

FEMINIST MEDIA DISCOURSE IN PALESTINE AND THE PREDICAMENT OF POLITICS

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Introduction

Having to act within a traditional patriarchal society has made women's efforts to influence public policy in Palestine especially hard. Palestinian women have had and still have to act against their discrimination as women in Palestinian society and as Palestinians against Israeli occupation. This dual struggle has clashed sometimes and created tensions between women and other social movements, especially the Islamic movement. In this context, most mainstream media institutions in Palestinian society remain loyal to the dominant traditional nationalist political thinking. The lack of attention to women's problems in the regular Palestinian media mirrors women's limited influence on decision making in Palestinian politics (Rabab Abdulhadi 1998). The few existing critical media institutions that belong to the Islamist movement and which refer to women issues, do so from a religious point of view (Amal Jamal 2003). This reality has made the interaction between feminist media discourses very marginal. Since the intensity of the interaction between mass media and audiences is cardinal to media influence, the women's movement's efforts to raise public awareness to their situation through the mainstream media has remained rather limited (Dietram Scheufele 1999). Palestinian women have had to look for alternative avenues of reaching the wider public.

Like any other social movement, the Palestinian women's movement has had to utilize the existing structural opportunities for their purposes (Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald 1996; Sidney Tarrow 1998). They followed sociological theories of "social constructivism" assuming that the media frames gender reality in predictable and patterned ways (Maxwell McCombs, Donald L. Shaw & David Weaver 1997; David McQuail 1994). As part of their efforts to play a greater role in Palestinian society and politics, feminist Palestinian organizations have developed their own media institutions. Their aim has been to reframe public awareness and establish a counter-public that opens the way for different thinking on the gendered character of social and political reality. All central women's groups operating in Palestinian society developed their own forms of media such as brochures, reports, pamphlets, and newspapers. This pattern of media publication is an interesting point from which to examine feminist media policies and discourse in Palestinian society. An important question to answer addresses the main characteristics of the journalistic discourse adopted by the women's movement. Another would be to ask how feminist discourses adopted by women's media relate to the broader political and ideological context in which they operate.

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It is rather difficult to examine all feminist publications in Palestinian society. To answer the questions raised above, for my purposes here, it is sufficient to examine the most prominent feminist publication, the bi-weekly, *Sawt al-Nisa'* (*Women's Voice*). This newspaper is published by the Women's Affairs Technical Committees (WATC),¹ an umbrella organization including six women's study centers, five women organizations affiliated with political parties, human rights organizations, and many politically independent and professional women (Jamal 2001a). To explicate the main characteristics of feminist media discourse and answer the questions that frame our discussion, I examined 54 editions of the bi-weekly. I divided my examination of the newspaper into two levels. The first deals quantitatively with the main contents of the newspaper. For that purpose, simple methods of measurement are utilized to examine 27 editions of the bi-weekly—editions 51–77, from July 30, 1998 to July 29, 1999. The second level utilizes critical discourse analysis as a methodology that enables making the central principles and values of the newspaper and the movement behind it rather apparent (Norman Fairclough 1995). To do so the editorials of another 27 editions—78–105, from August 12, 1999 to August 15, 2000—are studied. The editions analyzed in this paper were published before the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000. Despite the fact that the intifada has led to some changes in the editorial orientation of the studied newspaper, its contents and fields of coverage are still more or less the same.² Before I undertake a systematic analysis of the bi-weekly, there is a need to locate it within the general Palestinian media regime.

The Location of Women in Palestinian Media

The Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a result have deeply influenced the structure of the media in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This change has marked the beginning of the emergence of what Phillip Schlesinger (1991) has called a new communicative space, in which *Women's Voice* became a part. New media institutions were established that include daily newspapers, radio stations, and an official Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC). Most media institutions in the new communicative space have centered on the PA, which sought to control the consumption patterns of the Palestinian public and their exposure to media outlets (Jamal 2001c). As a result, a new media regime began developing in the Palestinian territories (Jamal 2001b). The new media regime defined what is legitimate and what is not on the institutional and discursive levels. It defined who is allowed to say what, when, where, and how. The national struggle for independence conditioned the way in which local matters are presented in the media (Yasser Abed Rabbo 1998).

