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The Palestinian Women's Movement versus Hamas: Attempting to Understand Women's Empowerment outside a Feminist Framework

By Sara Ababneh¹

Abstract

This paper asks whether—and if so, how—Islamic groups such as Hamas that clearly define themselves outside a feminist framework can be studied in terms of women's empowerment. The material discussed is based on fieldwork conducted with Hamas-affiliated female Islamists, as well as women's rights activists in general, in the occupied Palestinian territories in 2007. Centrally, this work debates whether it is possible to think of women's empowerment in non-feminist terms. The significance of this study lies in two critical contributions to questions of women's empowerment in Muslim societies: Firstly, the case of Islamism exposes the hegemony of feminism—religious and secular—as a theoretical framework when we study conservative religious groups. The discourse of the Palestinian women's movement functions as the 'invisible' framework that we often use to evaluate non-feminist groups. Secondly, this paper shows the importance of giving more attention to Islamist practice. While Muslim feminists' reinterpretations of Islamic texts have made important contributions in terms of women's empowerment, an exclusive focus on discursive analysis can result in overlooking significant developments in Muslim women's activism. Conversely, a discourse-centric analysis can lead to romanticizing organizations and movements which, despite espousing, even foregrounding, gender-egalitarianism in their discourse, are quite hierarchal and patriarchal in their practice.

Key Words: Women's Empowerment, Feminism, Palestinian Women's Movement, Hamas, Islamism, Qualitative Research, Interviews, Self-Reflection, Silences

Introduction

In late spring of 2007, I travelled to the occupied Palestinian West Bank to conduct my Ph.D. fieldwork on female Islamists affiliated with Hamas. I took the opportunity also to attend conferences and meetings of the women whose writings on gender in Palestine I had admired for years. Hearing academic papers presented by both academics and women's rights practitioners I

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was shocked at the hostility with which most of the women I met and heard spoke about female Hamas activists. Statements too crude to repeat in an academic article were the norm when the discussion turned to the victory of Hamas in the 2006 parliamentary elections and the fact that now an Islamist was Minister of Women's Affairs. Female Islamists were described as tools in the hands of the male elite of Hamas who reproduced their own subordination. There was no doubt about the fact that Hamas would suppress all Palestinian women and bring the 'secular' and 'open' Palestinian society back to the Middle Ages.

Not only were Hamas members missing from any academic conference on gender, there were also almost no women who wore the headscarf present. At one conference I attended, the only *muhajaba* (woman wearing the *hijab*/ headscarf) immediately declared that she was a member of Fateh.

This vilification of Islamists, believing that female Islamic activists are not agents who make their own choices, was at odds with the otherwise sophisticated analyses of these academics and practitioners. Coming from feminist backgrounds, many had previously spoken out against the tendency of mainstream academia to universalize the experiences of those who are powerful.

This experience left me deeply unsettled. Moreover, in the secondary literature on gender politics in Palestine, international academics often uncritically adopted the same views. An example of an earlier incident in which this was the case is Reema Hammami's (1990) article on the so-called *hijab* campaign.

Hammami (1990) writes that in the early years of the first Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) a campaign was waged to impose the headscarf on first the women of Gaza and then the women of the West bank.

In Gaza it started with religious youths writing graffiti, then breaking into girls' schools and making speeches. Next, young boys (between 8 and 12) who were empowered by the *intifada* joined the campaign. If there were no soldiers to throw stones at, women without headscarves made good targets. Politically unaffiliated *shabab* [youth] who felt left out found harassing these women a safe way to express nationalist sentiment... What was most problematic for many women in Gaza was that this social pressure accompanied an attempt to "nationalize" the *hijab*. Original arguments ascribing the *hijab* with religious meaning were all but swept away by its new *intifada* signification. The *hijab* was promoted... as a sign of women's political commitment, as women, to the *intifada* (Hammami, 1990, 26).

In Gaza the harassment got so bad that, within a year, there were almost no women left who did not eventually start wearing the *hijab* (Hammami, 1990, 27).

A year after the attacks, the Unified Leadership, which was comprised of all Palestinian political factions except for Hamas, finally condemned the attacks. Graffiti soon appeared saying that those who threw stones at women will be treated as collaborators. Hammami writes that,

the statement of the Unified Leadership had an immediate impact. In a matter of days the atmosphere in the streets changed dramatically, and women without headscarves no longer felt so threatened. Few men dared tell a woman to cover her head, and those who did could be accused of considering themselves greater

than the Unified Leadership. The women had the power of the intifada on their side (Hammami, 1990, 27).

Even though Hammami acknowledges the complex nature of the incident, arguing that “the forces of the hijab campaign are hard to delineate because multiple forces worked simultaneously (though not necessarily jointly) to confront women at every turn with demands to wear a headscarf” (Hammami, 1990, 27), Hammami as well as others clearly blame the Islamists, mainly Hamas, for being behind this campaign (Abdulhadi, 1998, Roy, 1993).

More so than in Hammami’s article itself, her article is henceforth cited as the proof of what awaits women if Hamas were to come to power. None of the secondary literature is interested in hearing the version of Hamas leaders. Jaroen Gunning, in an unpublished chapter on Hamas and gender, which is based on primary research in Gaza, argues that Hamas leaders were not even aware that there was a campaign going on (Gunning, ND). He further shows that, except for one case, the youth were not in any way part of Hamas or affiliated to it. Rather, more than once, the youth turned out to be collaborators employed by the Israeli army (Gunning, ND). Furthermore, Gunning maintains that although Hamas leaders (women and men) certainly encouraged women to wear the *hijab*, they were quick to affirm that forcing someone to wear a *hijab* was absolutely against their principles and was to be rejected. Moreover, Hammami herself concedes that “Hamas...issued a local *bayan*² disassociating itself from the attackers” (Hammami, 1990, 26).

