

Reconstructing Gender and Activism

The Case of Women's Initiatives in Al-Wihdat refugee camp

China Sajadian

Academic Director: Dr. Muhamed Al-Khalil

Project Advisor: Dr. Jalal Al-Husseini

The School for International Training

Spring 2007

Abstract

This paper explores the various ways that major social, political, and economic issues influence Palestinian women's consciousness and initiatives in Jordan. Based on a set of interviews with self-identified female activists in Al-Wihdat refugee camp, I contextualize my findings in the multiple institutional and discursive realms through which female identity is constituted, such as nationalism, socioeconomic status, humanitarian development, and community. By investigating these women's perspectives on a personal basis, I seek to uncover female subjective identities which subvert, complicate, and contest dominant constructions of the needs, roles, and ambitions of Palestinian refugee women.

Topic codes:

506 Anthropology (other)

507 Gender Studies

521 Regional Studies: Middle East

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Student (please print name): China Sajadian

Signature: *China Sajadian*

Date: 19 May 2007

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Theoretical Framework and Literature Review.....	13
Methodology.....	20
Findings.....	28
Conclusion.....	43
Bibliography.....	46
Appendix.....	50

Introduction:

“The Palestinian woman is first and foremost a refugee. She is homeless, she has lost family members, and she has faced horrible conditions. She knows that she has suffered more than any other group of women in the world. But she doesn’t give up on the issues because Palestine is in her heart.”¹

Palestinian camp communities offer fertile milieus for the study of gender because of the multiplicity of forces, influences, and institutions bearing on its construction.² From UNRWA development regimes to the changing sociopolitical environments of their host governments, camps have been exposed to multiple sources and types of pressure that have influenced gender ideology over the years. As a result, Rosemary Sayigh contends, “gender became articulated and politicized as it had not been in Palestine, transformed into a central element in popular resistance to culture loss and alienation.”³

Challenging narrow conceptions of the Palestinian nationalist imagination, this paper points to the realm of camp women's activism as a rich paradigm through which to observe and interrogate Palestinian refugee identity. Based on a series of in-depth interviews of female activists in Al-Wihdat refugee camp in Jordan, I attempt to reveal the various ways that nationalism, refugeeism, community, class, and gender relations are perceived by women through their activities.⁴ The diversity of perspectives I encountered – from liberal to conservative, secularly-oriented to Islamist, strategic to pragmatic – encompassed under the umbrella of women’s activism in Al-Wihdat camp raises a

¹ Anonymous #3, interview by China Sajadian, 02/05/07, Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp, Amman, Jordan.

² Rosemary Sayigh, “Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical, and Methodological Issues,” in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 148.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

number of questions about the social, political, and ideological topography in which contemporary female activists function. What are the main reference points against which female activists in Al-Wihdat define themselves?

The overall orientation of this study cannot be reduced to the “oppositional poles” of liberation and subordination, but rather presumes “complex processes of transformation and yet simultaneous reproduction of gender structures and meaning.”⁵ Deriving from the statements and sentiments of fourteen different interviewees, in this paper, I argue that women’s activism in Al-Wihdat refugee camp can best be understood in relation to the environment in which it functions. As such, I situate the current activities, goals, and perspectives put forth by these activists within the discourses of nationalism, humanitarian development, and international politics, observing the spectrum of ways that these women’s views reflect or contest these dominant discourses.

Significance of Study

In reference to dominant trends in scholarship about the Middle East, Edward Said has criticized the altogether lack of a “theoretical dimension,” stating that “Middle East studies seems to be governed the most by what you might call pragmatic and policy-oriented issues.”⁶ Notions of Palestinian refugee identity and nationalism are constantly negotiated in the context of multiple, and, at times, contradicting ideological apparatuses, including the UN, host governments, and the international community. Indeed, as Ted Swedenberg states, “In a very real sense...how Palestinians remember their past has a

⁵ Julie Peteet, Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 5.

⁶ Edward Said, interview by James Paul, "Orientalism Revisited: An Interview with Edward Said," Middle East Report, (1988): 33.

great deal to do with how they are imagined by others.”⁷ This is doubly true in the case of Palestinian women.

Taking Said's criticisms into consideration, I believe it is vital to challenge singular interpretations of history and contemporary politics by revealing subjugated forms of knowledge. According to Foucault, this entails elevating the personal and private domains to the status of a historical subject.⁸ Therefore, against the multitude of empirical policy studies and development reports claiming to represent the situation of refugees, I attempt to overcome generalizations by placing women at the center of my study. In doing so, I aspire to depict my subjects “as agents of history, as producers of culture, as needing change.”⁹ Given Al-Wihdat’s deep historical relationship with Amman’s social, political, and economic evolution, this camp presents a unique and relevant context for exploring female activist perspectives.

There currently exists a moderate amount of ethnographic scholarship based on the role of gender in refugee camp communities, most notably, the works of Rosemary Sayigh, Julie Peteet, and Cheryl Rubenberg. Concerning Palestinians in Jordan, Randa Farah has accurately observed that “studies on Palestinian refugee camps are relatively meager.”¹⁰ With exception to the works of Randa Farah, Stephanie Latte-Abdallah, and Jason Hart, research in the camps of Jordan remains limited. Drawing inspiration from Sayigh’s and Peteet’s research about women in the camps of Lebanon, I attempt to apply a similar methodological and theoretical approach to the Jordanian context.

⁷ Ted Swedenberg, *Memories of Revolt*, (Fayetteville: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 3.

⁸ Michel Foucault, "Why Study Power: the Question of the Subject," in Hubert Dreyfuss and Paul Rainbow, eds. *Bergnel Structuralism and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 208.

⁹ Rosemary Sayigh, “Dis/Solving the Refugee Problem,” *MERIP Reports*, (1998): 21.

¹⁰ Randa Farah, “Popular Memory and Reconstructions of Palestinian Identity: Al Baq’a Camp, Jordan,” PhD dissertation in Anthropology, University of Toronto, (1999): 15.

General Theory and Approach

According to Lynne Walter, “Feminist studies deconstruct the object of anthropological representation by conceptualizing culture as the negotiation of meanings over time, as opposed to the coherence of meaning at a particular moment in time.”¹¹ Seen in this way, gender serves as a powerful basis on which to interrogate political, social, and historical norms precisely because it is one of the key forms of identification on which culture and society are constructed.¹² To investigate the role of women's activism in Al-Wihdat refugee camp, I have chosen to base my study on the voices of the activists themselves. Perspectives from gender studies, cultural anthropology, and the sociology of knowledge supplement my research. I will situate my discussion of gender activism in the camps within various subaltern/third-world/international feminist theories, including the works of Georgina Waylen, Deniz Kandiyoti, Partha Chatterjee, and several others. Previous scholarship on the role of gender in Palestinian communities will enrich my findings and analysis.

Historical Background

After the foundation of the state of Israel following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, approximately 820,000 Palestinians were forced to leave their homeland.¹³ The majority fled to neighboring Arab countries, including 100,000 to the Kingdom of Jordan.¹⁴ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency was founded in 1949 to accommodate and

¹¹ Lynne Walter, “Feminist Anthropology?” *Gender and Society*, (1995): 273.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ala Al-Hamarneh, “The Social and Political Effects of Transformation Processes in Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Amman Metropolitan Area,” in George Joffe, ed. *Jordan in Transition*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 172.

¹⁴ Ibid.

provide direct relief to Palestinian refugee dispersed throughout various Arab countries. Over the course of the next several years, four refugee camps were established with international help to serve as temporary shelter for Palestinians being expelled from their homeland, including Al-Wihdat, which was established in 1955.¹⁵ Another wave of Palestinian refugees occurred in 1967 after the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Six more refugee camps were established at this time. Because Jordan had formally annexed the West Bank in 1951, the majority of these Palestinian refugees were granted Jordanian citizenship. Today, Palestinians in Jordan represent about half of the Jordanian population. This number accounts for forty percent of total Palestinian refugees worldwide.¹⁶ The persistence of the refugee issue has profoundly influenced the evolution of the Palestinian nationalist movement, the role of UNRWA, and refugee aspirations for the future.

