



Palestinian women and nonviolence

By Lucy Nusseibeh

The history of the involvement of Palestinian women in nonviolent actions within the Palestinian national struggle is almost as old as the struggle itself. As the Middle East and the world as a whole act and react to the violence created by men, the need for women's voices to be raised and to be heard is greater than ever. We are currently witnessing the most extreme violence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict thus far, with battles raging all over the West Bank and Gaza that often leave women and children conflict between equals, the overwhelming military and political power is with Israel, which - by controlling the freedom of movement - controls every aspect of Palestinian life. The result is a deep sense of humiliation felt by Palestinians at the hands of the Israelis.

The context for Palestinians today is one of total despair. There is a closure of minds and futures as well as roads, the economy is in almost total collapse, and there is no sign of a turnaround, only more of the same. Many children no longer dream of anything other than becoming "martyrs," and it is all that most women can do just to cope - for themselves and for their families.

In this situation of siege and bomb attacks, with women and children paying the

heaviest price, such coping is itself an assertion of nonviolence. Nonviolence in this situation is just coping with the fear, devastation, poverty, humiliation, and constant, all-pervasive tension to try to remain human.

Nonviolence in its classic sense involves transforming the conscience of one's opponent through one's own moral agency so that the opponent perceives that his actions are immoral and will therefore stop them. When this does not work, outsiders (from another country) can play a role or the "mirror" can be held at a different angle so that the opponent perceives his actions differently.

Nonviolence can also be viewed more broadly as an assertion of humanity and as the development of potential in spite of the odds against it, since violence essentially cuts off potential. Just as violence breeds hatred and leads to a vicious and inhuman cycle, nonviolence can be used to break that cycle. Nonviolence, therefore, is a form of assertiveness and empowerment that enables people to stand up even in the face of overwhelming violence and retain their humanity.

Palestinian women have used nonviolent approaches since the very beginning of the conflict early in the last century. During the British Mandate, for example, they organized petitions to the British parliament. They also held a mass demonstration against British and Zionist policy as early as 1920, and in 1929 held the first Palestine Arab Women's Congress in Jerusalem that drew over 200 delegates. That congress issued a revolutionary declaration for women to leave aside their other duties and "support their men in this [national] cause."

The tragedy of 1948 was so overwhelming that, like now, women were primarily

engaged in just coping and keeping together what they could of the bits and pieces of their shattered lives. Simply maintaining their families and their Palestinian identity was an assertion of active nonviolence.

The war of 1967, although equally overwhelming, gave new energy to Palestinian women, who immediately came out in force in demonstrations, sit-ins, and peaceful marches to protest and raise awareness about the injustice of the Israeli occupation. Committees were set up to support prisoners and their families and, by the late 1970s, the four major Palestinian factions were represented by four different women's committees, in addition to the many charities set up to empower and educate women to resist the occupation.

The high point of Palestinian women's involvement in nonviolent activities was during the Intifada of 1987, as women took prominent roles in leading demonstrations, setting up popular relief committees as nonviolent alternatives to the constantly encroaching Israeli system, and running both families and institutions while Palestinian men were arrested in droves.

The current conflict is typified by men shooting and boys throwing stones at Israeli tanks, yet the women's movements have been absent and silent for a long time. At first, this was the case with all movements, as the sudden and vicious nature of the violence threw everyone into shock. Now, although there are some nonviolent activities (such as marches), and some organized protests and petitions from women's organizations, only international involvement and media coverage seem to make a difference. Even during the Intifada of 1987, Israel was able to thwart nonviolent tactics in ways that rendered them futile by turning nonviolent demonstrations violent,

preventing media coverage, confiscating the property of those who refused to pay taxes, and other means.

In today's environment, there has to be a different way to hold up the mirror of morality in such a way that it might break the cycle of violence. Women can be the key to this if they reach out to each other across international boundaries. If women from outside the Middle East come as international observers to witness the plight of Palestinian women and talk about what they see, perhaps their voices can be heard.

They may then be able to serve as the mirror for Israeli women who could help vote into power a more conciliatory government. Moreover, if the media were to focus on Palestinian women far more than it does, and if women become prominent in decision making and in conflict resolution exercises, there is hope that women working together can bring about the viable Palestinian state and just solution that has so far eluded men.

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