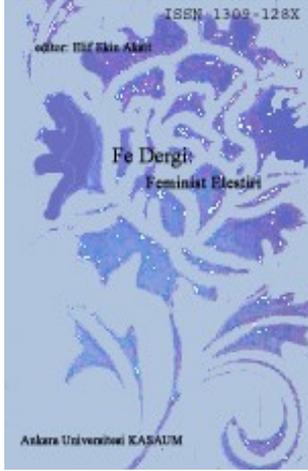


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Women's Political Movements in the West Bank and Israel: Challenging Perspectives From Within

Giulia Daniele

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Women's Political Movements in the West Bank and Israel: Challenging Perspectives From Within
Giulia Daniele*

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the role played by women activists in overcoming exclusivist ethno-national narrative identities by means of feminist as well as peace-oriented perspectives represents a central issue within grassroots activism and academia. In particular, the paper focuses on the main initiatives experienced by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women in both their own societies and joint projects, such as the most well known, Jerusalem Link. Nevertheless, the current reality reveals controversial obstacles to contextualise these alternative political actions with the aim of suggesting feasible conflict resolutions. Although women activists have attempted to build egalitarian and dialogical relationships across conflicting narratives, in the last decade the majority of such instances have continued to produce internal asymmetries between the "occupier" and the "occupied", without achieving a common proposal to end the Israeli military occupation, and, as a consequence, a just resolution of the conflict.

Keywords: Israel/Palestine, ethno-nationalism, military occupation, conflict resolution, feminism.

İsrail ve Batı Şeria'da Kadınların Siyasal Hareketleri: Meydan Okuyan iç Tartışmalar

İsrail Filistin savaşı bağlamında, kadın aktivistlerin dışlayıcı etnik milliyetçiliğe dayalı kimlikleri feminist ve barış odaklı yaklaşımlar yoluyla aşmak için oynadığı rol, akademi ve taban örgütlenmesi aktivizmlerinin temel meselesidir. Bilhassa bu makale, Filistinli ve İsraili Yahudi kadınların hem kendi toplumlarında hem de ortak projelerinde deneyimledikleri insiyatiflere, en iyi bilinen örneklerinden biri, Jerusalem Link'e odaklanmaktadır.

Yine de, mevcut durum çatışmayı uygulanabilir bir çözüme götürme amacındaki alternatif politik eylemlilikleri bağlamlama oturtabilmenin önünde tartışmalı engelleri göz önüne seriyor. Her ne kadar kadın aktivistler, çatışan anlatılar arasında eşitlikçi ve diyaloga dönük ilişkiler kurmaya çabalasalar da, son on senede bu tür ilişki anları, "işgalci" ve "işgal olunan" arasındaki iç asimetrileri üretmeye devam etmiştir. Bu devamlılık, İsrail'in silahlı işgalini sonlandıracak ortak bir öneri geliştirememiş ve dolayısıyla, çatışmanın adil şekilde çözüme ulaşmasını sağlayamamıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İsrail/Filistin, etnik milliyetçilik, ordu işgali, çatışma çözümü, feminizm

Introduction

This paper is founded on the theoretical analysis and the fieldwork evaluation of my Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Women, Reconciliation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Road Not Yet Taken*.¹ My research explores the most prominent instances of secular women's political activism in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, over the period starting before the establishment of the Jewish state up to late 2011, with a particular focus on the last decade. It deals with diverse examples of women's activism that have been influenced by and, in the majority of cases, prevented by the main obstacles associated with Israeli military occupation. In detail, I question the effective influence of such Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists involved in initiatives founded on mutual recognition, reconciliation and cooperation between conflicting narratives.

In doing this, I aim at contributing to the current debate on the process of making Palestinian and Israeli women activists more visible, especially considering them as central political actors to open up areas of inquiry around relevant prospects for the end of the conflict. By paying attention to both literature and fieldwork, throughout my research I have re-problematised women's political involvement across national, ethnic and class divergences among and within Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's movements. This has meant an extended fieldwork that was conducted in a period of time divided into three phases: the first of these was from September

* PhD, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies (Italy) and University of Exeter (UK)

to December 2009, the second phase covered August and September 2010, and the last one took place in June 2011. The make up of my interviewees were as such: the group of thirty-six women I met have been composed of fifteen Palestinians from the West Bank (mainly Ramallah area) and East Jerusalem, and twenty-one Israelis, including Jews (both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi)² mostly from Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Palestinian citizens of Israel from Haifa and Nazareth³.

Ethno-nationalism⁴ and women's activism: overcoming narrative identities

When approaching the study of Palestinian as well as Israeli women's backgrounds, practices and perspectives, it is necessary to explore the historical and socio-political contexts in which women activists have built up their politics. The fact that Palestinian women live in a stateless nation where the national liberation movement has taken a central place in their everyday reality, and, on the contrary, Israeli women live within an institutionalised nationalism, represents the core issue from which my research has started. In other words, considering national liberation (for Palestinians) and national security (for Israeli Jews) as the most crucial discourses at the heart of the conflict, women's struggles both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel have been increasingly influenced by such opposite ethno-national collective identities.