From the inception of the Palestinian refugee problem, a key issue has been the gap between changing political realities and the ideological aspirations of refugees. In hopes of achieving the right of return, camp residents initially harbored resistance to extensive infrastructural development in the camps for fear of a tacit recognition of the permanence of their refugeeism. Refugees continue to hold tightly to their traditions, memories, and family ties in hopes of preserving the remnants of their past. In the face of present socioeconomic conditions, however, the vast majority of camp residents now fully acknowledge that attending to immediate needs in the camps through the

¹⁵ Randa Farah, "Popular Memory and Reconstructions of Palestinian Identity: Al Baq'a Camp, Jordan," PhD dissertation in Anthropology, University of Toronto, (1999): 102.

¹⁶ Ibrahim Mhanna, "Non-Governmental Organizations in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan," Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Center, Birzeit University, (2000), 4.

development of civil society and infrastructure does not necessarily delegitimize their right of return.

Large-scale, top-down development and relief characterized UNRWA services initially. As the refugee situation endured, development aims shifted in favor of enhanced education and training programs in the 1970s.¹⁷ In the late 1980s and early 1990s, UNRWA began to dedicate more attention to “self-help” initiatives, which was accompanied by a greater focus on women.¹⁸ In tandem with UNRWA’s shift away from welfare toward more substantial social development, a network of non-governmental organizations emphasizing social awareness and self-supporting enterprise began to emerge. It is in this context that locally-driven, sustainable organizations aimed at women’s specific needs, such as the Women’s Program Centers and the Jordanian Women’s Union, began to emerge in the camps.

The Women’s Program Center and the Jordanian Women’s Union are currently the preeminent organizations representing women’s needs in the camps. Given that the majority of my respondents were affiliated with the Center or Union activities in some way – whether as leaders, members, or occasional participants – I deem it necessary to provide a brief overview of the development and inner workings of these two organizations.

Women’s Program Centers

Established upon an initiative from UNRWA’s Relief and Social Services Programs, these centers provide training courses and social awareness programs through

¹⁷ Benjamin Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 274.

¹⁸ Ibid.

local means and support.¹⁹ The Program Centers were established in the camps in the 1980s, but the majority of their more sophisticated programs – including the legal advice bureau, civic education programs, and community savings and loan groups – were introduced after 1993.²⁰ The centers’ main objectives are to enable more women to acquire the skills to earn a living, to advise women in coping with family and social problems, and to facilitate women’s leadership roles in the community.²¹ In tandem with addressing day-to-day practical economic, social, legal, and health matters, these centers also commit to a broader ideology of raising awareness about the needs and rights of individuals, especially women and children.²²

Women’s committees from the local community meet regularly to plan, implement, and follow up on the projects. These local committees contribute to managing these centers by contracting teachers to hold training courses on a voluntary basis usually without monetary compensation.²³ Such involvement of the community in all stages of decision-making ensures that the Center’s initiatives remain reflective of women’s needs. Although the Program Centers are located within refugee camps and therefore primarily geared toward camp women’s needs, according to the regional manager of the Women’s Program Center, “The Center does not discriminate on the basis of religion, politics, or nationality...some Jordanian women seek to participate too. We do not turn them down, because our objective is to advance all women.” According to the UNRWA website, about 3,800 women benefit from the Center’s services every year.

¹⁹ Ibrahim Mhanna, “Non-Governmental Organizations in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan,” Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Center, Birzeit University, (2000), 30.

²⁰ Ibid, 30.

²¹ Benjamin Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 58.

²² Ibrahim Mhanna, “Non-Governmental Organizations in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan,” 30.

²³ Ibid, 29.

The Jordanian Women's Union

Originally established by a Jordanian female lawyer in 1945, the non-governmental organization that is now called the Jordanian Women's Union was subject to dissolution and multiple restarts until it finally established itself permanently in 1976.²⁴ There are ten branches in Jordan, representing the major cities.

The union's main objectives extend beyond the purview of women's issues, and contain many programs centered on family and children's needs. Its main objectives concerning women include: (1) organizing the capabilities of Jordanian women in defending their rights and achievements, (2) mobilizing Jordanian women in the development of the local community, improving their social status and enabling them to optimize their creative and productive potentials, (3) overcoming the legislative, economic, social, and cultural barriers to women's advancement, (4) strengthening women's political awareness and democratic drive, and (5) helping eradicate illiteracy through reading and writing, legal, and political education.²⁵

Similar to the Women's Program Centers, Union activities in the camps are driven by local unpaid volunteers, except for token salaries paid to those who work in kindergartens.²⁶ The Jordanian Women's Union cooperates with the Program Centers in the camps by providing a legal umbrella, human resources, and moral support.²⁷

²⁴ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 09/05/07, Jordanian Women's Union Headquarters in Jabal Hussein, Amman, Jordan.

²⁵ Ibrahim Mhanna, "Non-Governmental Organizations in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan," Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Center, Birzeit University, (2000), 33.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Feminist Theory, Gender in the non-Western world

Since the 1960s, a significant body of scholarship concerning the role of women, feminism, and gender in the non-Western world has emerged in response to the narrowness of traditional Western feminist theory. From "third-world feminism" to "subaltern feminism" to "womanism," scholars have coined myriad phrases to describe activism which does not fit the mold of classic Western feminism. Acknowledging that feminism and its associates have become encumbered by their association with the West and colonialism, I attempt to employ such terms as "feminist," "gender activism," and "women's movement" with much more fluid definitions in mind.

Both Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Kumari Jayawardena agree that second-wave Western feminism is limited by its exclusive focus on gender equity in isolation from the effects of class, race, and colonialism. Their visions of female activism in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and ethnic minority communities in Europe and America are predicated on an understanding of multiple, inextricable forms of subjugation that comprise feminist consciousness in these regions. According to Kumari Jayawardena, "Women's movements do not occur in a vacuum but correspond to, and to some extent are determined by, the wider social movements of which they form part."²⁸ In her view, prevailing social, political, and economic conditions entail limitations for the women's movement, whose methods of struggle are, in turn, generally determined by those limits.²⁹ Similarly, Johnson-Odim states: "While it is clear that sexual egalitarianism is a

²⁸ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Zed Books, 1986), 10.

²⁹ Ibid.

major goal on which all feminists can agree, gender discrimination is neither the sole nor perhaps the primary locus of the oppression of Third World women... thus, a narrowly defined feminism, taking the eradication of gender discrimination as the route to ending women's oppression, is insufficient to redress the oppression of Third World women."³⁰

Scholars of "third-world feminism" posit that women's oppression in these regions must be viewed in the context of all oppression. In the face of foreign domination and economic struggle, subaltern women's movements in these regions necessarily contain broader concerns in their agendas. Johnson-Odim believes this requires an ideology that incorporates yet transcends gender-specificity, with the aim of not only bringing up the status of females, but of rehabilitating their nation.³¹ "Such a definition of feminism," she argues, "will allow us to isolate the gender-specific element in women's oppression while simultaneously relating it to broader issues, to the totality of what oppresses us as women."³²

Understanding subaltern women's movements requires exploration of "the bases on which women come together as women."³³ Such an approach allows one to look beyond a rigid binary of resistance/ subordination to observe the avenues through which women use their socially prescribed roles and preexisting circumstances to act politically.³⁴ Deniz Kandiyoti coined the term "patriarchal bargain" to describe the ways that women "strategize" within a set of concrete social, economic, and political constraints. "These patriarchal bargains," Kandiyoti argues, "exert a powerful influence

³⁰ Cheryl Johnson-Odim, "Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third world Women and Feminism" in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, And Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 315.

³¹ Ibid, 321.

³² Ibid, 322.

³³ Georgina Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 18.

³⁴ Ibid.

on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts...they also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression.”³⁵ Viewing patriarchy and gender relations in this way permits a more fluid, workable definition of women’s resistance. In Kandiyoti’s view, patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable exchanges, but rather are subject to historical transformations that uncover new terrains of struggle and negotiation between genders.³⁶ Georgina Waylen points to the politicization of women’s social roles as evidence of the patriarchal bargain, such as the ways in which women exploit their roles as mothers or household managers as a platform to voice their demands.³⁷ In the face of multiple constraints, women may capitalize on, and, in effect, reify certain aspects of their socially constructed identities in order to make gains elsewhere. This framework helps clarify why certain women’s actions may appear to contradict their long-term interests in favor of short-term gains.

