



THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT DURING THE UPRISING

JOOST R. HILTERMANN

The early days of the uprising in the occupied territories yielded striking images of Palestinian women marching in the streets, schoolgirls throwing stones at soldiers, older women carrying baskets of stones on their heads to supply younger demonstrators, women arguing and tussling with the authorities to win the release of an arrested boy. Given this unaccustomed public profile, some commentators began referring to the intifada not only as a “shaking off” of military rule, but as a social revolution in its own right in which the younger generation rebelled against their elders, street activists rebelled against the authority of the PLO, and women rebelled against their traditional place in a patriarchal society.

Already by the third year of the uprising, the above assessment of the intifada's effect on women had revealed itself as premature: despite women's activism, their social and political position in society had remained essentially the same. Still, it would be wrong to dismiss totally the intifada's implications for women; women's awareness of their rights has been significantly enhanced, and more women than ever before have been mobilized—beyond their participation in demonstrations—in organizational structures channeling their energies towards satisfying the needs of a society under siege. Perhaps more important, women have begun seriously to address the issue of their rights and roles in the struggle for national liberation, a subject barely alluded to before the uprising except by a handful of committed activists.

Joost R. Hiltermann is a sociologist and writer. This essay was excerpted from his book on the Palestinian labor and women's movements, which is due to be published by Princeton University Press in 1991.

Mobilization during the Intifada

What sets the uprising apart from previous years in terms of women's activism is the fact that it is not just students and long-time activists who participate in direct confrontations with soldiers, but women of all ages and from all sectors of society, especially women from villages and refugee camps. These are women who, during the years prior to the uprising, had been courted by organized women's groups through nationalist-oriented literacy and skill-training programs but who, despite their sympathies, had not joined any formal frameworks. The uprising spurred these women to work for the national cause in a situation of real emergency. "Because our program [before the uprising] was explicitly political, economic, and cultural, women were afraid to join," one Nablus activist explained. "But during the uprising, our program began to address reality. Now women are more eager to join, because they want to address problems in their real lives."¹

From the early days of the uprising, women's activism was partly spontaneous, and partly organized by the four women's committees which together constitute the modern women's movement in the occupied territories. These committees had all grown out of the Women's Work Committee, founded in the late 1970s on the spur of the national movement then gathering force as high school and college students turned their activism to mobilizing other sectors of the population. A number of the founders were graduates of Bir Zeit University. Many had clashed with the Israeli army in demonstrations in the early and mid-1970s, and their activism was fueled by a growing realization that Israel was not going to relinquish the occupied territories voluntarily, and that the existing local institutions were ill equipped to cope with a prolonged military occupation. Moreover, the kind of broad-based movement envisaged was seen as an effective protection against the loss of cadres, an important consideration given the frequency with which heads of universities, charitable associations, and other institutions were deported or imprisoned by the Israeli authorities.

The founders of the Women's Work Committee had been particularly impatient with the charitable societies that had hitherto dominated women's activities in the occupied territories. The charitable societies provided services to women without teaching them the elementary skills that would enable them to help themselves. In contrast, the new Women's Work Committee started a program of education not only in the towns but also for the first time in the villages and refugee camps throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The program involved classes in literacy, health education (including first aid), and skills-training classes (for example, in embroidery, food processing, and so on) usually at members' homes or at makeshift committee offices. The committees also set up day care centers, which made it possible for women with small children to work outside the home. Through the various programs, the women began engaging in political discussions, thus rais-

ing their awareness not only concerning the national question but also concerning the issue of women's rights in Palestinian society.

In the early 1980s, the original Women's Work Committee split into four committees, reflecting the factionalism in the Palestinian national movement in general. The largest of the successor organizations are the Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (FPWAC), which identifies with the political program of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees (UPWWC), which leans toward the Palestine Communist Party. These are followed by the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC), which adheres to the political program of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and finally, the Women's Committee for Social Work (WCSW), which supports Fateh. The committees all have memberships in the thousands; the FPWAC alone claims to have some 10,000 active members.

