

## Female Roles within the Occupied Territories of Palestine

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*“Any society that fails to harness the energy and creativity of its women is at a huge disadvantage in the modern world”*, Tian Wei. Although women are also, if not more, oppressed as men during times of conflict, for years they have been neglected or reduced down to being just a “housewife” in regards to the oppressive situation they are facing. A perfect example that highlights a serious conflict in which women are not viewed or seen as symbols of revolution or even factors that face extreme oppression and harm is that of the Israeli occupation over Palestine. Many Palestinian and non-Palestinian scholars – especially feminist-based scholars – have studied and examined Palestinian women’s role concerning their resistance towards the Israeli occupation and apartheid. Regardless of the lack of abundant publications and controversy that surrounded women-based organizations that were present in Palestine that aimed towards helping women and the Palestinian cause in general, women became very apparent during the first intifada (Vanessa, 2011).

Before the emergence of the women-based organizations in the occupied territories of Palestine, women faced extreme adversity as a direct result of the apartheid placed on them by the state of Israel. Since there was a denial of full rights and protection towards the Palestinian society in the occupied territories in general, it became harder for women to plead their case of inequality and lack of fair rights to their representative state - Israel (Vanessa, 2011). Similar to other situations around the world in which women are not treated equally, Palestinian women were indirectly given the societal role of a stay-at-home wife or caretaker,

thus further strengthening the notion that claims that women are prone to live in the private spheres such as their home. As a result of this sexist discrimination towards them, Palestinian women began taking the matter into their own hands in non-violent ways to challenge the system that was oppressing and limiting them from becoming part of the public sphere (Vanessa, 2011). To do so, they founded an organization by the name of the “*Higher Women’s Committee*” in December 1988 - after the start of the first intifada - that publicly advocated and spoke about the inequality present between the men and women that lived within these occupied territories (Vanessa, 2011). They also helped contribute towards the fight for the national liberation of Palestine in all its forms as they slowly became more involved and present in different methods and procedures of resistance. Women were finally starting to achieve previously unheard of visibility regarding women’s rights and began evidently contributing towards the fight against the Israeli occupation. Their presence and assistance with the Palestinian struggle helped bring these Palestinian women out from the shadows of the private sphere and into the light of the public sphere, which in itself was an indirect way of challenging patriarchal structures that limited them within society (Vanessa, 2011).

It is important to note that occupation does not only physically harm an individual, but also emotionally and mentally. This is where women’s role in the destruction or resistance of the occupation was in full play. Women took care of everyday activities such as, “*the delivery of basic services, humanitarian care and early childhood education*” (Vanessa, 2011, p.545). In addition, women helped educate other women about domestic abuse and other issues that were considered taboo, yet were strongly affecting the lives of those under the Israeli occupation. Women that were abused were unable to go to a state and plead their case of domestic abuse due to the inequality present within the Israeli government towards

the Palestinians, therefore these women took it into their own hands to help and educate other women facing this problem (Vanessa, 2011). Unsurprisingly, there was some controversy going around regarding these women's resistance towards the Israeli occupation and assistance with the fight against the struggle. Men within their society did not believe this was the job nor place – meaning the public sphere - for women and insisted that they return to the privacy of their homes and take care of the children and elderly, while the men deal with the resistance and the struggles caused by the Israeli occupation. Nevertheless, women continued to fight for their visibility within the public sphere and even played a very important role in the survival of their families and other people's families during the military invasion that took place in Gaza from 2008 to 2009 (Vanessa, 2011). Even after the fighting and extreme destruction had come to an end, women continued to play an important role as they helped with the reconstruction of Gaza. Although neglected or unspoken of, women were very important factors in many different forms of resistance towards the dreadful Israeli occupation placed on them.

Not all women-based opposition was solely based on the concept of non-violence, certain women played a role in the violent side of the resistance. One of the most famous and notable women of the resistance is Leila Khaled, who later went on to become the “*symbol of Palestinian resistance and female power*” (Viner, 2001). Khaled was part of the resistance group named “*The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*” – PFLP for short. Within her time with this revolutionary organization, she conducted many plane hijackings without harming a single person present on the flight. As a result of these hijackings – along with her other forms of resistance -, she became very well known, especially after her famous and symbolic image was published to the world. In this image, you can see Khaled holding an

AK-47 rifle with the kufiyah – a symbol of Palestinian resistance and liberation - wrapped around her head. This image plays an important role not only for the Palestinian resistance but also as an indirect symbol of female strength and inclusion. Seeing a beautiful and delicate woman such as Khaled holding a weapon and showing her will and strength to fight alongside the men, helped strengthen and expand Palestinian women's role and purpose within their society, especially in regards to the Israeli occupation. Not only was she training and fighting alongside these men, but she also faced similar consequences and punishments such as imprisonment.

However, regardless of her strength and equality to the men of the PFLP, Khaled was still sexualized and treated differently simply because she is a woman. One example in which Khaled was sexualized instead of praised for being a strong woman is when a Norwegian newspaper wrote about her in 1980 and commented on her “bombs” – obviously referring to her breasts (Viner, 2001). Another example of how she was treated differently as a woman is when she would get asked about her “motherly and nurturing instincts”, to which she would reply, *“I have learned that a woman can be a fighter, a freedom fighter, a political activist, and that she can fall in love and be loved. She can be married, have children, be a mother. Revolution must mean life also; every aspect of life.”* (Viner, 2001). Leila Khaled's strength and participation within the resistance alongside the men shaped her into one of Palestine's most famous and admirable female power and resistance symbols.

Women have faced multiple different forms of discrimination for many years, especially when it comes to times of conflict and resistance. Throughout the ongoing occupation of Israel over Palestine, women have played many distinctive – yet equally

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important – roles within their society, however, their rights are not met particularly under the oppressive occupying government of the state of Israel. As a result, women eventually took matters into their own hands and began conducting non-violent forms of resistance under a women-based organization called the “*Higher Women’s Committee*”, regardless of the opinions of the men in their society. On the other hand, some women such as Leila Khaled took part in active and violent forms of resistance alongside men, to challenge the patriarchal structures that their society was built on. For years women have played a vital role in the ongoing resistance present in the occupied territories and Palestine as a whole, as pioneers for women empowerment and societal progression and development.

## References

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