In agreement with these theorists, I contend that the gender identity of Palestinian women cannot be separated from the greater economic and political struggles that they face. Maxine Molyneux constructs a fruitful framework for interpreting women’s activism by distinguishing between practical and strategic gender interests. Women’s activism operating around practical interests, the so-called “politics of every-day life,” focuses on issues of poverty, health, and family. According to Molyneux, all autonomous female collective action is not necessarily feminist in the sense of addressing women’s ‘real’ interests, but could also pursue initiatives not directly related to gender issues, or even serve to undermine women's rights in some cases. Strategic gender

³⁵ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” *Gender and Society*, (1988): 275.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Georgina Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 18.

interests, on the other hand, “are those interests which can be derived deductively from an analysis of women’s subordination and from the formulation of a more satisfactory set of arrangements.”³⁸ Within this definition, feminist movements can be defined as movements of women mobilizing autonomously and self-consciously as women on behalf of gender-based demands.³⁹

Whether a women’s movement is strategic, practical, or containing elements of both, one can conclude from these various theories that women’s activities should not be viewed as “discrete entities” somehow separate from the other struggles against colonialism, imperialism, and for national liberation.⁴⁰ Nowhere is this status more evident than in the case of Palestinian refugee women. By incorporating generational difference, class, national identity, and locale into my ethnographic research, I strive to highlight the multi-layered construction of gender identities and its link to women’s mobilization strategies. In Elia Zureik’s view, these multiplicities are precisely what characterize the “subaltern nature” of the discourse on Palestinian identity – “a discourse of resistance that is fragmented and lacks unity.”⁴¹

2) Feminism and nationalism

Edward Said has spoken of “an incipient and unresolved tension” in the contest “between stable identity as it is rendered by such affirmative agencies as nationality, education, tradition, language and religion, on the one hand, and all sorts of marginal,

³⁸ Georgina Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 21.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁴¹ Elia Zureik, “Theoretical and Methodological Considerations for the Study of Palestinian Society,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, (2003): 159.

alienated or... anti-systemic forces on the other.”⁴² This tension, Said contends, “produces a frightening consolidation of patriotism, assertions of cultural superiority, mechanisms of control, whose power and ineluctability reinforce...the logic of identity.”⁴³ Normative constructions of gender are a major manifestation of this tension.

Nationalism is a polymorphous phenomenon, which unleashes emancipatory as well as repressive ideas and forces.⁴⁴ Nationalist movements, while opening up spaces for greater political participation, entail a reordering of relationships, discourses, and power structures in the community. This reordering has a converse effect on members of the community who do not fit the normatively-constructed nationalist subject, a primary example being women. In the process of nationalism, women’s roles and rights become a terrain on which the nationalist project inscribes itself in accordance with its historical project. The nationalist trajectory defines itself against external forces through the rigidification of a set of dichotomies concerning the domains of spiritual/material, home/world, and feminine/masculine.⁴⁵ Caught within this framework of “false essentialisms,” women’s roles and actions become severely encumbered and reconfigured by dominant social and political concerns.

A considerable amount of scholarship is devoted to the role of women in nationalist movements. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have identified five major ways in which women have tended to participate in national processes differently than men: (1) as biological reproducers of the national/ethnic collectivity, (2) as reproducers

⁴² Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 155.

⁴³ Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 155.

⁴⁴ Frances Hasso, “The ‘Women’s Front’: Nationalism, Feminism, and Modernity in Palestine,” Gender and Society, (Aug., 1998): 441.

⁴⁵ Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, 134.

of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, (3) as participants in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of culture, (4) as bearers of ethnic/national differences, and (5) as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles.⁴⁶ In this way, “for Third World women, national struggle has been simultaneously an entry point into public life and a source of transformed constraints, altering gender values by making them explicit, ‘fixing’ them newly at the core of national culture.”⁴⁷

To what extent has the Palestinian nationalist movement informed the refugee women’s movement and women’s consciousness in the camps? In attempting to answer this question, it is important to recognize that, although nationalist themes permeate camp women's conceptions of their identity, they never do so completely or uniformly.⁴⁸ Indeed, as Rosemary Sayigh has observed in her field research experience, “Careful listening enables us to hear narrations that reflect both dominant discourses on - women (nationalist and communal) and women's own appropriations of their female and nationalist identities.”⁴⁹

3) Gender development/mobilization strategies

Foucault portrays a view of power where “individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.”⁵⁰ In his view, power is not merely a form of domination by one person or group

⁴⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis and Flora Anthias, Women-Nation-State, (London: Macmillan, 1989), 7.

⁴⁷ Rosemary Sayigh, “Gender, Sexuality, and Class in National Narrations: Palestinian Camp Women Tell Their Lives” Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, (1998): 181.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 169.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 98.

over another; it presents an availability of options which influence how one experiences externalities.⁵¹ Within the manifold relations of power, individuals are not only its passive recipients; they are also its agents.⁵² From a Foucauldian perspective, Julie Peteet posits, “Women, as a gendered category, are constituted by power, but at the same time, women as members of different class-power structures are vehicles of power.”⁵³

Palestinian refugee camps have been subject to external control, foreign intervention, and coercive change, and, at the same time, they have been arenas of complex forms of resistance and adaptation.⁵⁴ Within this context, what is the significance of gender activism? Through the lens of post-modernist and post-structuralist interpretations of power, women’s political action represents, in part, a struggle over dominant meanings and an effort to change those meanings.⁵⁵ Margot Badran adds further insight to this definition when she states: “It means that many women across a broad spectrum insist on maintaining or increasing their own roles in society and promoting a public presence of women in general. It means that many women insist on their own growth, productivity, and creativity in diverse spheres. It means that women are fighting back against retrogressive forces that wish to push them to the margins of society.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Julie Peteet, Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 6.

⁵² Cheryl Rubenberg, Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank, (London: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 11.

⁵³ Peteet, Gender in Crisis, 6.

⁵⁴ Rosemary Sayigh, “Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical, and Methodological Issues,” in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 155.

⁵⁵ Georgina Waylen, Gender in Third World Politics, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 18.

⁵⁶ Margot Badran, “Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt,” ed. Valentine Moghadam, Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 204.

The complex and contingent web of discourses in which women's activism takes shape are well-evidenced in the Palestinian refugee camps of Jordan. Key to the agendas of various women's activities in Al-Wihdat camp is the notion of women's empowerment. However diversely and nebulously construed, the emerging conception of empowerment, at its core, is nearly universally defined by its supporters as increased self-reliance, sustainability, independence, and leadership.

III. METHODOLOGY

The Subjects

My data consist of thirteen open-ended, in-depth interviews over the course of several weeks with thirteen different Palestinian women activists who work and/or reside in Al-Wihdat refugee camp. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and an hour and a half, depending on the comfort level and availability of the speakers. The majority of interviews were conducted in women's homes in the camp, although some were held at the Wihdat branch of the Women's Program Center, one was held at the Jordanian Women's Union Orphan Center, and one was held at the main branch of the Jordanian Women's Union in Jabal Hussein. Every interview was conducted in Arabic with the assistance of an interpreter. My transcriptions of the women's words are based solely on my interpreter's translations during the interviews. If time and resources had permitted, I would have preferred tape-recording the interviews and translating the women's responses afterward for an exact interpretation of their words. However, within the time and monetary constraints I was allotted for field research, this was not a possibility for

my project. Thus, the direct quotations I present in this study are not necessarily the precise translations of their statements, but rather are based on my interpreter's phraseology at the time of the interview.