The WCSW is the closest ideologically to the earlier charitable societies in that it provides services to women rather than mobilizing them. The other three committees are quite similar in their work, although they tend to focus on different categories of women in their recruitment strategies: thus, the UPWWC has organized primarily working women, the FPWAC concentrates on housewives, while the UPWC tends to have an educated, urban middle class membership, often young women who have come out of the student movement. The real difference between the committees lies in their political identifications and therefore the positions they take on national issues.

After the intifada broke out, the four committees stepped up their efforts to mobilize their own members and sympathizers and to absorb new recruits. Concentrating on the areas of their greatest strength, they extended the schedules of child care centers to accommodate women active in the uprising, and geared health education classes to first aid as casualties mounted in the neighborhoods, especially as a result of beatings and tear gas.²

In the early stages of the uprising, the women's committees lent their organizing and leadership experience to the emerging popular committees in villages, refugee camps, and urban neighborhoods throughout the territories: indeed, during the early period, the work of the women's committees and of the popular committees was virtually indistinguishable. Women's committee activists would join local popular committee members in organizing relief or emergency services after Israeli army raids, paying solidarity visits to the families of martyrs and detainees, and providing material assistance whenever necessary. Working on behalf of prisoners and their families, they would contact lawyers, collect clothing for prisoners, and arrange prison visits via the Red Cross. Women also distributed leaflets, discussed politics openly (often for the first time), and urged people who remained unconvinced to participate in the uprising.

Overall directives issued by the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) were translated into specific calls to action for women by the

women's committees. In a landmark joint program of the four committees on 8 March 1988 celebrating International Women's Day, women were called upon to participate in popular committees and trade unions, to boycott work on strike days, to confront soldiers and settlers, and to promote a "home economy" of locally-produced food and clothing.³ In keeping with the UNLU's calls, women were prominent in efforts to monitor prices charged by merchants and to ensure compliance during commercial strikes and boycotts of Israeli goods, and especially in providing alternative education to children in homes, churches, and mosques after the closure of schools. Women were particularly active with the popular committees in urban neighborhoods, playing a lesser role in the villages and camps.⁴

Throughout the uprising, the women's committees organized marches, and activist women and schoolgirls participated in demonstrations and confrontations with the army; it is remarkable that despite their prominence in such actions, women suffered relatively few casualties.⁵ The level of women's participation has varied from locality to locality, being lower in the more religious or conservative areas such as al-Khalil (Hebron), where a turnout of 100 women in a demonstration is considered good⁶ and far higher in towns such as Ramallah, where despite a smaller population a demonstration may draw as many as 500 or 1,000 women.⁷ Slogans have included not only demands for an independent state, but for women's liberation as well. During a march in Ramallah commemorating International Women's Day on 8 March 1988, for example, "women unfurled banners, posters, and flags and began their silent procession to the center of town. The banners and slogans called for women's liberation, for an independent state with the PLO as its leadership, for an end to the occupation, and for an end to Israeli brutality."⁸

Although women were active in the popular committees, it is not clear if they made any gains in their rights as women through such involvement. On the one hand, women engaged for the first time in collective political actions in the streets, occupying a space traditionally reserved, with few exceptions, for men. Their politicization is bound to have a long-term impact on their role in society. But on the other hand, as Islah Jad, a Bir Zeit University lecturer, has argued, the "essential goal" of the popular committees was merely "to find new members for the mass organizations of each faction Women's role in the popular committees became an extension of what it traditionally had been in the society: teaching and rendering services," without ever going beyond that.⁹

Women's Production Cooperatives

In the only clear effort at totally independent action during the uprising, the women's committees began to establish women's productive cooperatives in response to the food shortages caused by army curfews and the boycott of Israeli products. These cooperatives produced relatively simple foodstuffs, such as fruit juices, pickled vegetables, canned goods, and jams, as well as

clothing, embroidery, and picture frames for the local market. Women were in charge of all stages of the production process and shared the profits. They would sell their wares through offices of the women's committees or through merchants who identified with the committees' work. The number of cooperatives has remained fairly limited, however. More commonly, women affiliated with the women's committees produce goods directly in their own homes to be sold by the committees through the outlets mentioned above.