This example should not function to discredit Hammami’s article or to imply that women were not pressured to wear the headscarf. I cite this example to shed light on a practice that has become increasingly commonplace in work produced on Palestine, namely, speaking from a presumed position of neutrality when judging and condemning Hamas on issues of gender, which would otherwise be unthinkable when conducting feminist analysis. Feminists have been among the first to underline the link between the speaker’s subject position and the knowledge she/he produces. As a result many strands of feminism emphasize the importance of the author, clearly situating herself in her work, as part of the data. Moreover, silences are treated as indicative of wider power relations and structures (Belenky et al., 1986, Guha et al., 1988, Ramazanoglu et al., 2007, Said, 1978, Spivak, 1996, Young, 2001).

In this paper I will examine the relationship between the Palestinian Women’s Movement and Hamas to attempt to contextualize the debate between the Palestinian women’s movement and their Islamist counterparts and to think about how we can study Islamists from the perspective of women’s empowerment. In the case of Palestine, women from the Palestinian women’s movement and women’s rights NGOs have defined women’s empowerment. As a result, I argue that we must start with a clear understanding of the basic assumptions of these activists in order to avoid judging Hamas simply by concluding that the assumptions of female Islamists are not the same as those of the Palestinian women’s movement and, therefore, that they do not empower women. Furthermore, the specific context of those who are speaking about empowerment needs to be examined before uncritically taking on their verdict on whether other groups empower women or not. Finally, judging whether or not a certain group’s actions are beneficial to women should be based on an analysis of this group’s actions instead of simply taking on what others say or write about them. It would be unthinkable to conduct a study of

² Arabic for ‘declaration’.

Democrats in the United States in which all the data is based on Republican accounts, unless it is clearly marked as a study of ‘Democrats through Republicans’ eyes’.

I argue that in order to understand the ‘secular’³ responses of the Palestinian women’s movement to Hamas’ Islamism, we need to a) contextualize both sides; b) analyse the discourse of Islamists; and c) analyse their practice.

This paper starts by discussing some of the main assumptions of members of the women’s movement in the West Bank, as well as the history of the women’s movement in all of historic Palestine. In doing so, we can contextualize the response of the Palestinian women’s movement to women in Hamas and discern the multiple dimensions that led to the various confrontations between women’s rights activists and female Islamists. I argue that we must try to understand non-feminist groups by examining their own practice and discourse. This paper examines one example of the discourse of women in Hamas and another case of the practice of some female Islamists. The first example deals with the work and vision of Dr. Mariam Saleh and Amal Siyam when they became Ministers of Women’s Affairs after Hamas won the legislative elections in 2006. This example aims to shed light on the politicized relationship between the Palestinian women’s movement and female Islamists and asks what this means in terms of the types of ‘feminist’ knowledge that are often assumed to be true.

The second case I examine is the structure of the Birzeit Student Islamic Bloc as an example of Islamism in practice. In particular, I will use the context of this student group to think through whether only Islamic models which critically re-examine patriarchal attitudes can be empowering to women and what this means in terms of certain practices that many feminists and women’s rights activists in the Arab world would consider inherently patriarchal, namely, gender segregation.

Palestinian Feminist Critiques and Assumptions

Eileen Kuttab, a professor of women’s studies at the University of Birzeit, is considered one of the leading voices in the Palestinian women’s movement critical of the Palestinian women’s movement and somewhat sympathetic to Hamas (Kuttab, 1999, Kuttab and Abu Awwad, 2004, Kuttab, 2006, Kuttab, 2007a, Kuttab, 2008). Yet, despite her relatively open-minded attitude to Hamas, she remains deeply suspicious of the Islamic movement with regard to its gender politics. As she put it in our conversation:

It is part of [Hamas’] political agenda to disempower women, or to empower them in a specific way. It is empowerment in Hamas’ own context and disempowerment in *our* context. It is empowerment because Hamas want women to be public citizens. Hamas really pushes women for higher education. They want women to become more involved in public life, [but] the issue is how and where. [The question of] ‘where’ is based on the separation of men and women... What kind of roles? Only those which are an extension of women’s *reproductive roles*, as teachers, etc. and not at all to leave that framework. I think in that context it is relatively empowering, but it is disempowering because

³ I use secular between quotation marks because many of the members of the women’s movement are devoutly religious (be they Muslim or Christian). I simply use the term because these women disagree with Hamas’ vision of Islamism and usually do not fight for a religiously-inspired type of politics.

Hamas is not giving women new opportunities to explore. Like ‘the political’ for example, the *political for Hamas is only to serve the patriarchal goals of the party*, which are very masculine. Hamas does this through the tool of religion, as a tool to suppress women. On the other hand it is empowering, because at least Hamas is accepting women to become more involved in public life (Kuttab, 2007b, my parentheses and my italics)

Salam Hamdan, another women’s rights activist I interviewed, did not believe that the framework of Islam necessarily disempowers women, but that the specific framework that Hamas chooses does.