In particular, on the Palestinian side, in relation to the controversial dichotomy between the national project and feminist perspectives, women activists have put emphasis on their own national identity, as reaction towards the endless process of military occupation. As a result, national aspirations and women's rights have not been separated, but they have instead complemented each other in order to address what many women I interviewed have described as the "double burden" of military occupation and social pressure. This has also affected the nature of the relationship between the women's political agenda and the national liberation as well as self-determination aims. Borrowing the term "frontliners", as was initially proposed by the scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian:

"these women occupy the most visible positions in the field of activity in daily life within a conflict zone, positions of grave responsibility. [...] These women survive both the daily assaults against their quotidian activities and the psychological warfare that is endemic to a militarised zone".⁵

On the other side, the majority of Israeli women political activists, after recognising that military occupation is also a feminist question, have highlighted the strict linkage between feminism and pacifism. By contextualising their own struggle within the Israeli militarised society, Israeli women's activism has been defined in terms of a "mobilization-marginalization phenomenon",⁶ through which women have been encouraged to join in the political system (mobilization) but, on the other hand, they also have to face up to the militarised patriarchal daily reality (marginalization).

In addition, it is important to underline that Israeli women activists do not represent a unitary subjectivity, but they have multiple voices coming especially from class and ethnic differences. These main divisions, mostly among Ashkenazi Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and Palestinian citizens of Israel, have created a variegated panorama in the Israeli women's movement that has embraced the so-called "system of the quarters" (Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Palestinian and lesbian),⁷ with the aim of ensuring equal participation and representation from each narrative identity. Nevertheless, both Mizrahi and Palestinian citizens of Israel have continued to experience contradictory disputes against Ashkenazi power hegemony that has increased an internal hierarchical system within Israeli society and women's organisations as well.

Palestinian-Israeli women's joint activism: a critical picture

Another significant issue to take into consideration in deconstructing conventional approaches towards women's activism within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is related to joint projects and mutual cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli women. In spite of the mainstream view, since the time of the first Aliyah⁸ in the 1880s common initiatives between Palestinian Arab and Jewish women have taken place. However, after decades of non-dialogue between the two sides, only in the early 1990s Palestinian and Israeli women's organisations decided to take up again the advocacy of political alternatives, starting from within the complexity of different identities and through a shared process that required "constant tending and mending".⁹ In such initiatives, the so-called "transversal politics" emerged as a feminist political practice in the process of translating theoretical analyses to everyday action.¹⁰ It has meant that women activists have brought with them their own roots and,

concurrently, they have tried to shift putting themselves in the point of view and experience of the “Other”. Nonetheless, in many cases such Palestinian-Israeli joint projects have maintained the *status quo* and protected the hegemonic power of the dominant side within what has been called “normalisation”.¹¹

Among such women’s joint projects, the most emblematic one has been the *Jerusalem Link* between Israeli women from *Bat Shalom (Daughter of Peace)* and Palestinian women from *Markaz al-Quds la l-Nissah (Jerusalem Center for Women - JCW)*. At least at the beginning of their political involvement, the two women’s centres agreed to work both jointly and on their own towards achieving common fundamental goals, such as the recognition of self-determination of the Palestinian people, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel in accordance with international law, and the most controversial topic of sharing Jerusalem.¹²

In the past decade, the facts on the ground have shown internal tensions and challenges: on the one hand, Palestinian women trusted in a feasible political transformation of the Israeli partner, while, on the other, Israeli Jewish women acted more on personal relationships with Palestinian women rather than putting pressure on their own political establishment. Furthermore, during the most recent years and especially after the 2008/9 *Operation Cast Lead* in Gaza, a feminist critical debate about and within Palestinian and Israeli women of the *Jerusalem Link* underlined that the power asymmetry between the “occupier” and the “occupied” is still in existence.

Non-violent resistance and civil disobedience: a way forward

The necessity to establish counter-narratives for overcoming the *status quo* in Palestine/Israel remains a controversial issue across the women’s movements. Nonetheless, in attempting to go beyond the ethno-national discourse that divides Palestinians and Israeli Jews between “we” and “them”, a number of women’s initiatives suggested an alternative political lens through which conventional concepts and strategies were put into question. As a result, since the early 2000s, non-violent and civil disobedience actions have been reintroduced as crucial conflict resolution practice in the land of Palestine/Israel. In such contexts, women’s role has increased both individually and as a collective group, demonstrating ability, strength, and determination to succeed in their struggles and in motivating other people from different backgrounds and political views to join in.