The goals set forth for the cooperatives were ambitious, though not always very clear. Pamphlets distributed by the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC) assert that the objective of the committee's production project (entitled "Our Production Is Our Pride") was "to build the basis for women's emancipation by constructing economic projects."¹⁰ But of the project's five main aims and principles, only two pertain to women: "The transformation of women's traditional role in the domestic economy into a positive role in the national economy," and "The provision of opportunities for the participation of women in economic enterprises as a basis for economic independence and social emancipation."¹¹ Moreover, the UPWC has not explained how a "positive role in the national economy" will enhance women's social and political status in society and lead to social emancipation, nor how the cooperatives can contribute to this transformation.

Assessments of the results of women's cooperatives and production efforts have been mixed. While the cooperatives clearly afford a measure of economic independence for women, they do not necessarily provide the stimulus for women to become more active in community life. As *Islah Jad* has argued about the cooperative effort, "[s]etting up a women's production cooperative in the countryside does not automatically lead to changes in the gender-based division of labor, nor to an upward reevaluation by men of women's work."¹² Expressing a widely held view, a UPWWC activist noted: "Our position in the political struggle has changed, but our position in social life has not."¹³ A Nablus activist complained that "men are still making the decisions. If a woman is active, the neighbors start talking. So it will take a long time of struggle, and we won't automatically get our rights as women when we get our state."¹⁴

Nevertheless, cooperatives have had positive results and probably constitute one of the more significant achievements of the uprising. According to a UPWWC activist, the establishment of the UPWWC's cooperative in the village of Idhna near Hebron "helped to bring the issue of women onto the agenda"; participation in the cooperative "increased women's social consciousness. Women realized that they had the same abilities as men. It helped them get out of the family circle, and help out in the bad economic situation as men were either in jail or unemployed."¹⁵ Even if resistance to change is stiff, women's issues have been put on the agenda and women for the first time have begun to discuss their status in society. And while women during the uprising may "have enlarged or extended their traditional role rather than adopting a completely new role," as Rita Giacaman and Penny

Johnson have pointed out, aspects of this role “have become a source of resistance because women have transformed their family responsibilities to encompass the entire community.”¹⁶ According to an activist in the village of Kufr Na'meh (Ramallah), the fact that women participate in marches, demonstrations, and confrontations with the army, and get injured or killed; the fact that they go to town to sell produce in the market, visit relatives in prison, and join political events in Ramallah or Jerusalem has changed their overall position. Because of the uprising, women have strengthened their role in the family, often have control over money, can refuse to obey certain orders, or can decide which school their children will attend. She called the role of women “outstanding” compared with the years before the uprising.¹⁷

There is no doubt that the active participation of the women's committees in the uprising and the economic contribution of the cooperatives have not translated into the significant concrete changes sought by women. But the daily struggle in the streets has brought activists from the various factions in the national movement closer together. In the words of one activist, “because of neighborhood work, women from the different blocs are now blending, developing strong personal relationships, and struggling side by side.”¹⁸

In the women's movement this has led to greater formal cooperation, which eventually crystallized in the establishment of the Higher Women's Council (HWC) in December 1988. The Council united the four committees in one forum; women leaders felt that only through the joint action made possible by such a body could the crucial issues of education and the legal situation created by the religiously-based family law be addressed effectively.¹⁹ The Council's aim was to unify the women's movement around the twin themes of women's social struggle and the struggle for national liberation. It also strove to find a proper balance between the two so as to prevent the return of women to their traditional social roles following the national victory. In this regard, activists repeatedly reminded their peers of how Algerian women, who had played so important a role during the revolution, had fared following Algerian independence in 1962.