You know the *aya* [verse from the Qur’an], that men are *qawwamun ‘ala al-nisa’* [literally ‘men are guardians of women’].⁴ I told them [female Islamists] there are 380 different interpretations; and that they take the most conservative one. They do not allow you to speak about the *hijab* [the female headscarf]...I stood up saying: “so we are not in agreement”. They said, “no we agree on the main parts”. They said, “the concept of dignity”. I said “my opinion about dignity is different from yours. I believe that I should have equal rights in all. I have the same rights and duties”. They said “no, you do not have the duty to pay for your own living”. Then we talked about whether women are ever going to be adults [their own guardians] and they said “no never ever” (Hamdan, 2007, my parentheses)

Compared to others from the Palestinian women’s movement, both Hamdan and Kuttab were among the most sympathetic to Hamas. Unlike many of those active in the field of women’s rights in the West Bank, they did not dismiss Hamas activists outright. Their tolerance clearly had its limits, however. Despite making different arguments, both Kuttab and Hamdan believe that it is necessary to prioritize the struggle for gender justice to empower women as a group. Certain practices, such as the separation of the sexes and confining women to certain roles, are believed to be inherently patriarchal. Through examining two examples, this paper shows that in practice many women can be empowered in “women’s only spaces”, and that, in fact, mixed spaces might act to exclude a certain type of woman, mostly those of more conservative and less privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Thus “women’s only spaces” enable women from all backgrounds to participate in activities that might, while in theory being open to all, in practice only enable women from so-called open-minded families to use. Moreover, there is nothing inherently patriarchal about the idea of separate spaces. So long as the

⁴ The interpretation of this verse (4:34) is contested by Muslim feminists. The translation that I give here is only one of many. Yusuf Ali, for example, translates it as ‘Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband’s) absence what Allah would have them guard’. Pickthal’s translation reads “Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded” Shakir translates the verse as follows: “Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded”. Ali Quli Qara’i’s translation reads “Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, care-taking in the absence (of their husbands) of what Allah has enjoined (them) to guard”.

space of men is in any way more privileged than that of women, the concept as such is not patriarchal.

Hamdan argues that Islam as a religion can in fact be empowering to women, but only when the key texts are interpreted in a non-patriarchal manner and androcentric readings are deconstructed along the lines of the works of reformist scholars, such as the work of Pakistani scholars Rifat Hassan (1990) and Asma Barlas (2002) and the American scholar Amina Wadud (1999), to name only a few examples. Thus, the question arises as to whether it is possible for movements acting in accordance with an ideology based on an interpretation of Islam that does not refute the 'conventional androcentric wisdoms' to be empowering for women. In other words, can organizations such as Hamas still empower women even without refuting patriarchal Islamic interpretations? This paper intends to answer these questions.

The relationship between the Palestinian women's movement and women activists in Hamas shifted from largely ignoring each other to an open clash when the Islamist Dr. Mariam Saleh, following Hamas' victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections, was appointed Minister of Women's Affairs. The next section examines this crisis in order to highlight the antagonistic relationship between the women's movement and the women of Hamas. In addition, the discussion will underline the *a priori* refusal of the women's movement to engage with the women of Hamas in any way. The women's movement, like in its publications, had already made its condemning verdict of Hamas and its women. Neither the following attempts of Hamas women to communicate nor the practice that the two Islamist ministers engaged in was a factor in the women's movement's appraisal and judgment. This is only one example of what has become commonplace in academic writing concerning gender and Islamism in Palestine, namely, that (while it might be deemed totally unacceptable to do so in any other case) when it comes to women and Islamism, there is an academically unsubstantiated and pre-conceived negative judgement concerning women's empowerment through an Islamic framework.

The Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs

The Ministry of Women's Affairs was founded in November 2003 with Zahira Kamal, a former DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine) activist, as its first minister. Kamal remained Minister until the legislative council elections of 2006, when Dr. Mariam Saleh was appointed in her place. On the 15th of March 2007, Amal Siyam replaced Saleh as an 'independent candidate' in the newly-formed unity government. Even though Siyam argued that she is not affiliated with Hamas, she has been perceived by many as an Islamist. Khulud Da'yebis—an independent candidate—replaced Siyam when Mahmoud Abbas singlehandedly dissolved the unity government on the 15th of June 2007.

Hind⁵ worked in an NGO promoting legal reform and making the law more gender egalitarian. When I met her, she told me how outraged she was that an 'Islamist' was the Minister of Women's Affairs: "We saw that there was a woman who has never worked on women's issues, so she did not know how to deal with this. They got a woman to fill the job, but not a woman who believes in the centrality of women's issues" (Hind, 2007).

Marcel, who has worked at the Ministry for Women's Affairs under all four ministers, summarized the events as follows: "When the government changed all the NGOs were against

⁵ Name has been changed for purposes of privacy.

the new government. They prejudged that Hamas oppressed women. They said that they could not work with the Islamists on the issue of women” (Marcel, 2007).

Upon assuming her responsibilities as Minister for Women’s Affairs, Amal Siyam faced much opposition from the staff:

They did not cooperate. In the three months I could not hire a head of office and an escort... We could have ratified all these laws, but the employees inside the ministry did not cooperate with me. There was a plan not to work with me (Siyam, 2007).

Prior to Siyam, Mariam Saleh had encountered a similar reaction.

A month after taking over I called all women’s organizations to come, from all the different factions. The general union boycotted this meeting... I was very keen to stop the marginalization that I myself had suffered from. The way they saw us as backward, ignorant women who will bring women back to the Stone Age. (Saleh, 2007, my parenthesis)

In order to understand the Palestinian women’s movement’s rejection of Hamas women it is essential to understand the history of the former. As the next section will show, rather than simply being the outcome of ideological differences concerning gender politics and women’s empowerment, political factionalism and class politics have also played a central role in bringing about this hostile relationship between the two movements.