I found my interviewees with the help of Fatima,⁵⁷ one of the leaders of the Jordanian Women's Union in Al-Wihdat. As a well-respected community leader and a life-long resident of Al-Wihdat, Fatima's extensive network around the camp allowed me to visit many women from a variety of backgrounds. Since I was interested in studying women's political activism, I originally proposed to focus only on female heads of women's organizations. However, as so frequently occurs during the fieldwork experience, it soon became apparent that the scope of my research field was too narrow to paint an accurate picture. Through my discussions with Fatima and observations of the community, I quickly came to realize that gender activism extends far beyond formal organizational structures. Julie Peteet discusses such definitional obstacles in her research of women's initiatives in the refugee camps of Lebanon, stating that "Women active in what is often labeled the domain of 'formal politics' are not a large category, but if we account for the other, less easily defined and categorized types of political affiliation and activism the picture becomes more detailed."⁵⁸ Indeed, women's activism is not a self-delimiting, discrete category that is measured by political affiliations and official capacities alone. Thus, in order to encompass a more diverse array of social backgrounds and perspectives in my research, I opted to include several women who participate in "women's activism" in less structured ways. The result was a rich tapestry of overlapping as well as contrasting perspectives. Among the fourteen women I interviewed, some held

⁵⁷ The names of my respondents have been changed in this paper in order to protect their confidentiality.

⁵⁸ Julie Peteet, Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 4.

university degrees while others were illiterate, some boasted formal affiliations with either the Jordanian Women's Union of the Women's Program Center and others were informally active in the community. Four of the women were widows and three were orphans. Their ages ranged from eighteen to eighty, divided relatively evenly among the three different generations.

According to Sayigh, "ethnographers often feel they have to choose between the pursuit of predetermined questions and intervening as little as possible in order to preserve a state of 'naturalness.'"⁵⁹ I made a great effort to conduct the interviews as fluid conversations, so the specific questions I posed differed depending on each speaker's interests. I described my objective to each woman I interviewed as a study on how different social, economic, historical, and community factors influence women's activism, ambitions, and perspectives in refugee camps.

I began each interview by inquiring from where in Palestine she originated, with whom she lives, and what portion of her extended family live in the camps of Jordan. Sometimes even these preliminary questions sparked a personal anecdote or brief historical narrative. After that, I asked each speaker to describe her background in activism, the organizations with which she is engaged, and the reasons she became involved. For the rest of the session, I adhered to a certain set of broad themes, inquiring about the speaker's perspectives on nationalism, the refugee camps, UNRWA, the status of women, her memories or visions of Palestine, and her dreams for the future. Whenever possible, I used information gleaned from her life history as a basis for my questions in

⁵⁹ Rosemary Sayigh, "Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical, and Methodological Issues," in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 154

an attempt to personalize the exchange.⁶⁰ Though the vast majority of my questions were not directly related to women, the speakers' female subjectivity – whether as mothers, daughters, feminists, or any other strong self-identification – provided revealing insights into to the subject of gender.

The field

Having lived in Jordan for two months, I felt a degree of familiarity with the social and political climate surrounding refugee camps and the Palestine question. I conducted fieldwork in Al-Wihdat refugee camp, the second largest Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan with a population of near 50,000. I chose this location because of its size, urban context, and historically politically active community. I was interested in the way its proximity to Amman's social, political, and historical development affected the development of the camp. I viewed this urban proximity as yet another component shaping the women's movement and constructions of gender in the camps, proposing that the social and political influence of Jordan is much more present in this camp than in the other more isolated camps.

The extent of Al-Wihdat's incorporation into the capital's development is evidenced by its evolution into "the trade center of southern Amman."⁶¹ In 1999, Al-Wihdat had more than 1,950 officially registered shops and enterprises, double the amount that had existed a mere six years prior.⁶² At the same time, many pressing social

⁶⁰ Cheryl Rubenberg, Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank, (Boulder, Lynne Renner, 2001), 23.

⁶¹ Ala Al-Hamarneh, "The Social and Political Effects of Transformation Processes in Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Amman Metropolitan Area," in George Joffe, ed. Jordan in Transition, (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 180.

⁶² Ibid.

and economic issues face this camp, including eroding social services, housing shortages, urban poverty, and rising fertility rates. Taking all of these components into consideration, I applied some of my questions to the specific context of Al-Wihdat, in order to draw a fuller picture of the unique qualities and perspectives of its residents.

Situating the anthropologist

In contemporary ethnographic research, increasing attention has been given to the role of the anthropologist vis-à-vis his subjects. A key methodological dilemma facing the ethnographer is striking the balance of intersubjectivity, the relationship between the researcher and the research community.⁶³ Different aspects of a researcher's identity, such as age, gender, class, religious identification, and ethnic origin, are manifested in the fieldwork experience, "opening up certain experiences and understandings, closing off others."⁶⁴ No longer regarded as purely objective viewers capturing cultures in their "pristine" states, anthropologists of today must be conscious and critical of the way that institutional, social, cultural and political influences come to bear on their choices of topics, questions, and methods of research.⁶⁵ Thus, effective ethnographic scholarship requires awareness of how one's position and background influences the research process, both in the field and in analysis.⁶⁶ By acknowledging one's subjectivity as a researcher, "space is created for consideration of the way in which the researcher's

⁶³ Rosemary Sayigh, "Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical, and Methodological Issues," in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 146.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Randa Farah, "Popular Memory and Reconstructions of Palestinian Identity: Al Baq'a Camp, Jordan," PhD dissertation in Anthropology, University of Toronto, 35.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

origins and background shape field experiences and interpretations.”⁶⁷ In this way, the ethnographic interview is more effectively conceived as an unfixed, dialectical exchange of ideas “in which both parties are active agents in shifting and controlling positionality within given historical, political, and social paradigms.”⁶⁸

As a middle-class Iranian-American woman, the differences between my subjects and I outweighed our commonalities in many ways. Everyone inquired about my ethnic background from the outset of the interview, and each woman reacted differently to my identity. Some women very clearly designated me as “Western,” which was reflected in “us” versus “you” distinctions throughout the interview. In other cases, especially among older women, the speakers made a point of emphasizing our common roots, that we are “*min umm waheda*” (from one mother). These differing perceptions of my identity undoubtedly had some bearing on the way that women viewed my objectives, and, in turn, how they answered my questions. Women who perceived me as “one of them” tended to be more honest and explicit about their dissatisfactions with the camp, UNRWA, and the Jordanian government. In contrast, the women who perceived me as “foreign” were initially reluctant to answer my questions pointedly, and often tailored their responses to what they thought I wanted to hear. Nevertheless, at no point did my respondents ever appear suspicious of my intentions, which I attribute to the reassuring presence of Fatima at nearly every interview.

Deriving from her extensive experience working with previous researchers, Fatima helped ease the occasional misunderstandings that inevitably accompany this type

⁶⁷ Rosemary Sayigh, “Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical, and Methodological Issues,” in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 146.

⁶⁸ Randa Farah, “Popular Memory and Reconstructions of Palestinian Identity: Al Baq’a Camp, Jordan,” PhD dissertation in Anthropology, University of Toronto, 38.

of interview by helping explain my intentions to my subjects when needed. For example, some women initially hesitated at the sight of my participant consent forms, until Fatima explained to them that this is an important part of ensuring the integrity of my research. For illiterate women, my interpreter read the terms of consent aloud, and Fatima signed on their behalf. Fortunately, a significant portion of the women I interviewed had interacted with researchers in the past, and were therefore familiar with the requisite procedures. Fatima also helped bridge the gaps in communication. Even with an interpreter present, some of my questions were abstract, and thus prone to being lost in translation. Fatima, who was very familiar with my intentions, would often rephrase my questions in more accessible terms if the interviewees seemed confused about my objectives. She also encouraged initially shy speakers to give more thorough, honest answers to my questions. Furthermore, as I have stated, most of the interviews were conducted in the speaker's homes or in Fatima's living room, often in the presence of many other neighbors, children, and family members. This informal atmosphere helped mitigate the tension that usually accompanies an interview.

Obstacles inevitably arise when a researcher from another class or cultural background attempts to research a marginal group, especially concerning the choice of speakers and representing the "collectivity."⁶⁹ The researcher enters the field with initial preconceived objectives that often change through the fieldwork experience.⁷⁰ I was forced to reevaluate even my most fundamental research assumptions as soon as I entered the field, especially concerning the definition of "women's activism," as I mentioned

⁶⁹ Rosemary Sayigh, "Gender, Sexuality, and Class in National Narrations: Palestinian Camp Women Tell Their Lives," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (1998): 171.