The Palestinian Leadership and Women

In terms of the national struggle, women activists have been unable to take a more prominent role in the leadership of the uprising. Although it is likely that the UNLU has at one point or another included women, its members have generally been men, as the language of its communiqués and the pattern of arrests and deportations suggests.²⁰ An examination of UNLU communiqués reveals not only a striking disregard for women's issues and the role of women in the uprising—as compared to the attention paid to other sectors of Palestinian society—but also an attitude toward women that is profoundly traditional, patriarchal, and condescending. For example, when the UNLU addresses the participants in the intifada, it invariably refers to “our sons,” “brother doctors,” “brother workers,” “brother businessmen and grocers,”

and so on.²¹ When women are mentioned, it is usually as “mothers,” that is, women are mentioned only in relation to others, their sons, rather than in their own right. Alternatively, they are grouped with children and old men and all people “who are suffering.”²² Women are commended for their “steadfastness,” for “standing firm,” and for “protecting the uprising,” not for participating in it.²³ In communiqué number 21, the UNLU invites “students, workers, merchants, peasants, and strike forces” to carry out acts of civil disobedience. Women are notably excluded, despite the obvious activism of the women’s committees.

Thus, women’s roles are marginalized; women are cast as protectors of the uprising and of those who supposedly make the uprising: their male relatives. There are, however, slight departures from this pattern. In communiqué number 5, the UNLU called on “mothers, sisters and daughters to work side by side with their husbands, sons and brothers.” But again here, despite the call to action, it is not a given that women would “work side by side” with men, nor is it recognized that in fact they had been doing so from the beginning of the uprising, or even before.²⁴ In August 1988, when the UNLU tried to fill the institutional vacuum created by King Hussein’s formal withdrawal of his claim to the West Bank by reinforcing the popular committees and other grassroots organizations, it for the first time made a strong appeal to the women’s committees, among others. The UNLU reminded the women’s committees that they had to “shoulder a special responsibility in organizing sit-ins and other appropriate activities” in solidarity with men and women prisoners. After all the committees had been doing during the preceding eight months, this must have been a puny, if not offensive, reminder to women organizers.²⁵

International Women’s Day has proven to be the only occasion when the UNLU devotes substantial attention to women’s participation in the uprising, but again the record is mixed. In 1988, the UNLU did not go further than including a call for demonstrations on 8 March as part of its weekly schedule of events.²⁶ In 1989, the UNLU went further, to “salute the Palestinian woman” and to declare its “admiration for her heroism in the national struggle.” The UNLU referred to women’s organizations, urging a “strengthening [of] the unity of the women’s movement in the State of Palestine within the framework of the Unified Women’s Council.” But again, all references were made in the context of the UNLU’s weekly schedule.²⁷ In 1990, the UNLU went so far as to name its communiqué “The Woman’s Call,” and reserved a special section for women, but made sure that they were referred to in the “proper” context, that is, in relation to men:

Progressive nations celebrate International Women’s Day on 8 March as a day of struggle for the world’s women’s masses. While celebrating this great day, in the name of all the sons of our people, we congratulate the world’s women’s masses and the masses of the Palestinian women’s movement and its vanguard organizations, hailing every working woman, woman struggler and housewife, and especially our imprisoned strugglers.