The Palestinian Women’s Movement: Historical and Contextual Notes

Palestinian women have been politically active at least since 1917 when they mobilized alongside Palestinian men against the Balfour Declaration (Hout, 1986). In 1921, the first exclusively female organization—the Palestinian’s Women’s Union—was founded (Ismail, 1993). Two hundred Palestinian delegates attended the 1929 Arab Women’s Congress of Palestine (Sayigh, 1992, 4). Palestinian women were also active in the Great Revolt from 1936-1939 by supporting the strikes against British and Zionist goods, selling their jewelry to donate money to Palestinian fighters, carrying food to fighters, hiding fugitives and transporting weapons (Hout, 1986). During the same time, Palestinian women from middle class backgrounds, who were “strongly influenced by the missionary philosophy” (Ismail, 1993, 3) were also active in charitable societies. As would be the case for most of its history, apart from a few exceptions, in the early stages the Palestinian women’s movement consisted mostly of upper middle class women.

While some branches of the Palestinian Arab Women’s Union stayed active, the *Nakbeh* of 1948 and the loss of the majority of Palestine led to a period in which work came to an almost complete halt. This lasted until the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) in 1965 (Sharoni, 1995, 61). The GUPW was founded alongside the Palestinian Women’s Association (PWA) as part of the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The goal of the GUPW was to “mobilize the efforts of Palestinian women and to organize a progressive political women’s organization in order to represent Palestinian women everywhere” (Sayigh, 1992, 4).

The second major change in the women's movement occurred in the late 1970s with the establishment of the women's committees, which many have claimed provided the backbone to what is now known as the New Women's Movement (Sharoni, 1995, 65). On Women's Day in 1978, the Women's Work Committee (WWC) was founded by a new generation of women who were "university educated, politically aware and socially progressive" (Sharoni, 1995, 65).⁶

Before starting their work, the WWC activists decided to assess the needs of the women they intended to work with. Conducting a survey and making connections with the women they aimed to empower, the WWC women "were astonished to discover a population totally outside their experience" (Sturm, 1993, 62). The upper and middle class backgrounds of the WWC activists had meant that few had knowledge of the lives of women in refugee camps, who were "illiterate, overworked, poor, economically dependent on men, [and] unaware of their legal rights" (Sturm, 1993, 62). Sharoni writes that "this new awareness among middle-class Palestinian women activists and emphasis on grassroots projects and organizing had a great influence on the development of WWC and later the entire women's movement" (Sharoni, 1995, 66). This awareness led to debates about the relationship between gender and other forms of discrimination. Despite seeking to "reach out to more ordinary women" (Sharoni, 1995, 68) on the whole, awareness of their class privileges did not lead the women's movement to work aggressively on expanding the membership to include women from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Jad, 2007).

As a result of factional loyalties amongst the members of the WWC, different groups emerged out of the WWC. Since the WWC became increasingly identified with the DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) established the Union for Palestinian Women's Committee (UPWC); the pro-Fateh group founded the Women's Committee for Social Work (WCSW); and the more pro-communist members founded the Union for Palestinian Working Women Committee (UPWWC) (Sturm, 1993, 64). Despite this split along party lines, the women's committees continued working together and avoided rivalry, carrying out joint projects during the 1980s (Sharoni, 1995, 67).

The eruption of the First Intifada in 1987 resulted in a change in the composition of the women's movement (Jad, 2004, 90). Palestinian women who had previously participated in the literacy programs provided to them by the women's movement officially joined the ranks of the movement itself (Sharoni, 1995, 69).

After the Oslo Peace accords in 1993, many of the successful women's grassroots organizations were transformed into NGOs. Islah Jad argues that (what she terms) the 'NGOisation of the women's movement' has not been empowering for women.

NGOisation...[denotes] the process through which issues of collective concern are transformed into 'projects' in isolation from the general context in which they are implemented and without taking into consideration economic, social and political factors affecting these projects...It also denotes a shift in women's activism from voluntarism to dependence on foreign funding; a shift in the personnel dealing with women's empowerment from grassroots rural and refugee cadres to middle class urban elites of professionals (Jad, 2004, 12).

⁶ Jad notes that the WWC was largely composed of women who worked in political organizations, especially left-wing parties and Fateh.

Thus, Jad argues the women's movement was transformed from engaging in political resistance to state building. Voluntarism and political resistance was transformed into paid labour and depoliticized. In the process the former members of the women's movement came under increasing pressure to accommodate the preferences of the donor countries.⁷

The lengthy discussion of the women's movement is necessary to locate politically the voices of those who have written about and defined women's empowerment in Palestine for the last thirty years and whose accounts have become synonymous with the truth about Palestinian women's empowerment. While they differ substantially on most issues, on the relation of Hamas and women most writers (with the exception of a handful, like Islah Jad) are in agreement that Hamas oppresses women. What is left unsaid, however, is the political and class background of the speakers.

It is important to note the partisan background of the women's committees as well as the link of the GUPW and the committees to the PLO to appreciate the deep suspicion that the members of the New Women's Movement had towards Hamas. Although the relationship varies, during the summer of 2007 the relationship between Hamas and most of the factions of the PLO was extremely hostile and politicized.