⁷⁰ Rosemary Sayigh, "Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical, and Methodological Issues," in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 146.

previously. Another major dilemma facing ethnographers is the task of representation. Acknowledging the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives of women in the camps, I understood that the women I interviewed only stood for themselves, and I did not intend to extrapolate from their experiences in favor of vast generalizations and essentialisms. With that said, the necessary process of analysis, fitting data into frameworks, and commenting on patterns and observations inevitably distorts reality to some extent. As such, analysis necessitates a balance between the researcher's agenda and the answers of the subjects, which raises the question of "whose schema of representation should prevail, the researcher's or the research community?"⁷¹ Within this study, I have attempted to create a space for the women's words to speak for themselves, in hopes of revealing in the most accurate way possible how women construct themselves and their surroundings, how they frame themselves in relation to others, and how they negotiate their social reality.⁷²

Feminist ethnography

According to Julie Peteet, "a key task of an anthropologist is to humanize those otherwise marginalized and demonized, giving them a voice and bringing their life experiences to others."⁷³ This task is particularly imperative in the case of women. For the past several decades, the field of feminist anthropology has evolved and burgeoned, which has served to gradually reveal the host of external forces, overlapping identities,

⁷¹ Rosemary Sayigh, "Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical, and Methodological Issues," in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996): 147.

⁷² Cheryl Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank*, (Boulder, Lynne Renner, 2001), 3.

⁷³ Julie Peteet. *Landscape of Hope and Despair*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), ix.

and power structures that construct gender.⁷⁴ Therefore, research on gender, women's activism, and gender discrimination does not merely concern the realm of gender relations, but rather exists in dialectical conversation with other social, political, and economic forces. The philosophy governing my research is most accurately captured by the following statement by Erika Friedel, an anthropologist in Iran:

“The critical evaluation of gender-identities and gender politics is a mine field. Having traversed it, I now find myself interested in questions that go beyond exposing inequalities, that have to do with learning more about the view from within, about evaluative views women have of their own existential situations as women, as mothers, as wives. This includes an interest in local evaluative concepts and processes, including critiques of any kind, but not in a relativist-functionalist mode, in which, for example, ideologies and practices women use to work the system are seen as supporting the system (they do, of course, and it needs to be said), but in the form of comments they actually make about their culture and about their situation in society.”⁷⁵

The study of gender and women's activism, then, merits a keen understanding that the construction of gender is an ongoing, constantly shifting process. The women in this study range widely in age, class background, education level, and experience. By incorporating such a variety, I hope to reveal a diverse repertoire of perspectives that have been overshadowed by the prevailing discourses of academia, nationalism, humanitarian development, and the international community.

IV. FINDINGS

Gender relations among Palestinian women have not been shaped solely by internal social forces. The effects of dispossession, long-term dislocation, and ongoing nationalist struggle are profoundly intertwined with the construction of gender roles and women's consciousness in refugee camps. The rich set of responses I encountered during

⁷⁴ Ruth Behar, “Gender, Identity, and Anthropology,” in Fatima Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, eds. *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 81.

⁷⁵ Erika Friedl, “Notes From the Village: On the Ethnographic Construction of Women in Iran,” in Fatima Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, eds. *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 93.

my fieldwork in Al-Wihdat camp yielded multiple and varying portraits. Certain responses differed along lines of class, generation, and family background, whereas other ideas remained universally agreed-upon.

While I designate the set of women I interviewed as ‘activists,’ I apply this term loosely and fluidly, with the implication that these women by no means constitute a single, homogeneous entity. Based on the common experience of displacement, there were certain parallels in these women's positions that transcended their differences. However, it is important to recognize that their views, self-conceptions, and the severity of social control to which they are subjected are constantly mediated by class and family background.⁷⁶ Thus, the various forms and perspectives of activism that these women take are embedded in a diverse set of personal experiences and motivations. The plurality of voices exhibited here carries us beyond a stagnant perspective of everyday life and sheds light on the myriad ways in which gender politics are played out on a daily basis on the ground.⁷⁷

Making the private domain public

The immense loss of livelihood and community that accompanied the early decades of displacement led to a reconstitution of many forms of self-identification. In some ways, the experience cloaked differences in class, origin, and gender beneath the commonality of the Palestinian struggle. In other ways, dislocation catalyzed a reinterpretation of previous social relationships, altering some roles while reinforcing

⁷⁶ Julie Peteet, Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 8.

⁷⁷ Cheryl Rubenberg, Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank, (Boulder, Lynne Renner, 2001), 3.

others. The growth of the Palestinian resistance movement promulgated the private realm to a public role, recruiting women's domestic and family duties for political action and effectively politicizing their meaning. Women's early activities in response to crises crystallized around the home and the provision of sustenance to fighters. Those of my respondents who were from the first and second generations of Palestinian refugees often interpreted women's early political activism as an extension of their domestic and maternal roles.

In regards to women's early political activism, Leila, age 75 and resident of al-Wihdat since its inception, replied, "We helped people during Black September by preparing food and donating support. During the Intifada, we went to visit wounded freedom fighters in the hospital." Older women like Leila often point to relief and welfare activities as the primary locus for their early activism. Following the establishment of Israeli statehood in 1948 and the subsequent expulsion and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, middle-class women performed the crucial role of substituting for state services through ad-hoc charitable activities. Leila and other women of her generation have mentioned that their early political activities were largely shaped by the expectation that they would soon return to their homeland.

In its attempt to mobilize the largest possible numbers of the population, the early Palestinian nationalist movement constructed a paradoxical role for female activists. Bound to their roles as mothers and nurturers, yet bearing a new responsibility to their nation, women were expected to be "super-women," embodying both feminine virtue and an unparalleled commitment to the nationalist project. Because women's early activism was primarily aimed at the broader national cause, women's active political participation

in the early nationalist movement ironically helped reproduce and maintain these prevailing gendered discourses in many ways.⁷⁸ Thus, although women's early nationalist efforts afforded women greater public visibility, their actions ironically served to circumscribe women's specific needs and desires.

Nevertheless, Leila made a point of emphasizing that women never ceased trying to improve themselves and their social situations, even as they perceived their refugee status as temporary:

Women here didn't stop [after they were expelled from their homes]. Women were illiterate, but they had ambitions and tried to complete their education...In the past, women formed groups in order to support each other internally. Social activism meant taking care of other women in need. And later when the new perspective of women's independence arose, women obtained loans in order to start projects and to support themselves economically and develop their social lives. Although some women couldn't because of their social situation.⁷⁹

Having witnessed the evolution of several generations in the camp, Leila portrays women as ambitious and innovative in the face of their specific circumstances. In a matter of mere sentences, she paints a distinctive portrait of the trajectory of women's self-advocacy: from purely practical concerns to strategic gender interests. At the same time, she acknowledges that certain women face more social limitations than others. Women's early activism was primarily a middle-class phenomenon, the product of those who possessed the resources and means to engage in community concerns.

During the 1948 war, Leila's husband, now deceased, was beaten until he lost his eyesight and then imprisoned for several years. She, along with many other women I interviewed, represent the many thousands of Palestinian women whose lives were forever changed by the death or imprisonment of their husbands. In the absence of men,

⁷⁸ Rabab Abdulhadi, "The Palestinian Woman's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics, and Challenges," *Gender and Society*, (1998): 656.

⁷⁹ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 23/04/07, Al-Wihdat refugee camp, Amman, Jordan.

many women were forced to shoulder family responsibilities on their own. As a result, for the first time, some women were compelled to search for employment as well as initiate contact with the larger network of kin to obtain financial assistance.⁸⁰ Such actions by women that would have once provoked male resistance were now filtered through the lens of national responsibility and practical necessity.⁸¹ In this way, the obligation of attending to difficult conditions helped redefine the parameters of women's public roles in marked ways.

Class consciousness

According to Julie Peteet, "Gender is not an exclusive or totalizing category indicating essence, experience, or a concept of self." The way Palestinian women experience and interpret their gender identities is constantly negotiated by other factors such as class, origin, and family background. In the case of my respondents, the prevalence of poverty in Al-Wihdat emerged as a prominent factor shaping their perspectives and responses. In fact, all of my respondents designated poverty as one of the fundamental problems facing women in the camps today.