The emerging Palestinian media regime did not change the hegemonic political culture in Palestinian society and as a result did not seriously influence the conservative cultural discourse that characterized the media previous to the establishing of the PA (Jamal 2001b). Despite the major shifts in the media structure, media institutions, especially daily newspapers, played down gender issues and remained reluctant to address topics considered to be socially sensitive in Palestinian society (Jamal 2000). Topics such as the placing of women in society and politics and the discrimination against women in all social fields have not won enough attention. Issues that are considered to have special sensitivity, such as rape, physical abuse of women and children, and women's battering do not win central headlines, if they are given any attention.

This picture reflects the broader socio-political reality in which women's issues were pushed to the margins after the establishment of the PA (Nahla Abdo 1999). Women's issues have remained very marginal in the Palestinian media, capturing a place on the public agenda only after assertive and consistent efforts have been made by the women's movement. From the latter's perspective, the public media did not adequately cover its activities, and in the eyes of many activists for women's rights, the daily newspapers did not display sufficient sensitivity to their demands (Jamal 2001a). Furthermore, when Palestinian media—both print and electronic—have covered women's affairs they have framed them from a masculine point of view. Examining the images of women on Palestinian television and the women's topics raised in the newspapers mirror clearly three dominant frames (Jamal 2001a). Women are either framed as mothers of the nation, mothers of the martyrs, or as housewives. Stories and issues related to women's affairs are usually superficial and reflect the hegemonic patriarchal structures of Palestinian society (Jamal 2003). This framing is apparent in the focus in most media institutions on stories dealing with pregnancy, motherhood, cooking, and fashion. Even commercial advertisements and employment notices are usually formulated in the masculine, except in cases where a secretary is sought when the feminine form is used.

There are several reasons why women's voices have been marginalized and feminist discourses largely ignored in the Palestinian media regime. One reason relates to the social and cultural norms that no Palestinian editor or journalist is willing to challenge. Keeping with this line of argument and despite some recent changes, the fact that most Palestinian journalists are men can be cited as one reason for them not paying enough attention to women's issues.³ Out of the 500 currently registered members of the Palestinian Journalists Union only 120 are women, most of which joined the Union recently and still have junior positions in news agencies or newspapers.⁴ Palestinian men are part of the patriarchal social structure and do not necessarily conceive issues of concern for women as topics for public debate. In this sense, the media tend to reflect the dominant masculine social mentality (Joseph Massad 1995). This is especially true in an emergency situation in which all Palestinians have to face the harsh policies of occupation. Within this framework comes the criticism directed against the women's movement itself. This is perceived by influential figures to be too radical and propagating slogans that do not correspond with the socio-cultural reality in which Palestinians live (Jamal 2001a). This criticism is not only heard from religious figures but is also raised by national activists who either would prefer that, for the time being, the women's movement directs more of its energies toward the national struggle and postpone until a later stage the struggle for equal gender rights or that the women confine their activities to minor issues that do not challenge the patriarchal social structure. This perspective has great impact on what is conceived to be legitimate or illegitimate to cover in the media since it falls within the patriarchal ideology mentioned above.

Another reason behind the modest presence of women's affairs in the Palestinian media might have something to do with financial considerations of news media organizations. Covering issues of special sensitivity in the media could have a negative impact on the consumers. It could lead to a drop in the numbers of their audience, something that negatively influences their interests. Covering controversial issues could lead to a backlash not only from the public, but also from conservative social movements, such as the Islamist movement and from the PA and its religious establishment. The ambiguity of the Palestinian legislation in regard to media and publication is an obvious ground for

fears among journalists. Many would prefer self-censorship rather than have to face legal and political harassment. Furthermore, journalists and editors prefer to skip stories about social issues that are not perceived to be an integral part of the hegemonic social and cultural discourse (Jamal 2000). In fact, many journalists feel it is their social responsibility not to break with the dominant national discourse.⁵ The continuing emergency conditions created by the Israeli occupation under which Palestinians still live, especially after the outbreak of the second intifada, make many journalists reluctant to deal with controversial matters for patriotic reasons. Some subscribe to this line of thought in order to ensure that they remain on the safe side, especially after several incidents in which journalists were arrested for breaking accepted norms (Jamal 2001b).