Moreover, there is also a class difference between members of the women's movement and Hamas. Women from the women's movement mostly come from middle class backgrounds. In contrast, the women of Hamas come from refugee and village backgrounds as well as the cities.⁸ While the level of education of women from Hamas and the women's movement was often the same (Jad, 2004), with many women in Hamas pursuing their PhDs, the type of education differed greatly and played an important role in determining the types of jobs available upon graduation.

Jad writes that while male elites were mainly educated in Arabic, female elites were educated in English schools. After three decades of British colonial rule, the percentage of educated rural women did not exceed 7%. This, Jad continues, was one of the main factors preventing bonds between urban and rural women from materializing (Jad, 2004, 284). Jad also notes that education is an important facilitator of class mobility. While women affiliated with Hamas are often as educated as their counterparts in the women's movement, the type of education they have received mostly differs. The fact that most Islamist women are refugees and educated in Gaza or Arab universities limits, for example, their chances of employment in the NGO sector, a place of employment for mostly middle to upper middle class women. This sector, which is one of the main sources of employment for women, requires foreign language (predominantly English) proficiency. Thus, despite the high level of education of most female Islamists, the lack of fluency in English as well as their backgrounds re-inscribes socio-economic difference between them and the women of the women's movement (Jad, 2004, 25).

As a result of ideological, religious, class and political differences, the definition of empowerment is contested. What is at stake is the question of what type of political activism is

⁷ It has to be mentioned here that while this critique of NGOs is relevant in many contexts, there are also counter examples. There are many instances globally where NGOs provide the sole structure and opportunity for women's extrication from extremely difficult situations (Alnoor, 2003, Andrews, 2013, Alvarez, 2009, Brown, 2008, Eade, 2005, Kilby, 2006, Kuhl, 2009, Thayer, 2009, Watkins, et al, 2012).

⁸ Mariam Saleh was born in a refugee camp, and so were most of my other respondents. Samira Halayqa, an elected member to the Legislative Council, was born and continues to live in a village near Hebron. Amal Siyam, too, is from a refugee background. Consequently, a class barrier is re-inscribed and the women from the two groups rarely move in the same circles.

considered empowering for women. In addition, the objectives and outcomes of political activism vary as well. When comparing the *content* of the different versions of empowerment, we need to keep the *context* of the lives of the two groups—the Women’s Movement and Hamas respectively—in mind. More so than simply being at odds in terms of the definition of women’s empowerment, the main difference concerned what type of politics to practice.

A New Vision?

So what did Saleh and Siyam accomplish when they were Ministers of Women’s Affairs? Firstly, it has to be noted that these women were only ministers for about a year and three months, between the two of them. During this time, the discourse of the two Islamist ministers can be categorized in four broad ways.

Firstly, both ministers argued that Islam, rather than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, should provide the basic guiding principles. Although the new Islamic administration of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs said that it appreciated the efforts of the previous administration, its members believed that the basic framework that the mission statement of the Ministry was based on should be revised. What kind of Islam Siyam was referring to and how that relates to women remained unclear, however.

When we studied it from an Islamic perspective we found a lot of problems from an Islamic point of view, some were directly contradictory, so they made a few changes, from 40 pages, it was only 3 pages...They had made the West the main source of legislation. How can I take the West only? We take from the West, yes, but only for what goes along with our traditions. If China, the Vatican, Israel have refused CEDAW⁹, [why can we not have reservations]? All countries have their specificity. They refused the adjustment. (Siyam, 2007, my parentheses)

Saleh also tried to widen the mandate of the Ministry. She believed that legal change was important. However, she saw the previous work of the Ministry as not dealing with the main problem facing Palestinian women, namely, the occupation. After she became minister, Saleh argued that the occupation should be the first priority of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. While many in the women’s movement agreed with that, they also believed that the struggle for Palestinian liberation should be coupled with the struggle for gender justice. Saleh, and following her Siyam, politicized the issue of women’s rights, arguing that Palestinian women should be seen as prisoners, fighters, wives of martyrs, and so forth. According to Marcel, the Ministry (under Fateh), “did not really handle issues that were directly related to the idea of women under occupation. They also did not work on executive issues, rather its main thing was to change laws that exist” (Marcel, 2007).

Saleh and Siyam attempted to change the mandate of the ministry from only having a legislative function inside the Palestinian Authority to dealing with Palestinian women under occupation and the economic and political problems stemming from it. To use Jad’s terminology, this was an effort to reverse the “NGOization” that had dominated political life after the Oslo peace process. Both ministers started visiting women all around the West Bank. During the time of my fieldwork, Siyam toured the main Palestinian cities in the West Bank and met with parents

⁹ The Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

of female prisoners, “an issue forgotten by most nationalists and secular women’s organizations” (Jad, 2004, 246). Siyam organized festivals for the relatives of female prisoners in which they were honoured for their sacrifice for Palestine. She also met with women and discussed their problems with them. In doing so, Saleh and Siyam countered what they saw as the elitist policies of the previous administration.

To enable legal reform, the ministry had previously focused on organizing workshops with female and male experts working in the field of women’s rights. Islamists were not the only ones who critiqued the elitism of the previous Women’s Ministry. Critical voices inside the movement made some of the same arguments. Eileen Kuttab, a veteran of the women’s movement, believed that:

Not only the Women’s Ministry but all [women’s rights efforts] were targeting the elite...I don’t believe that the secular movement is really fruitful for women in general because it is not dealing with priority issues, women’s issues that are issues of the majority, it is a class ideology...I really sympathize with the Islamic movement targeting the poor because they target the majority of the women, and they are targeting the real issues. We do not have a state, why are we speaking about legislation?... The danger is only what kind of state we want. The dream of the seculars was that of a secular democratic state (Kuttab, 2007b, my parentheses).