Among my respondents, the majority of women attributed their poor economic situations solely to their position as refugees without mentioning gender inequality. When asked to identify the greatest problem facing women in Al-Wihdat, Asmaa, a full-time teacher and participant at the Jordanian Women's Union Orphan Center, stated:

Poverty is the greatest problem now. But the source of all problems is that we are refugees... that our land was taken from us. Poverty, crime, insecurity, and the issues of

⁸⁰ Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 77.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 32.

dealing with other nationalities in the camps – it is all connected to the fact that we are refugees.⁸²

Asmaa has been teaching Arabic, mathematics, and Palestinian national history at the Jordanian Women's Union Orphan Center for seven years. When I asked her why she decided to become involved in the Union originally, she said it was because her father is sick and she needed a job to help support her family. Taking this job offered the added benefit of free access to the Union's services and classes. This instance revealed an important element for understanding the factors that motivate women to join women's activist organizations. Asmaa's situation unveiled my mythical preconception that every woman participating in formal women's organizations does so of her own volition. On the contrary, since women's organizations offer a number of employment opportunities and much-needed services, it is quite conceivable that a woman would join purely out of economic necessity and not necessarily with any ideological commitment to the organization itself. Herein lies a paradox which contests the notion of rigid distinctions between practical and strategic gender interests. As Asmaa's situation exemplifies, women can work for ostensibly strategic gender interests with practical interests in mind.

Fatima, a grade school headmistress and leader of the Al-Wihdat branch of the Jordanian Women's Union, emphasized the importance of education as a means of self-advancement:

Besides refugeeism, the two biggest issues facing women in the camps are poverty and a lack of education. Each is interconnected – one leads to another. This leads to the problem of economic dependence on men. A major percentage of women, especially elders, are illiterate. Without proper education, women are forced to make a living through difficult means, working in jobs like housecleaning.⁸³

⁸² Anonymous #2, interview by China Sajadian, 02/05/07, Al-Wihdat refugee camp, Amman, Jordan.

⁸³ Anonymous #3, interview by China Sajadian, 02/05/07, Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp, Amman, Jordan.

Fatima was one of the only respondents to explicitly draw a connection between women's economic status and gender inequality. Regarding women's employment, Fatima stated perceptively that "There are one thousand doors of opportunity for men to knock on and only one for women."

In the face of deteriorating economic conditions, the issue of poverty is becoming more salient than national consciousness in motivating women to action. Leena, a middle-aged widow who has been involved in the Jordanian Women's Union since 1990, believes that the greatest issue facing Palestinian refugee women is poverty, especially among young orphans. She laments the fact that, for many women and girls, not even the basic necessities are satisfied or affordable. When I asked her if her activities with the Union aim at addressing the broader nationalist cause or the right of return, she scoffed: "Day-to-day concerns are all we can think about. The broader future is not a possibility."⁸⁴

Souad, a manager of the UNRWA Women's Program Center, lamented the fact that poverty has become the foremost concern of women at the expense of gender consciousness and national consciousness. For example, she noted that, in recent years, less women have been enrolling in classes and more women are simply seeking funds to survive.⁸⁵ Souad spent most of her life living in Al-Wihdat until she moved into the neighboring suburbs of the camp in 2000. She made a point of emphasizing that leaving the camp does not signify an abandonment of the nationalist cause. A fervent nationalist,

⁸⁴ Anonymous #3, interview by China Sajadian, 23/04/07, Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp, Amman, Jordan.

⁸⁵ This refers to the community savings and loan groups program that was initiated by UNRWA in 1996. This program provides loans to members, mainly women, from a revolving fund. According to the UNRWA website, the fund was first established with the women's own pooled savings and external funding to assist them in starting up their own businesses. For further information, see: <<http://www.un.org/unrwa/programmes/rss/women-jor.html>>

Souad fears that Palestinians are losing sight of their broader aspirations in the face of daily struggles. She views her leadership capacity in the Women's Program Center as an avenue through which to keep the broader causes alive. In answer to my inquiry about the current role of women in Al-Wihdat, she said:

The enemy tries to render Palestinian people so poor that all they can think about is getting by rather than focusing on advancing themselves and their cause. We are always trying to promote the broader cause here at the Center... Our mothers lived in Palestine and experienced expulsion. Younger generations of women were raised with this concept. The enemy tries to make you forget the idea that your country was stolen, so that you are only concerned with day-to-day necessities.⁸⁶

Souad believes that the prevalence of poverty, by exacerbating priority differences of among Palestinians, represents not only a barrier to political participation, but, more importantly, undermines the causes which bind refugees together. It is significant that she interprets her leadership role among women chiefly as preserver of the nationalist spirit.

Women and Nationalism

The centrality of nationalism to women's self-conceptions, as evidenced by Souad's and Leila's statements, leads one to question in what ways the national struggle has been conducive or, conversely, obstructive to women's struggles for their own rights. From the British Mandate to the second Intifada, the growth of Palestinian nationalism has offered women the potential to challenge traditional gender roles through greater public visibility and political participation. Yet, although women have undoubtedly gained new opportunities through their participation in the nationalist movement, in the process, their own agenda has been continually subordinated to male-defined national goals. Cheryl Rubenberg points to "the masculinization of nationalism; the politicization

⁸⁶ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 28/04/07, Al-Wihdat branch Women's Program Center, Amman, Jordan.

of women's reproductive capacity; the enshrinement of women's 'role' as producers, supporters, and sustainers of men; the prioritization of the national question over women's issues..." as primary setbacks for the women's movement.⁸⁷ In this section, I attempt to explore how my respondents interpret women's role in nationalism, and the extent to which normative constructions of gender and nationalism have become embedded in their perspectives.

It is clear from the set of responses I encountered regarding this topic that motherhood is central to many women's conceptions of their role in nationalism. In the face of immense national loss following the wars of 1948 and 1967, women were valorized by the Palestinian community as "fertile mothers," who must reproduce the nation's population and thus replenish Palestinian cultural heritage.⁸⁸ Reem, age 59 and mother of nine, an active member of the Jordanian Women's Union, and a self-proclaimed "lifetime activist", stated in regards to this subject:

Each Palestinian woman raises her children to be nationalists until they die. Even if they travel to America, they stick to their beliefs, because the cause has been engrained in them.⁸⁹

Here, Reem enshrines women with the responsibility of keeping the ideology alive across space and time. Reem's conception of gender and nationalism is similarly focused on motherhood:

Women have a major role as story-tellers. They must raise their children to love Palestine. But women's role as mothers is no more or less important than men's roles.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Cheryl Rubenberg, Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank, (Boulder, Lynne Renner, 2001), 258.

⁸⁸ Rabab Abdulhadi, "The Palestinian Woman's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics, and Challenges," Gender and Society, (1998): 655.

⁸⁹ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 24/04/07, Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp, Amman, Jordan.

⁹⁰ Anonymous #2, interview by China Sajadian, 02/05/07, Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp, Amman, Jordan.

In contrast to Asmaa, Alia, an 18-year old supervisor at the Women's Union Orphan Center, stood alone among the women I interviewed in her view that the woman's role as mother is actually an indication of a *greater* responsibility to the nationalist struggle:

In national activism, everyone participates: men, women, and children. Old women are in the streets protesting every time. Mothers raise their children, so mothers have an even bigger role in nationalism, actually. It's true that men have strong feelings toward their sons, but not as a woman, who would sacrifice her life for her children. When we see the mothers of martyrs on TV, we know she feels *hasra* (grief).⁹¹

In many ways, "Mothers of martyrs" symbolically straddle the line between both the element of suffering and the element of militancy that represent the Palestinian nationalist struggle. In this statement, Alia highlights the way in which women have become the visible bearers of the Palestinian tragedy, and symbolically deploys this suffering as a form of national activism.

During a lecture she delivered to young girls at the Orphan Center, Alia drew connections between faith, nationalism, and gender. Beginning by invoking a Hadith related to modest female comportment, Alia demonstrated how modest dress is a form of security, resistance, self-definition, and a means of preserving the honor of the Palestinian nation in the following statement:

"Do you wish to be fashionable like the girls in West Amman? Be proud to wear modest Islamic dress. It represents your Palestinian identity more than a fashionable outfit... when you wear your scarf, you do not need to be afraid of dying at any time because you have preserved your honor"⁹²

Alia points to the inextricability of national identity and religious honor in the construction of Palestinian gender identity. She uses her faith as a means of defining herself against the surrounding society which she perceives as foreign and blasphemous.