With specific regard to the main Palestinian villages in the West Bank, such as Bi’lin, Ni’lin, Budrus, Nabi Saleh, as well as to several neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem (including Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan, and the Old City), non-violent weekly demonstrations to fight against the construction of the Wall, the illegal Israeli settlements and the house demolitions have become internationally recognised. However, in such actions of resistance very few Israeli Jewish women along with international activists supporting Palestinian women engaged with the popular committees and faced the challenging question of “normalisation” with respect to *status quo* built upon the “occupier” and the “occupied”.

Another significant way of resistance against such a deadlock has been represented by initiatives of civil disobedience, which have been acted out by Israeli Jewish peace-oriented feminist activists. Among them, since May 2010 the writer Ilana Hammerman together with other Israeli women activists have decided to enable a group of Palestinian women to enter Israel and to enjoy the sea for the first time in their lives. They have publicly announced in the most popular Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* their choice not to obey an “illegal and immoral law” (referring to their violation of the “Law of Entry”).¹³

Conclusion

Throughout my research I put emphasis on the increasing importance of considering Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women’s political activism within a theoretical framework based on the feminist critique related to conflict contexts. I believe what emerged from my fieldwork represents a significant challenge towards the *status quo*, and in particular towards a peaceful way out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, the ongoing situation between the “occupier” and the “occupied” cannot be only reduced to the issues of recognition and reconciliation, as founding pillars of a feasible conflict resolution, but it is necessary to realise the structural conditions that have transformed the land of Palestine/Israel. In addition, the wide gap between the theoretical plans suggested by women activists along with scholars and what has happened on the ground creates a prolonged impasse. This has continued to be a problematic issue not only in relation to women’s feminist mobilisation, but also it concerns past and current alternative politics to the dominant mainstream, namely leftist peace groups and political parties.

Although the foremost examples of women's political activism in Palestine/Israel have been not able to effectively connect their standpoints with their actions, the value of their everyday struggles and analyses is a fundamental tool for restructuring political practices and for readdressing useful prospects towards a fair future cooperation between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. Such an encouragement of solidarity experienced by women activists I met during my research field has expressed both their awareness of the difficulties in changing their daily situation and their determined political strength in opposing the "normalised" military occupation and growing ethno-nationalisms.



¹ My Ph.D. dissertation will be published by Routledge in March 2014.

² The Israeli Jewish social landscape is composed of several and contrasting communities. The two main broad categories refer to: *Ashkenazi*, Jewish population of European, American, and Russian origin, who correspond to thirty-two per cent of the total population of Israel especially belonging to the ruling economic, political, and social elite; *Mizrahi*, Jewish people of North African, Middle Eastern, and Asian origin, who represent forty-eight per cent of the Israeli people even though they are at the margins of power. Since the foundation of the state of Israel, a hierarchical society has been established in which Ashkenazi Jews have achieved the dominant position, followed by Mizrahi Jews, and finally by Palestinian citizens of Israel. This background has produced internal instability as well as conflicts within Israeli society, and also among minority subgroups, such as women's organisations.

³ In detail, I met women who were either activists in their own national women's movements or involved in joint initiatives. In both cases, after the demise of the Oslo Accords, a small number of these women continued political activities within their original socio-political group, whilst others decided either to abandon effective political engagement or to renew their political participation, but this time working within different organisations.

⁴ As described by one of the most prominent scholars on nationalism and ethnic conflicts, Walker Connor, "ethnonationalism" expresses the most influent sense of a group's self-identity founded on ethnic and kinship features. Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: the Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: University Press Princeton, 1994).

⁵ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4-5.

⁶ Tami A. Jacoby, *Women in Zones of Conflict*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 8-9.

⁷ This system has been used to guarantee fair representation of women's voices coming from different backgrounds and histories (especially from minority communities) in their organisations' staff, board, panels, committees, and in general in their activities.

⁸ This term refers to the waves of Jewish immigration to the land of historic Palestine since the end of XIX century that supported the values of political Zionism in the new settler society.

⁹ Ayala H. Emmet, *Our Sisters' Promised Land: Women, Politics and Israeli-Palestinian Coexistence*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 16.

¹⁰ Nira Yuval-Davis, "What is 'Transversal Politics'?", *Soundings*, no. 12 (1999), 94-98.

¹¹ This concept has created "a false image of 'normal' relations as if there is no occupier and occupied and as if the two sides are somehow equal" (Salem, "A Path to Peace"). Even though it has been used in common language following the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979, in the last decade it has taken on negative connotations.

¹² Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*. (London: Zed Books, 2007), 112-115.

¹³ The "Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law" (temporary order), which passed in 2003 and extended in 2007, prohibits entry into Israel by Palestinians from the occupied territories and Gaza Strip as well as by other inhabitants from "enemy states" such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, for purposes of family unification with Israeli citizens. This mainly caused dramatic consequences concerning the family unification of Palestinian citizens of Israel with Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

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