Jad points to the economic dimension of the rift between Islamist and ‘secular’ Palestinian activists. ‘The universalist discourse used by women in NGOs is alien not because it is ‘Western’ but because it was not founded on a thorough knowledge of the women’s situation whose interests these organizations claimed to be representing’ (Jad, 2004, 250). Thus it was argued that the new ministry should approach those who had been neglected by the previous ministry. Saleh believed that the Ministry of Women’s Affairs should base its mandate on a more realistic version of ‘the Palestinian woman’: a woman who lives under occupation and whose most pressing problems stem from it. Saleh argued that most Palestinian women did not feel that the Women’s Ministry represented them, an observation confirmed by a number of writers in recent years (Jad, 2004, Rubenberg, 2001).

I said we should not only work on employed women, there are so many more women who do not work in the government or in firms...How can we help these women, women in the refugee camps, the wives of the prisoners? Now there are 12000 prisoners. If none of these people are married we are speaking about 12000 mothers, and how many of them are married? Have daughters? So this is a big sector. We have many who are handicapped from the first intifada. Who takes care of them? Not women? The martyrs? Where are their wives? (Saleh, 2007)

In other words, seeing women only in their capacity as individuals led the previous administration, due to its perceived liberal biases, to overlook the problems that Palestinian women face as a result of their roles in relation to their children, siblings, parents and husbands: as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives. Neglecting to address these problems, Saleh maintained, resulted in ignoring some of the central concerns facing women in Palestine. Feminists have shown the problems with seeing women only in their relational capacities to men.

This example draws our attention to the fact that seeing women only as individuals may also be equally problematic. While women might have needs as individuals, they can also have needs as mothers, sisters and wives. If we are interested in women's empowerment we need to address women in both their relational and individualistic capacities.¹⁰

To think through whether only Islamic models that critically re-examine patriarchal attitudes can be empowering to women, the next case outlines an example of an Islamic model of activism that does not refute any of the attributes which many feminists and women's rights activists would regard as patriarchal and conservative. In particular I will examine the question of whether practices such as gender segregation necessarily disempower women.

The Birzeit Student Group¹¹

The Islamic student group, which is now affiliated with Hamas, *Al Kutla Al Islamia* (The Islamic Bloc) was founded at Birzeit University, one of the largest universities inside the West Bank and located in the village of Birzeit near Ramallah. The Islamic Bloc was established in 1978 by a small group of men and women who identified more with the Muslim Brotherhood than with the dominant left-wing parties of the time. This group found that there was no political student group to reflect the ideology of those who did not identify with a secular solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It was not until April of 1979, however, that they decided to enter the election race for the student council under the name of *Kutlat al 'amal al tulabi* (the Student Action Bloc). After a few months of Israeli closure of the university, the students came back in November 1979 as *Al Kutla al Islamia* (the Islamic Bloc) (Abu Yaqeen, 2007). Even though there was only one woman with a headscarf involved in the Islamic Bloc at the time, other women, among them a Christian woman, had been active in the foundation period (Abu Yaqeen, 2007).

In 1979, the Islamic Bloc consisted of a few students who coordinated their work in an informal manner. However, by the summer of 2007 (nearly thirty years later) the Islamic Bloc was one of the strongest, best-organized and most structured student groups on campus. More importantly for this research, the Islamic Bloc consists of two equal bodies, one for women and one for men.

There are about 100 active female and 100 active male members who organize activities all year around. These students constitute what is called the base of the Islamic Bloc. In separate elections for women and men, in which anyone's name can be nominated by any member from the base using secret nominations, 23 female and 23 male students are elected for the *shura* council (governing body). While the 'sisters' advertise their elections, the 'brothers' do not for security reasons. Separately, the 23 female and 23 males elect the *lajneh* (the committee), which consists of five sisters and five brothers. It is from these five brothers and five sisters that the leaders who are called the prince and the princess (the *Amir* and the *Amira*) are finally chosen.

¹⁰ It is important to note here that, despite the argument of Hamas members that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights in general were individualistic in nature, Hamas and other Palestinian liberation groups in general have often turned to the same conventions in order to affirm their rights as a people to self-determination. Thus it is mostly in relation to women's rights that the question of individualism is raised. This can be seen as being part of the connection many in the Arab world make between women's rights, colonialism and more recently imperialism and the mistrust towards women's issues that stems from that (Young, 2001).

¹¹ All names of students and participants have been changed for the security and safety of the respondents.

The rationale behind having these two structures was the belief that gender mixing was *haram* (religiously prohibited).

The Islamic Bloc thus consists of two equal structures—one for women and one for men. The structures are identical and the prince and the princess are equal in position. Unlike the women’s committee in the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, for example, the female section of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit does not report back to the male section, nor is it a subpart of it. Rather, it is an equal body. Coordination between the male and the female sections happens between the prince and the princess (Hamzeh, 2007).

In the 2005/2006 academic year, the Islamic Bloc won the student council elections, attaining seven seats. From these seven seats, two seats were given to female Islamists and five to male Islamists (Hassan, 2007). The only other student organization which also had female representation in the student council was the left bloc. Two female students were among the representatives. All the other students were only represented by male students.¹² “The Fateh faction did not have a single female student despite having 21 seats [in the student council]. Only when we criticized them did they get two women” (Mariam, 2007, my parenthesis).

The example of the Birzeit Islamic Bloc not only counters the commonly held belief that women are at best marginalized or at worst wholly absent in Islamic political parties, it is also an example of a structure that is gender-sensitive and equal with few equivalents worldwide. The example also counters the belief that gender segregation is necessarily disempowering for women.

In practice, gender segregation often translates into men having the right to use public spaces, and women being barred from using them (in other words, a case of separate but not equal spaces, which is what many opponents would argue is always the case when there is segregation). The example of the Birzeit Islamic student group counters what has now become a conventional wisdom for most feminists and civil rights activists, most notably in the United States, namely, that separate necessarily means unequal. The belief that separate gender spaces are inherently unequal has also been adopted by many women’s rights activists in the Arab world. I am aware that I might be making a controversial argument against a long-standing view. However, given third-wave feminists’ efforts to avoid universalizing certain practices and norms which emerged in the Global North (hooks, 1982, Mohanty, 1993, Roy, 2004, Koopman, 2008), I believe that this is a crucial point to examine. bell hooks, critiquing the American women’s movement, argues that regarding the family as an inherently oppressive institution, for example, is an outcome of the experience of white feminists. For African American women, hooks maintains, the family was often the only source of refuge in a hostile society (hooks, 1982, 20, 46, 75). Thus, she argues against universalizing the experience of one group—in this case white American feminists—to claim that this is a problem that faces all women. The issue of whether segregated spaces are inherently oppressive to women also relates to the larger question of whether we can determine *a priori* that certain practices are disempowering to women.

Consider the following example. One of the projects that the female part of the *kutla Islamiah* worked on was to rent an apartment building in 2006, using it as a dormitory for female

¹² Thus, once back in a gender-mixed space, the Islamists, like other student groups, went back to privileging male representation. There was no conviction concerning the necessity of equal gender representation, or of integrating women’s issues into what is understood as wider political issues. This example urges us to be cautious about the lasting empowering effects of gender-segregated spaces in the absence of a wider discussion about incorporating some of the lessons learned from these segregated spaces into gender-mixed spaces, in other words, from seeing the mixed space as one which includes both the female and male side equally.

students. Since the dorm was led and managed by female Islamists, parents of female students who lived far were more willing to allow their daughters to live on campus,¹³ which enabled some female students to attend university (Reem, 2007). Reem told me that many parents would have refused to let their daughters study at Birzeit altogether had it not been for the assurances that the female students of the Islamic Bloc gave the parents when they visited them. It was the fact that parents knew that there were “women’s only spaces” at Birzeit that played the determining factor (Reem, 2007).

It was not just the parents, however, who were appeased by the fact that there were “women’s only spaces”. Female students, too, argued that they were more comfortable in these spaces. Again, this is a debate that second-wave feminists in particular engaged in. One example is the debate about the merits and drawbacks of co-ed educational systems versus female only ones (Ewing, 2006, Smithers, 2006, Sullivan, 2009, Sullivan et al., 2010, Wills et al., 2006, Younger et al., 2006). The subject remains of great interest to many today, however, as apparent in the two special editions which were recently published on this topic in the journal *Sex Roles* (2011, 2013).

Many of the students I met confirmed that they would not have been able to address problems that face women specifically if they had been part of a wider gender-mixed group (Mais Mariam, 2007). In a gender-mixed group issues that are considered ‘gender neutral’ often take precedence over ‘women’s issues,’ which are believed to be secondary to the national liberation struggle (Jad, 1990, Young, 2001). Even without making the more extended feminist argument that women’s issues are inherently linked to national liberation, *de facto*, the Islamist students at Birzeit were able to focus on exclusively women’s issues due to the gender-segregated space they had developed.

In many countries, gender segregation indeed indicates separate and not equal. For the student group in Birzeit, however, the belief in segregation did not lead to a model that disadvantages women and makes them bear the burden of such segregation. Rather, over the past 28 years, the students developed a structure in which they created two equal spaces. This shows that Islamist thinking in general, and the belief in segregation more specifically, does not necessarily lead to depriving women of certain freedoms.

Conclusion

This paper started by posing the question of whether non-feminist groups can empower women. The two examples examined show that, despite not actively working to empower women, and sometimes even maintaining notions of gender hierarchy, it cannot be argued that the work of the Birzeit student group or the two Islamist ministers worked against the interests of women. Moreover, many of the differences between the women’s movement and Hamas activists had little to do with issues of gender.

Neither Mariam Saleh nor Amal Siyam were ministers for long enough to enable an evaluation of what a Ministry of Women’s Affairs under ‘Islamic’ leadership would look like or

¹³ Even though all dorms are gender-segregated, parents of women are often worried about their daughters’ reputations being affected by living in a gender-mixed campus. Female Islamists in general, and the student activists in particular, were seen by many Palestinians as trustworthy and their reputation above critique (Ababneh, 2009, Ababneh, 2010). This trustworthiness was extended to any project that these Islamic Bloc activists engaged in and those taking part in these activities (in this case living in the dorm supervised by the female section of the Islamic Bloc).

whether their policies would empower Palestinian women. Nonetheless, this case touches upon many important issues. Firstly, it brings to the fore the fear that those engaged in the women's movement have of 'the Islamic framework'. This confirms Saba Mahmood's statement concerning the piety movement in Egypt that "the depth of discomfort the pietistic character of this movement evokes among liberals, radicals, and progressives alike is extraordinary" (Mahmood, 2005, 37).