⁹¹ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 04/05/07, Al-Wihdat branch Jordanian Women's Union Orphan Center, Amman, Jordan.

⁹² Ibid.

In her last statement, she highlights the feelings of precariousness that shape Palestinian refugee identity, while imbuing her scarf with the stability she seeks.

This fundamental parallel between nationalism and gender identity is also apparent in the sentiments of Aisha, an orphan since she was thirteen and now an active leader of youth activities for orphans. Throughout the interview, Aisha made strong statements about her current social situation by juxtaposing it to her vision of Palestine:

I don't like anything in the camp. It is too tight. The houses are so close together and there is no space. This situation was imposed on us. There is no social life and no freedom to leave our homes and speak to other people...If I were in Palestine, I would be able to go out and sit under a tree and talk to my friends. Here, my brother doesn't let me out of the house much.⁹³

This is yet another revealing interpretation of the significance of gender relations within nationalism. By superimposing her dissatisfactions with her current social reality upon her image of Palestine, Aisha envisions the achievement of nationhood as tantamount to her liberation. This statement demonstrates that she sees the constriction of her freedom by male family members as fundamentally connected to her refugee status, rather than a problem of gender relations

Women and gender-based activism

Based on my respondents' answers to a series of open-ended questions, I have attempted to portray the set of forces that influence female Palestinian activist's gender identities. As my respondents have demonstrated, economic issues, nationalism, and gender relations are among the many factors negotiating gender roles. Having laid a foundation for the environment in which women's self-conceptions and activism are

⁹³ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 02/05/07, Al-Wihdat refugee camp, Amman, Jordan.

produced, I will now give closer attention to the specific contours of women's activism today.

In her work on Palestinian women's activism, Rabab Abdulhadi points to the emergence of an "autonomous women's movement." According to her, "The Palestinian women's autonomous movement emerged in the early 1990s as a result of both favorable general conditions, as well as specific moments, that led Palestinian women to begin addressing their situation within the context of the gender hierarchy."⁹⁴ Women's organizing, she contends, "was located on a feminist continuum, shifting, evolving, and shaped by their relationships to their sociopolitical and cultural context."⁹⁵ In the case of Al-Wihdat, it is clearly apparent that the emergence of the Jordanian Women's Union and the Women's Program Centers in the camps in the early 1990s ushered in a new era of women's activism, for the first time emphasizing certain gender-based demands. What accounts for this shift in women's consciousness? There is no doubt that the influence of international institutions and host governments have been critical factors in shaping the goals of contemporary women's activism in the camps. The question that remains to be asked, however, is the extent to which women's past strategies and socially-defined conceptions of gender identity have also informed this discourse. Indeed, Nadjie Al-Alie argues, "local women activists do not merely adopt international agendas but selectively appropriate global issues and reinterpret them to suit their own needs and priorities."⁹⁶

In the absence of state structures in which to institutionalize their gains, Palestinian refugee women's organizations initiate and sustain bases for women's

⁹⁴ Rabab Abdulhadi, "The Palestinian Woman's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics, and Challenges," *Gender and Society*, (1998): 655.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Nadjie Al-Alie, *Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 219.

advancement by working within tactical limitations. In order to reflect local needs and interests as well as preserve its legitimacy in the eyes of men and women alike, these women's organizations must function within certain parameters. For example, the Center's job-training courses are predominantly in the areas of sewing, hairdressing, and cosmetology, which arguably reinforces the gendered division of labor.⁹⁷ However, a closer look reveals that the ostensibly gendered nature of these skills and services is a reflection of these organizations' desire to provide services congruent with local interests, acceptable norms, and available materials.⁹⁸

When I asked Noura, a lawyer who represents women in child custody cases through the Program Center, how the community perceives the activities of the women's organizations in Al-Wihdat, she was quick to assert that:

When the Women's Program Center first started, people were hesitant because they thought it was a Western project. But people soon began to realize that the Center helps the local community. Their demonstrated successes have enabled more cooperation and trust among other organizations, including the Association for Men.⁹⁹

As the primary deliverers of necessary services to women in the camps, the Center and the Union recognize that creating programs accessible to a wide range of women is a greater priority than uniformly upholding ideology. This method has enabled women who face traditional obstacles at home to convince their male relatives that these organizations' activities fall within the range of culturally acceptable female behavior.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, these women receive training that provides them with valuable skills to

⁹⁷ Frances Hasso, "The Women's Front: Nationalism, Feminism, and Modernity in Palestine," *Gender and Society*, (1998): 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 25/04/07, Al-Wihdat branch Women's Program Center, Amman, Jordan.

¹⁰⁰ Souad Dajani, "Between National and Social Liberation: The Palestinian Women's Movement in the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip," in Tamar Meyer, ed. Women and the Occupation: The Politics of Change. (London: Routledge Press, 1994), 40.

supplement family incomes, which facilitates greater empowerment and initiative. Thus, the success of these organizations lies in their ability to incorporate the interests of women from all layers of the population, regardless of age, family background, socioeconomic class, and religious identification.¹⁰¹ This fits within Deniz Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain model, wherein women conform to certain gender norms in order to make economic and social gains elsewhere. Such an understanding of these strategies challenges ethnocentric and class-bound definitions of what constitutes feminist consciousness.¹⁰²

The fact that both the Jordanian Women's Union and the Women's Program Center concede to certain norms does not mean that they are not still conducive to evolving needs and demands. In contrast to the failings of earlier Palestinian women's initiatives, these women's centers' initiatives extend beyond charitable capacities and the nationalist movement. These organizations have shrewdly adopted the international discourse surrounding women's needs, including such concepts as "legal literacy" and "violence against women."¹⁰³ In general, these centers have great potential for raising women's consciousness in all realms – employment, politics, nationalism, and the home. At the very minimum, the centers provide an all-female setting where women can engage in unfettered discussion about their situations. Without men present and removed from the constraints of the home, participant women are often more open to voice their dissatisfactions with politics and the community.

¹⁰¹ Joost Hiltermann, Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 141.

¹⁰² Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," Gender and Society, (1988): 260.

¹⁰³ Cheryl Rubenberg, Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank, (Boulder, Lynne Renner, 2001), 157.

Remaining Problems

Despite the widespread successes of the women's organizations, they continue to face many social and economic obstacles. When I asked Noura to describe how she defines 'women's empowerment', she replied:

There are many ways to empower women. We struggle to empower women comprehensively, but it is not possible yet. Instead, we take aspects of empowerment step by step – legal, economic, or political. We still lack a full picture that includes all the ways.¹⁰⁴

As examples of these efforts, she cited the Center's new courses about political participation, women's legal rights, and civic education. She believes that the Center's aims have achieved immense progress, as evidenced by the hundreds of women who benefit from legal advice and representation in legal matters every year. Nevertheless, she admitted, women's conceptions of gender roles are still very affected by outside influences. "True empowerment," she argued, "requires a shift in consciousness." When asked to determine what she perceives as the greatest struggle currently facing women in the camps, Noura pointed to gender relations:

We struggle to meet men on the issue of empowerment. Even when they outwardly agree with the Center's aims, they are often not convinced on the inside. A man may say he agrees with us, and then he goes home and beats his wife. Also, many men like to work with open-minded women, but they don't choose these women as wives. Women take notice of this.¹⁰⁵

Noura's words highlight the importance of developing and maintaining a specific women's agenda within the purview of camp women's activism. Achieving gender goals while avoiding excessive antagonism of male compatriots is an ever-present dilemma with which these organizations must contend. In the face of sexual, economic, and political discrimination, Palestinian women must continue to theorize about the specific

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, interview by China Sajadian, 25/04/07, Al-Wihdat branch Women's Program Center, Amman, Jordan.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

factors which they confront before they can achieve social liberation both in conjunction with and separate from national liberation.¹⁰⁶ During the intifada and beyond, Palestinian women want their political activism to be translated into real social gains so that they do not find themselves relegated to a permanently subordinate position when national liberation is achieved.¹⁰⁷

V. CONCLUSION

According to Lynne Walter, “the principal claim of feminist anthropology is that symbolic/material power and the knowledge of such power is as implicated in the social experiences of gender as it is in the experiences of class, race, caste, and other ‘invidious distinctions.’”¹⁰⁸ I undertook this project based on a feminist ethnographic methodology in hopes of providing a more nuanced understanding the construction of Palestinian gender identity in Al-Wihdat camp. I chose to focus my attention to women’s activism as a framework through which to analyze the expressions of such complex modes of identity. Outside of the work of Julie Peteet in the refugee camps of Lebanon, I have not yet encountered a project that specifically focuses on the domain of women’s activism in refugee camps. Given that existing scholarship on the refugee camps of Jordan is generally meager, I contend that undertaking such a project is doubly important in this case.