We also pay tribute to the struggling role of the Palestinian uprising's women's movement, to every mother who has lost a son, daughter, husband, or brother, and to every woman who meets with a struggling daughter or a heroic son from behind the Bastille of the Zionist enemy.²⁸

In the same leaflet, the UNLU congratulated mothers on Mother's Day, calling their "sufferings and pain the source of our strength and determination." Almost in the same breath, the UNLU exhorted "our sons at school to adhere to school times," and praised Palestinians for making history "through the blood of their sons."²⁹

Palestinian women activists do not appear to have publicly challenged the leadership's approach to the women's question. To the contrary, they occasionally provide interesting rationalizations for the approach. An activist in Arrabeh (Jenin) contended that the UNLU preferred not to focus on women in its communiqués because it did not want to draw attention to them, with a view to protecting them, because it understood women's important role in the uprising.³⁰ On the other hand, the women's movement has sought to capitalize on the declaration of independence by reminding women that they are "entitled to preserve all the gains already achieved on the national level," but that they "must also continue fighting for their liberation and for a radical and comprehensive solution to their economic, social and gender problems." Most importantly perhaps, women were told that they "must participate in developing legislation and a constitution, which will give women equal rights with men"³¹ Use of the word "entitled" suggests a certain defensiveness, but the overall tone is assertive, as the committees seek to translate political gains into concrete steps toward furthering women's rights.

Conclusion

In September 1989, the UPWWC, which identifies with the program of the Palestine Communist Party, put the following questions to its membership:

Has the intifada changed the perception of women's role in Palestinian society? Has it changed the way women themselves perceive their roles? These questions have to be reckoned with by the Palestinian women's movement to enable it to keep pace with the fast-moving events of the intifada What assurances do women have that they will not be asked to return to their traditional, domestic roles if and when national independence is achieved?³²

The UPWWC reports that members in branch meetings frequently raise the question, "When can we have birth control?"³³ The UPWWC concludes that "if the Palestinian women's movement is to grow and develop, it must address itself to women's issues."³⁴

The two other progressive committees, the PFLP-related UPWC and the FPWAC, the ideology of which is close to the DFLP, have echoed such sentiments. In lectures, meetings, and publications, women activists set off a

lively debate on the relationship between the women's struggle and the national struggle. One UPWWC representative said:

We haven't had a feminist agenda. We have been preoccupied with political concerns, and as a result we often became traditional in our approach, because we didn't want to become alienated in our society. We weren't necessarily aware that we were not on the right track. Recently, we have come to realize that this approach doesn't work. We realize that if we don't raise issues now, we won't be able to push them later on, and we'll be abused by the national movement.³⁵

The UPWWC therefore started holding lectures about early marriages, divorce, personal status law, the division of labor at home, and other social problems relevant to the lives of women.

In 1988 and 1989, women in the occupied territories came under growing pressure from the insurgent Islamic movement to wear a headscarf (*hijab*) in public. Many secular women, especially community activists, resisted such pressures. By the end of 1989, however, the campaign had succeeded in the Gaza Strip where women could no longer appear in public without a headscarf, and had made major inroads in the West Bank as well. Neither the UNLU nor even the women's committees were effective in countering the practices of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), and this may have contributed to the success of the *hijab* campaign in Gaza.³⁶ Some women activists later tried to explain the national leadership's and their own inaction by claiming that

we couldn't act earlier in Gaza, because the time was not right. The intifada was at its height, and we didn't want to create internal differences while fighting the occupation. Because Hamas will throw stones at us, we will throw stones at them, and the army meanwhile can take a break. Only now that the intifada has a solid grounding is it possible to address these issues. It is late now to act against this religious coercion, but not yet too late.³⁷

Such setbacks, however, do not augur well for the prospects of achieving further gains for women, and have undermined the credibility of the women's movement. The status of women in the intifada and in Palestinian society in general will therefore increasingly depend on whether the women's committees, as the vanguard of the women's movement, will be able to match their important objectives—which they have articulated with growing vigor after the declaration of independence in November 1988—with concrete action.

NOTES

1. Interview, Nablus, 17 December 1989.
2. Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (FPWAC), *Newsletter*, 8 March 1988, p. 11.
3. Quoted by Islah Jad, who interviewed women in villages and refugee camps. "From Salons to the Popular Committees: Palestinian Women, 1919-1989." In

Nasser and Heacock, eds., *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), p. 134.

4. Jad, p. 135.

5. Al-Haq reported at the end of the first year of the uprising that 15 women had been killed by the army, as

compared with 189 men. Al-Haq, *Punishing A Nation: Human Rights Violations during the Palestinian Uprising, December 1987-1988* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 12.

6. According to interview, Hebron, 13 June 1990.

7. From personal observations and interviews, March 1988. The FPWAC reports that 600 women participated. *Newsletter*, 8 March 1988, p. 9. Other estimates exceed 1,000.

8. FPWAC, *Newsletter*, 8 March 1988, p. 9.

9. Quoted by Jad, p. 135.

10. Union of Palestinian Women's Committee (UPWC), "Our Productive Project Is Our Pride" (Undated; available from UPWC).

11. Pamphlet written by Kathy Glavanis and Eilene Kuttab, Department of Sociology, Bir Zeit University. (Undated; available from UPWC).

12. Jad, p. 136.

13. Interview, Ramallah, 20 December 1989.

14. Interview, Nablus, 17 December 1989.

15. Interview, Ramallah, 20 December 1989.

16. Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, "Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers." In Lockman and Beinin, eds., *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 161.

17. Interview, Kufr Na'meh, 12 June 1990.

18. Interview, Ramallah, 20 December 1989.

19. See for example, "The Unified Women's Councils: The Women's and Nationalist Function of the Covenant." FPWAC, *Newsletter*, March 1989, p. 6, (in Arabic).

20. This assessment is shared by Giacaman and Johnson, p. 165. The Israeli authorities arrested what they referred to as members of the UNLU on several occasions in 1988 and 1989. All were men.

21. For example, for references to "sons," see UNLU communiqués nos. 3 ("O brave sons of our people"), 9 ("We address a militant greeting to the sons of Qabatyia"), and 23 ("We have no choice but to depend on ourselves to educate ourselves and our sons"). For references to "brother," see communiqués nos. 1 and 14.

22. For examples of references to women as "mothers," see UNLU communiqués nos. 8 ("our love for all mothers of this homeland"), 29 ("mother of the martyr"), and 53 (celebrating Mother's Day). For references to women in the context of victims of the occupation, see communiqué no. 24, which intones: "In the name of our people under curfews and in prisons, the bereaved, children, women, and the elderly who are suffering from the repressive measures of occupation"

23. See UNLU communiqués nos. 12 ("Our children, women, men and youths stand firm against the ruthless Zionist military machine"), and 32 ("The UNLU also values the role of the Palestinian woman in furthering steadfastness, uplifting the morale of our people, and in protecting the uprising").

24. Similarly, in communiqué no. 7 or 8 (unclear from the Lockman and Beinin text, which reproduces it), schoolgirls are urged to go to school every day and organize demonstrations, despite the fact that they had been doing so for at least a year prior to the uprising, often taking the initiative, at least from my own personal observations in Ramallah.

25. UNLU communiqué no. 23, 5 August 1988.

26. Interview, Kufr Na'meh, 12 June 1990.

27. Interview, Ramallah, 20 December 1989.

28. UNLU communiqué no. 53, 6 March 1990.

29. UNLU communiqué no. 53, 6 March 1990.

30. Interview, Arrabeh, 16 December 1989.

31. These are quotations from an editorial published in the FPWAC *Newsletter* of March 1989. They reflect the position of all three of the progressive women's committees, however.

32. "The Intifada and the Role of Palestinian Women," *Voice of Women* (newsletter of the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees), vol. 1, no. 2 (September 1989), p. 1.

33. *Voice of Women*, p. 4.

34. *Voice of Women*, p. 10.

35. Interview, Jerusalem, 21 October 1989.

36. See the excellent article by Rema Hammami, "Women, the Hijab and the Intifada," *Middle East Report*, nos. 164-165 (May-August 1990), pp. 24-28, 71.

37. Interview, Ramallah, 5 June 1990.