The reaction of the Palestinian's women's movement uncovers assumptions that most feminists share, namely, that the realisation of women's rights can only stem from a secular ideology and that religiously-inspired frameworks will invariably oppress women.

In one way, it can be said that the entrance of Dr. Mariam Saleh, a religious woman who grew up in a refugee camp, is in itself an example of a woman reclaiming the space of decision-making that the women's movement seeks to achieve. However, the class difference and, following that, the level of Westernization and different worldview, makes the women's movement perceive the vision for which women like Mariam Saleh stood as the antithesis to their struggle.

The issue goes beyond the person of Mariam Saleh, however. Also at stake was the validity of a different *political* approach. The basic assumptions of the women's movement were challenged through the so-called 'Islamic'¹⁴ approach of Saleh and Siyam. This approach not only privileged fighting the occupation over addressing the social problems Palestinian women faced—precisely because of the intrinsic connection between the occupation and Palestinian women's experiences—but also used Islam and not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its guide. The fact that neither of the two Islamist ministers was able to articulate exactly what 'Islam' here meant underlines the point that religion, or the lack of religion, was not really at stake.

Saleh and Siyam challenged the mandate of the ministry to go beyond ensuring that legislation is gender equal to dealing with the problems that Palestinian women face as a result of living under occupation. Furthermore, they argued that seeing women only as individuals prevents us from recognizing many of the problems women face as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. Rather than organizing workshops for women's rights activists, the Islamist ministers met with ordinary Palestinian women all over the West Bank. The disagreements were less about women's empowerment and more about what type of politics to engage in: legal reform and state-building or engaging with the problems caused by the occupation?

What was portrayed as a struggle over women's rights is in large part a struggle between different classes and political factions. Both sides tried to impose their own worldview as the only legitimate, objective form of women's empowerment. While both sides are guilty of this, the women's movement had the power of the hegemonic discourse of the international sphere on its side, as well as the privileges of their subject positions within Palestinian society. The *Islamiyyaat* (Arabic for female Islamists), on the other hand, were supported by the power of the 'hegemonic discourse of Islam' as well as being perceived as 'more representative' of 'true' Palestinian women.

Which vision is more empowering for Palestinian women is difficult to assess. However, the focus on women under occupation, as well as women in relational terms, helped Siyam and

¹⁴ The examples given in this paper show clearly that the work of Siyam and Saleh is as little 'Islamic' in this case as the policies suggested by the women's movement were about 'women's rights'. Islam and gender justice have very little to do with the practical differences in approach to the Israeli occupation that were suggested.

Saleh to widen the mandate of the Ministry. It also enabled them to reach more women and to hear firsthand what kind of problems women all over the West Bank were facing. Thus, it is enough to say that their actions certainly were not a threat to women's wellbeing in Palestine.

In the case of the Islamic Bloc, the idea of segregation is neither refuted nor reinterpreted in favour of a version that does not prohibit the mixing of the genders. Despite the lack of a radical reinterpretation of what is seen by many as a patriarchal reading of Islam, adhering to the idea of segregation has not led to disadvantaging women. On the contrary, it helped students who came from rural and conservative backgrounds, since a gender-segregated atmosphere allowed female students to be active politically without jeopardizing their reputation or disobeying their parents. Indeed, for numerous students, segregation made it possible for them to live on campus.

Perhaps most significantly, segregation enabled female activists to focus all their activity on women. This way, female students were not just the target of a small part of overall activities. By having two groups, the *kutla* is the only student organisation in Birzeit that has the ability to focus completely on the problems facing female students while simultaneously addressing the problems of male students. The female section organized workshops to help female students with their university work, photocopied class notes and books (for both male and female students) and organized events dealing with the challenges female students face at university.

The way the students of Birzeit have set up the Islamic Bloc demonstrates that segregation does not always lead to disadvantaging women. The student bloc was able to create a structure that was completely gender equal. As a result of upholding gender segregation, women were not pushed aside, but were required to fill the roles on all levels. In the Birzeit Islamic Bloc female Islamists constructed a different model of women's empowerment. Their ideal 'Islamic' society was one in which women and men are segregated. Women's roles and duties are defined within these separate spaces. Many women's rights activists in the Muslim world have argued that segregation disempowers women. However, as the previous example shows, it can be another form of empowerment. This example thus urges us to refrain from making sweeping statements concerning the nature of 'Islamic' political activists in regard to gender, in the same way that such statements would be misleading of any other political faction, Palestinian or otherwise. Indeed, the model developed by the students of Birzeit is not only useful for other Islamist groups to consider and learn from but also for secular political groups and student organizations in general.

Finally, I am not arguing here that these examples are representative of Hamas's work, nor that this is enough to make any kind of 'verdict' about whether Hamas as a whole works to empower or to disempower women. Rather, I use the first example of the clash between the women's movement and the Islamist ministers to show the danger of uncritically taking on the account of the Palestinian women's movement without contextualizing these accounts. Despite the important work of the Palestinian women's movement with regard to gender justice, this article functions as a warning not to take the accounts of those who have become 'stars' in the field of women's studies in relation to Islamists or other groups as truths. As readers, we must be careful not to assume that what the 'good guys' (or in this instance, the 'good women') say about certain issues is necessarily the 'right' analysis. The example of Hammami's account of the so-called *hijab* campaign, and the fact that almost all the literature produced on women in Palestine took her account of the story on without stopping to ask about the other side of the story is only one example of our willingness to go along with what the 'experts' have to say. We need to pay more attention to the political, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds of the speaker. As feminists, we must be aware of the hierarchies and truths within our own discourses.

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