As evidenced by the emergence of the Jordanian Women’s Union and the Women’s Program Centers, women’s awareness of their rights has been significantly

¹⁰⁶Souad Dajani, “Between National and Social Liberation: The Palestinian Women’s Movement in the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip,” in Tamar Meyer, ed. Women and the Occupation: The Politics of Change. (London: Routledge Press, 1994), 52.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 34.

¹⁰⁸ Lynne Walter, “Feminist Anthropology?” Gender and Society, (1995): 283.

enhanced, and more women than ever before have been mobilized in organizational structures for the nationalist cause.¹⁰⁹ The various political, social, and economic forces against which women's gender identities are negotiated are central to understanding the trajectory that has comprised Palestinian camp women's activism as it exists today.

Certain topics arose during my field research that are beyond the scope of this particular project yet merit future consideration. First, my encounter with Alia's religiously-inspired lectures led me to question the role of the burgeoning Islamic movement that has swept over the camps. To what extent do fundamentalist movements whose ideologies advocate traditionalism in family relations preclude women's mobilization in Al-Wihdat? Does this growth in Islamic fundamentalism account for Alia's rhetoric surrounding gender, honor, and nationalism? In what ways do the Center and the Union accommodate these religious opinions? I attempted to inquire about community resistance to the activities of these two organizations, but none of my interviewees were willing, able, or knowledgeable to speak of any such resistance. Has there been a conservative religious backlash against the more progressive elements of these organizations' mandates and women's increased public involvement?

In exploring the plurality of factors bearing on the construction of gender identity, the information I gathered in the field was most favorable to focusing on the effects of economics, nationalism, and gender relations. This project could have been expanded to include greater attention to the influence of the Jordanian government, Amman's urban development, and UNRWA. In what ways is gender identity shaped by humanitarian development, and, in turn, how are charitable development approaches influenced by the

¹⁰⁹ Joost Hiltermann, Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 42.

dominant discourses of its intended beneficiaries? What are the effects of Jordan's social reform efforts on constructions of gender? To what extent does the outward discourse on gender generated from Jordanian civil society and the royal family influence women's initiatives in the camps? In what ways did Black September alter conceptions of gender? These questions remain to be addressed.

Over the long decades of national struggle, Palestinian women have continually redefined their agendas in light of the constantly shifting state of the nation and state of women.¹¹⁰ The multiplicity of experiences, losses, gains, and transformations encountered by Palestinian women throughout the nationalist struggle attests to the impossibility of homogenizing and flattening women's experiences in formulating solutions to the challenges they face.¹¹¹ Indeed, "a topology of gender and social movements – neither linear nor flat – warrants a vision that takes all these complexities into consideration."¹¹² Such a vision requires an understanding of the profound interconnectedness of gender, sexual, cultural, socioeconomic, and national oppression. .

¹¹⁰ Souad Dajani, "Between National and Social Liberation: The Palestinian Women's Movement in the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip," in Tamar Meyer, ed. Women and the Occupation: The Politics of Change. (London: Routledge Press, 1994), 40.

¹¹¹ Rabab Abdulhadi, "The Palestinian Woman's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics, and Challenges," Gender and Society, (1998): 649.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 669.

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Appendix: Participant informed consent form

استمارة اقرار المشترك بالعلم
كلية سميث و مدرسة التدريب الدولي
اعادة بناء الهوية الوطنية و المجتمع: قضية مبادرة النساء المحليات في مخيمات اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الأردن

الدعوة للمشاركة و توضيح للدراسة

أنت مدعو للمشاركة في دراسة بحثية عن مبادرة النساء في مخيمات اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الأردن . أنا مهتمة في دراسة كيفية الاختلاف الاجتماعي ، الاقتصادي ، التاريخي، و عوامل المجتمع التي تؤثر على النشاط، الطموح ، والمنظور النسائي في مخيمات اللاجئين . أنت مؤهل للاشتراك اذا كنت تبلغ 18 سنة أو أكثر . سأسألك مجموعة من الأسئلة في مقابلة شخصية ، التي ستأخذ من ساعة الى ساعة و نصف .

المخاطر و الفوائد

الدراسة البحثية الحالية لا تتضمن أي نوع من المخاطر الجسدية ؛ سيطلب منك الاجابة على أسئلة عن معتقداتك، تجاربك، طموحاتك الشخصية و فكرتك المكونة عن الأثروا، الوطنية الفلسطينية، قضية اللجوء ، ووضع المرأة في المخيمات . و في حال وجود عدم رضى عن أي جانب من هذه التجربة يمكنك ابلاغ د. محمد الخليل ، مدير أكاديمية SIT على 0777176318(962) أو SITJordan@gmail.com. بالرغم من أن هذه الدراسة غير مصممة لمساعدتك شخصيا، إلا أن المعلومات التي ستساهم بها ستضيف على معرفتنا عن نشاط و طموح النساء في المخيمات والتي ستقدم أساليب أكثر فعالية للتطور الانساني في المستقبل. نتائج هذه الدراسة ستكون متوفرة للمشاركين المهتمين في الدراسة . في حال وجود أي ردود يمكنك التواصل مع الباحث وسيكون مرحبا بأي معلومات اضافية .

السرية

المعلومات التي ستقدمها ستكون محفوظة بسرية تامة . ولحماية خصوصيتك فالملاحظات و النسخ عن المقابلات سيتم الاحتفاظ بها في ملف مغلق في مكتب ال SIT في عمان . و كل المواد المستخدمة في المشروع سيحتفظ بها لحين انتهاء المشروع ، و يمكن الحصول عليها فقط عن طريق الباحث ، واسمك لن يتم التصريح به في نتائج البحث . و المعلومات التي تم الحصول عليها يمكن أن يتم نشرها في صحيفة جامعية و ستقدم في اجتماعات مهنية ، ولكن في أي حال فان هويتك لن يتم الكشف عنها .

الحق في الرفض أو الانسحاب

قد ترفض الاجابة عن أي سؤال أو انتهاء مشاركتك في أي وقت من دون عقوبة أو مسائلة .

الحق في الاستفسار

من حقلك الاستفسار عن هذه الدراسة البحثية و الحصول على الاجابة من قبل الباحث اما قبل أو أثناء أو بعد الدراسة. اذا كان لديك أي مخاوف حول حقوقك كمشارك في هذا البحث التي لم يتم الاجابة عنها من قبل الباحث يمكنك الاتصال ب د. فيل بيك، رئيس مجلس المراجعة المؤسسي في كلية سميث على 3914-585(413).

الموافقة

توقيعك أدناه سيبين أنك قد قررت التطوع كموضوع بحث لهذه الدراسة و أنك قرأت و تمعننت في المعلومات التي تم تزويدك بها سابقا ، سيتم اعطاؤك نسخة موقعة و مؤرخة من هذا الطلب لتحتفظ بها . مرفقة معها أية مواد ضرورية مطبوعة مقدمة من قبل باحثي الدراسة .

التاريخ:

توقيع المشترك :

اسم المشترك (الرجاء الكتابة):

متابعة البحث

لا

هل ترغب أن تشارك في متابعة البحث لاحقا؟ نعم

في حال اجابتك بنعم ، ما هي كيفية التواصل معك ؟

رقم الهاتف:

عنوان البريد الالكتروني: