Although societal discontent has had many turning points in the various stages of the conflict since 1948, this discontent increased significantly in 1995 with the signing of the Oslo Accords, which revealed the clear contradictions between words and actions. This has made it even more difficult for male and female human rights defenders to devote more time and effort to maintaining the household economy and daily livelihoods in their homes, especially for women defenders who still had the responsibility of performing housework due to the patriarchal structure of the society. Furthermore, during these years and with the outbreak of the second Intifada, many men were detained, imprisoned and / or killed by the occupation forces, resulting in additional responsibility for women human rights defenders as "heads of family / household." This dramatic scenario reduced the ability of male and female defenders to engage in and contribute to popular resistance. They had been also harmed by Israeli and Palestinian laws (including the Cybercrime Act, 2017), which hinder conducting awareness campaigns. Several Palestinian human rights organizations were affected due to the reduction of donor funds targeting peaceful (nonviolent) resistance activities under the pretext of "changing priorities and strategic orientations."

Unfortunately, another factor that has reduced the work and activities of the popular resistance (although it still represents a phase of the Palestinian struggle) is, as in the past, the policy of arbitrary arrests by the occupation forces. More than 6,500 political prisoners, including a large number of minors, are currently detained in Israeli jails.

In the same context of studying the situation of male and female human rights defenders in general and women in particular in Palestine, it is necessary to emphasize the clear and significant impact of regional fragmentation, isolation and restriction on freedom of movement on social cohesion and collective action. The disruption of social and societal cohesion has significant negative effects on the organizational capacity of civil society: Fences and separation walls, military checkpoints and roadblocks, geographical fragmentation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and millions of Palestinians in the diaspora. Thus, by returning to the turning point created by the Oslo Accords, this social fragmentation has a direct impact on the Palestinian identity and creates many barriers among the population: The Palestinians of East Jerusalem, the Israeli Arabs, the Palestinians of the West Bank, and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Although the role of Palestinian women in the struggle for national liberation remained hidden which seems as if it has been led by men, women role dates back to pre-1948. Back then, women partook in various initiatives such as participating in demonstrations and boycotts and establishing popular committees, in addition to their daily resistance as pillars of their families. Palestinian women have always worked to defend their people and to improve their situation within the dual fragility of both the Zionist environment and patriarchal society. This report analyzes the relationship between the national movement and the feminist movement.

The history of the feminist movement has been through different stages. A decline in the presence of women in the political sphere is observed in the strategies of nonviolence during the second Intifada comparing to the first Intifada, which is considered the most important stage. In that period and since the 1970s, women challenged the patriarchal roles and played an active role in popular resistance committees. Again, the signing of the Oslo Accords unfortunately highlights regression in terms of community›s commitment to resistance operations, which also affects women as an active member of society. In addition, the creation of a new power structure, the Palestinian National Authority, and the consequent tensions over the distribution of power and influence, have contributed to the weakening of the feminist movement. Since its inception, the Palestinian National Authority has not incorporated a gender policy, with quotas for women›s representation set to a minimum. In addition, within these new political structures, institutions such as health or education; which were usually managed by committees including large participation of women, have been institutionalized, leading to women's isolation within the domestic space. The armed struggle during the second intifada also drove women away from the political space of decision-making, and restricted them more to the domestic space.

On the other hand, the decade of the nineties is also an important stage for women›s movement. During that period, the so-called process of «transformation» of large sectors of the Palestinian society into community-based institutions (non-governmental organizations) took place. During the same period, some Palestinian women non-governmental organizations had been established, and a debate emerged on identifying the priorities of the nature of the national struggle or the nature of women›s liberation. It is possible here to talk about the 'elitism' of the Palestinian feminist movement, whose struggle focuses more on the achievement of global goals which respond to the agenda of international cooperation based on feminist frameworks.

Thus, one of the current challenges for women human rights defenders in Palestine is to implement actions that contribute to the dissemination of women›s spaces in order to promote gender-sensitive social change. Union of Palestinian Women, Rural Women›s Development Society, the Women›s Affairs Technical Committee, Filastiniyat Organization, Women›s Center for Legal Aid and Counselling, the Women Media and Development / TAM, and Women›s Studies Center, are just some of the organizations working to integrate a gender perspective for political and social change in Palestine.

Despite the different work approaches followed by women›s organizations, non-governmental organizations, grassroots committees, etc., it should be emphasized that all women are aware of the difficulties and obstacles the occupation imposes on realizing their rights. It is, however, clear that there are divisions in terms of setting practical priorities for the national liberation struggle and / or in order to realize women›s rights. Moreover, although there is a solid foundation of organizational social cohesion, there is still a need for more coordination in terms of work done and the use of available resources, especially in the particular need for women human rights defenders to achieve national liberation and to realize their rights as women.

Therefore, the work of women human rights defenders takes place in a context with multi-levels of hostility. On the one hand, the military structure of the Israeli occupation impedes the development of women›s activities and strengthens patriarchal structure, increasing the postulate need to protect women by men. On the other hand, frustration and violence which have infiltrated the social fabric resulting mainly from an occupation which is more than 70 years old, increases the social violence practiced by men against women. However, many women human rights defenders assert that the Israeli occupation puts women and men at the same level. Still, this will not be reflected in a genuine approach to equality in women-men relations in private life.

Taking into account gender as a key point in the analysis, violence and restrictions imposed by the occupation forces must be analyzed from a different perspective, since gender defines the actions of the actors concerned. Armed conflicts increase the heterogeneity of traditional gender roles.

For example, as noted above, the segregation of areas and the security policies imposed by Israel enhances patriarchal behavior, further restricting women›s freedom of movement, and thus, their political activism. In addition, the limited and fragile Palestinian economy as well as the difficult access to resources are a burden on Palestinian families in general. As a result, a large

part of the primary responsibility for earning a living falls on women-- among other reasons, this is due to imprisonment of a large number of Palestinian men who are in Israeli jails or incapacitated as a result of injuries or disabilities. Consequently, women are forced to allocate additional hours of their limited free time for popular resistance. This negative impact of the occupation is greater in rural areas, which are essentially more conservative and traditional, and where the influence of religious structure is more visible. Although it is true that many women human rights defenders receive support from their family and social environment, it is also true that many of them suffer from rejection, and thus doubt their political work and activities in the field. In addition, when the work of women defenders has a direct impact on equal rights for women, the rejection is usually greater. Whereas when the work of women defenders directly and substantially improves family and community life, acceptance is greater due to the collective benefit of such work. Therefore, the creation of cooperatives that promote the work of women and at the same time generate additional financial income for the family is positively perceived by society and leads to the consideration of women›s struggle as complementary to national struggle.

Despite the existence of a broad organizational structure, there is still a lack of social cohesion and networks of support among women. This situation is enshrined in the Israeli occupation through; for example, restrictions on freedom of movement. There are some groups and organizations that provide informal spaces for the exchange of experience and psychosocial support, however, it is necessary to strengthen these networks more within groupings, so that suffering is perceived as a common issue. Similarly, consideration shall be given to the individual suffering of women human rights defenders caused by the Israeli occupation violations. These violations include the exploitation of women›s bodies as a target of parental authority in cases of arrest, assault and torture, as well as the use of religious questioning by the Israeli army to humiliate women in the prisons. Stripping women of their clothes, preventing them from having healthy conditions during menstruation, or harassments while giving birth are only few examples of Israeli's humiliation of women defenders.

In this context of violations of rights, the feminist approach allows reconsideration of how to respond to the violence of the occupation by «feminizing responses» and meeting the specific needs of half of the population. In the alternative logic of nonviolence, training workshops are conducted, dialogue groups are formed, meeting and communication venues that enhance resilience are provided, and networks to improve joint action are established. If women in remote areas; especially in Area C, are aware of the suffering of other women

and the strategies they have developed for confrontation, the struggle takes a collective and multidimensional approach and thus will have a greater impact. It has been shown that if resources are invested to involve women in resistance and social activity, the achievements shall very satisfactory, to the extent women will assume leadership roles in their local communities. However, in order to achieve this goal, there is a need to raise awareness among Palestinians on gender and the importance of integrating a feminist perspective in the process of national liberation, explaining that the gender perspective responds to the specific needs of the Palestinian context and not only to the Western perspective as stated by some civil society actors. Therefore, most women believe that it is essential that men be integrated into training workshops and awareness campaigns on issues related to gender and women›s political participation.

After analyzing this conducted field work and research, the main recommendations are as follows:

- Integrate all actors in all training activities, and enhance social cohesion within nonviolence strategies.
- Enhance psychological support and counselling from a feminist perspective, which promotes inter-group networks through which suffering is understood as a collective phenomenon, taking into account gender as a difference, not exclusively but comprehensively.
- Enhance collaboration to avoid overlapping of work.
- Increase women's political participation through rehabilitation and / or training.
- Promote gender perspective among all levels of peaceful (nonviolent) resistance in Palestine, as an essential part of political and social change, and identify the differentiated impact of violence on women.
- Rely on the legal amendments that incorporate equality between men and women based on women rights recognized by international human rights conventions.
- Raise the awareness at the local, national and international levels to protect female and male human rights defenders and acknowledge their roles.
- Report the transgression committed against Palestinian citizens and violations of their human rights, through governments and awareness campaigns.
- Support local Palestinian movements that ensure equality between men and women in their agendas and workplans.
- Oblige Israel to comply with international legitimacy and reject all forms of collusion.
- Enhance exchange programs with other male and female human rights defenders at the international level.

Women contribution to the struggle to defend human rights must be perceived as an added value in developing policies and strategies based on non-violence for the liberation of Palestinian people. It is therefore necessary to ensure that women participation is increased, and design frameworks that guarantee that. The right to defend human rights must be analyzed from a gender perspective following a differentiated approach. Perceiving women only as victims increases the vulnerability of their status rather than recognizing them as effective individuals in the political and social transformation of Palestine in the process of achieving the freedom of Palestinian people.

NOVACT International Institute for Nonviolent Action

About the International Institute for Nonviolent Action (Novact)

Novact – International Institute for Nonviolent Action promotes international peace building actions in conflict situations. The Institute has been created through the collective effort of those active in international civil society to contribute to a peaceful, just, and dignified world. Through understanding nonviolence as a strategy for transformation, Novact aims at achieving a society based on human security and genuine democracy free from armed conflict and all dimensions of violence.

Through a global network of experts and activists in the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia, the Institute supports nonviolent movements, working for change and social transformation, and develops nonviolent interventions to protect vulnerable communities in conflict situations.

As a committed and politically independent actor, the Institute promotes actions, innovative ideas, research and training in order to influence the policies of defense, security and foreign policy in Europe and other international contexts. With the main office located in the Mediterranean city of Barcelona, Novact is a project of Nova-Social Innovation. Nova is registered as a non-governmental organization and it is registered as such with the United Nations. It obtains its funding from committed citizens and public institutions, which enables Novact to maintain its independence.

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