Regardless of the reasons behind the silence on gender issues, little doubt exists that matters of specific importance to Palestinian women do not garner enough attention in the Palestinian media. This has been best proven when the women's movement convened the Model Parliament (MP) in March/April 1998 as part of its initiative to influence public agenda and decision making (Rema Hammami & Penny Johnson 1999). The project was harshly criticized by the Islamist organizations and figures, who used all tools available to delegitimize the initiative and silence it (Islah Jad, Penny Johnson & Rita Giacaman 2000). Despite the fact that Palestinian dailies covered the parliament and its activities, they did not offer their support nor did they provide space for a suitable women's response to the criticism made against them.⁶ The media frames used by editors of the dailies mirrored their efforts to take a neutral position that refrained from siding with either of the parties, despite the fact that neutrality has been translated as siding with the silencing process. Critics of the MP made use of all possible means to draw attention to the allegedly negative social implications if the women's initiatives were implemented. Thus, the weeklies of the two main Islamic movements were used as a means to criticize the parliament while mosques and other religious institutions became vehicles for expressing the voice of traditional organizations, which attacked the MP and its negative implications for Palestinian society. The Islamic movement called upon women not to cooperate with the MP, maintaining that Islamic religion is the best protection for women's rights. Women involved in the organization of and participation in the parliament were accused of heresy and dissent, and of collaborating with foreign interests.

The PA did not intervene to stop the Islamists' fear-provoking campaign. Official Palestinian public television and radio did not adopt a clear position regarding the growing debate between Islamic figures and the women's movement, particularly with regard to the latter's freedom of expression. Media coverage of the debate provided limited space and time for all those involved to express themselves, while withholding support from either of the two sides.⁷ Notwithstanding the neutrality of the media, the women's campaign for equal rights was not viewed as political in nature, but was instead framed in religious and cultural terms that in effect bestowed greater moral power to those seeking to silence the women's movement.⁸ The few articles published in the daily newspapers on the ongoing debate between women's organizations and Islamic activists were generally informative and tended to refrain from taking an official stand. The PA mouthpiece *Al-Hiat Al-Jadidah* displayed little interest in the socio-political debate, but instead focused on the moral-religious dimensions, which helped to strengthen the claims made by the religious figures and organizations that the dominant moral order in Palestinian society was at stake. The other two newspapers, *Al-Quds* and *Al-Ayyam*, both

of which partially covered the parliament sessions, were more conciliatory to the women's movement. For example, they were willing to publish advertisements paid for by the women's organizations as a contribution to their sympathy with the latter. None of the editorials in the three newspapers, however, took a firm stand in defense of the women's right to publicly express their views.

Instrumentalizing the Media and Social Constructivism

In light of such circumstances and as an attempt to overcome social and cultural barriers, women's organizations developed their own communicative strategies. Popular women's magazines such as *Fosta*, *A'bir*, and *Balquis*⁹ were of little use to the women's movement. These commercial magazines are generally filled with superficial articles and color photographs that perpetuate a stereotypical image of the Palestinian woman. Rather than contribute to the women's struggle for equal rights, such publications primarily reconstructed and redistributed weak and inferior images of women as sexual objects (Liesbet van Zoonen 1994). The typical framing of women in the popular magazines is as housewives and mothers only or as "wombs of the nation," depicting them as either passive or subordinate participants in society.

The marginality of women in the Palestinian media has led women's organizations to look for new communicative strategies. The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) introduced a document that detailed its communication strategy saying that women seek:

- i. To encourage the introduction of a balanced, non-stereotyped, portrayal of women in the media.
- ii. To increase the media's attention to the constructive role that Palestinian women have played in the national struggle.
- iii. To increase the opportunities for women to participate within the media, express their views, and take part in the decision-making processes in the media and other forms of electronic communication.
- iv. To increase the focus placed on social issues that are of concern to all Palestinian society, but are especially relevant to women because they bear the brunt of the effects of these social issues.¹⁰

WATC was among the first women organizations to translate these policies into real measures. As an umbrella organization, WATC pioneered in initiating a major publication project. It established the bi-weekly *Women's Voice*. The initiative actually began in May 1996 with an appendix entitled "Women and the Elections" distributed with the daily newspaper *Al-Ayyam*. Although responses to the publication were mixed, the experience helped serve as a basis for turning the publication into a permanent enterprise being published with an increasing number of readers until this very day.¹¹ The title was changed to the more general and representative name *Women's Voice*, which indicates the feminist worldview of those women involved in its production. Thus, those behind the publication sought to attract the attention of all writers interested in raising public awareness of women's rights and social problems of special significance. Ten thousand copies of *Women's Voice* are still distributed with *Al-Ayyam* and 3000 are directly distributed to institutions and nongovernmental organizations. At its inception, the newspaper consisted of eight pages, but was expanded later to 12 and some of the editions are published with

16 pages. The newspaper devotes a special section to readers' responses, as part of its attempt to open a public debate on issues of concern for the women's movement.

The aim behind publishing the bi-weekly was not only to compensate for the lack of coverage of women's issues in the regular media, but also to express the voice and worldview of the women's movement. It seeks to influence the construction of a Palestinian social reality respectful of women's affairs. It also tries to insert women's struggle for equality into the public agenda and frame people's consciousness in legitimating women's rights. As a weak political group, the women's movement has had to find unique and innovative ways to access the public agenda and occupy a central place there (James W. Dearing & Everett M. Rogers 1996; Gadi Wolfsfeld 1997). To successfully create a public awareness sympathetic to their positions, they have needed to approach the public from a new vantage point, something that will become clear when we examine the main subject matters addressed by the newspaper.

Priming the Social in *Women's Voice*

To make the content of the newspaper clear and to examine the main characteristics of the social feminist perspective of the newspaper, I turn now to describing its contents. As mentioned earlier, I limit myself to a sample of 27 editions. A close look at *Women's Voice* makes clear that it has been a stage for the coverage of various subjects relevant to women of different ages, professions, and social and economic status. The bi-weekly has adopted a pluralist orientation that reflects different ideas and positions. It is possible to divide the contents into six different categories according to their proportional appearance.¹² These categories are social, cultural, legal, economic, political, and health issues (see Figure 1). Examining space allocation according to subject matters demonstrates that social matters in the broad sense dominate most pages of the bi-weekly. As we can see, priming the "social" has been part and parcel of the normative foundations of the Palestinian feminist discourse.

The emphasis put on social issues is related to patterns of women's oppression and silencing: 57.5 percent of the space of the newspaper is devoted to articles that criticize social norms that Palestinian women face daily. These social issues include: women's battery, family honor; the murder of women, rape, and marriage at an early age; polygamy, divorce, motherhood, and children; violence against children at home and in the school; interviews with women leaders regarding women's status in society; meetings and voluntary work conducted by women in different public institutions; social occasions such as universal Women's Day or Mother's Day; and emotional stories of women who did not realize their personal dreams as a result of the hegemonic social and cultural values imposed upon them. Most articles in this category focus on the location of women in their social environment. They seek to raise the negative dialectics of social structure and its impact on women. The social topics raised in this category expose the reader to alternative perspectives and interpretations of social reality. They pinpoint the mechanisms of social and cultural oppression and ways to overcome them. In this sense the bi-weekly nourishes "oppositional consciousness." It turns women's subordinate identity into a central source of positive social identification. In this framework, the newspaper demands changes in the polity, economy, and culture to rectify injustices. It demonstrates the shared interests of women in eliminating injustice and empowers women by nourishing a critical worldview (Jane Mansbridge & Aldon Morris 2001).

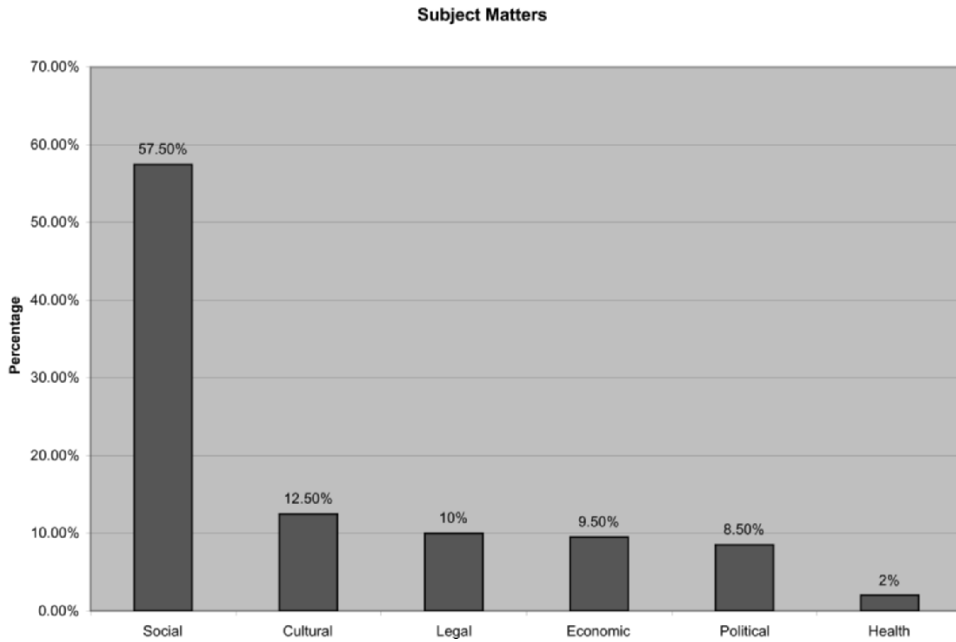


FIGURE 1
Substantive agenda of *Women's Voice*

Cultural, political, economic, and health issues are subordinated to the societal perspective dominant in the newspaper. This subordination expresses the view that women could become equal only if they are conceived as legitimate autonomous social agents. The topics covered in the social themes demonstrate how the sociality of the Palestinian women is repressed, rendering them marginal. Focusing on social themes mirrors the role *Women's Voice* plays in pinpointing the numerous hindrances that women face every day. The newspaper provides readers with stories from their daily life exposing them to everyday and banal forms of oppression. In opposition to the criticism voiced against the women's movement accusing it of over-politicization and social radicalism, examining the central topics addressed by the newspaper shows that these accusations are either inaccurate or exaggerated.

Focusing on social issues does not mean that other topics are rendered marginal. The cultural, political, economic, and health categories were also devoted some attention in the newspaper. Cultural topics such as higher education, art exhibitions, theater, book fairs, folklore gatherings, short stories, illiteracy and ways to reduce it, and feminist literature have won 12.5 percent of the newspaper's space. The focus on cultural activities challenges some common Palestinian societal norms according to which cultural activities are beyond the concern and reach of women. *Women's Voice* emphasizes the central role cultural activities play for the success of Palestinian women in society and the way involvement in these activities reflects positively on women's consciousness and their contribution to their community.

Legal-judicial topics have scored 10 percent on my scale. The legal status of women in Palestinian society became one of the central fields to be lobbied by women's

organizations. A central matter in this category is the personal status law, which determines the status of women in Palestinian society (Lynn Welchman 1999). In this context, special attention was devoted to the relationship between civil law and the Islamic *Sharia*. Economic issues and the labor market constitute 10 percent of the stories included in our sample. This category included articles addressing various subjects such as labor laws, the lack of equal opportunity, wage difference according to gender, loans for women's economic initiatives, economic independence of women and its importance in their empowerment, women and poverty, trade unionism, work training, and professional education. Political matters related to the political system and women's representation in it were also addressed by the newspaper. The newspaper sought to broaden the meaning of the political by shedding light on topics that render women's engagement in political life marginal. Here, one notices the special attention devoted to the gap between the intensive involvement of women in the national struggle for independence and their marginal role in the process of decision making.

Health represents only 2 percent of the paper's news space. Related issues were women's and children's health, environmental issues, food, mental health, and physical limitations. Health has been portrayed as central to women's engagement in society and special attention has been put on the PA's collective responsibility in promoting programs to ensure the physical and mental health of women. Health is connected to social security benefits as well as to national security. Special attention has been given to the importance of health care programs and insurance.

This general picture of the distribution of subject matters in *Women's Voice* demonstrates the newspaper's comprehensive nature and the attempts to address all issues that influence the welfare of women in Palestinian society. The newspaper mirrors the priority given to social affairs in the women's movement, something that pinpoints the uniqueness of Palestinian feminism. The newspaper is critical of the traditional patriarchal social structure. Nevertheless, it does not foster a secular individualistic vision that may render the social web secondary. *Women's Voice* mirrors what could be characterized as a liberal communitarian worldview, something that will become clearer in the coming section.

The Order of Discourse and the Critique of Patriarchal Power

To make the picture more complete, this section takes a closer look at the editorials of another 27 editions. It aims to uncover the ideological and normative underpinnings of the newspaper. Before I go into detail, it may be useful to say that the newspaper locates itself in its general Arab context rather than limiting itself to its Palestinian environment. Despite the fact that the newspaper is only sold in Palestine, its editorials tend to speak to a general Arab audience. They criticize Palestinian culture as a small part of the broader whole, namely Arab culture. Women's victimization is viewed as a result of the dominant patriarchal ideology in Arab countries that differentiates between two separate hierarchical spheres of the public and the private, one for men and the other for women.

This theme is reflected clearly, for instance in the editorial of issue no. 94. The editorial discusses Arab culture and claims that the cultural foundations that established the traditional role of women in society are still dominant in large segments of Arab countries. The slow changes taking place in parts of the Arab world, especially in Morocco

and Egypt, are faced with a counter-struggle by traditional segments in these societies. Therefore, there is a need to reread history and reinterpret its contents in order to bring about serious change. The editorial shows an inherent relationship between the existences of an active intellectual movement, such as in Morocco and Egypt, and the possible rise of challenging interpretations of history and culture that reject the dominant ones. The Moroccan and Egyptian intellectual movements were behind the changes in the status of women in these societies (*Women's Voice*, no. 94, March 23, 2000, p. 1). In these countries, new personal status law has been proposed and promoted by the women's movement and supported by many intellectuals. The same topic was raised in issue no. 90 that encourages giving women the possibility to divorce their husbands based on "incompatibility" without being required to supply other reasons. The editorial calls for liberalizing the personal status law. It criticizes the rejectionism voiced by religious movements and institutions that justify their position with Islamic *Sharia*'. According to the editorial:

Putting forth new ideas ... have to do with the power structure in society. Reshuffling the relationship between the two sexes on equal footing means power-sharing and participating in decisions that are concerned with change, thinking, inheritance and eliminating the principles of possession and slavery, which many try, in the name of religion, to portray as a normal situation. (*Women's Voice*, no. 90, January 27, 2000, p. 1)

The editorial calls upon Palestinian society to follow a few other Arab societies and open the personal status issue. It establishes its claims based on theorists of feminist thought in Islamic countries who claim that no development and change toward modernism can be achieved without putting women on an equal footing with men in all spheres of life (Deniz Kandiyoti 1991; Suha Sabbagh 1996). The editorial expresses the view that progressive or regressive change in one Arab country could have a positive or negative impact on other Arab societies. Despite the fact that the editorial establishes the claim that Arab culture is one of the main sources of discrimination against women, it defies the argument that the Islamic religion legitimates discrimination against women. It argues that the struggle of Palestinian women for equality should reach beyond the confines of their society. Several editorials address regressive measures taken against women's equality in Jordan and Kuwait in order to demonstrate the similarity of women's status in the Arab world.¹³

In issue no. 105, entitled "Silence and pattern," the editorial criticizes the common pattern of thinking and conduct in Arabic culture saying:

A very influential and interrelated duality has hindered the outcomes of the demand for equal rights for women in history in general and Arabic history in particular. This duality is the "silence" and the "pattern" which have a cause-and-effect relationship between them. Silence results from Arab culture's stagnant stereotyped picture that views women through the concept of shame.¹⁴ Sound is language and language is where culture is usually stored. Therefore, the patterns of stereotyped thinking excluded women from all cultural linguistic fields and considered the silence of woman as the most sublime and beautiful of her characteristics, whereas the chatting of men is considered popular culture... In the shadow of silence the pattern grows stronger, therefore the first step toward breaking this pattern is to

raise the voice of women high ... and there is no way to break this pattern but by breaking the barrier of silence ... There is no "culture of silence" but there is a culture that has led to silence, for culture is articulation, view and awareness. Until a new culture surfaces, there is no way other than having an elite that is able to raise the voice to smash the pattern and create a new era. (*Women's Voice*, no. 105, August 24, 2000, p. 1)

This strong and critical language passes judgment on a hegemonic culture that deprives women of being a part of society and subjects them to rigid control by men. The act of silencing is comprehensive with both mental and physical dimensions. Accordingly, women are confined to the private sphere where there is no recognition of their contribution to the welfare of society. The focus on language as the site where culture is stored reflects the attempt to educate the public as to the influence of discursive orders in society. It deconstructs the dominant discourse as a tool of control while introducing an alternative discourse to fight the hegemonic patriarchal culture. The editorial warns against using religious discourse by religious leaders to silence people.

Another central theme in the newspaper's editorials is the relationship between religion and the suppression of women. The newspaper pays tremendous attention to the manipulative efforts of the Islamic movements to freeze the status quo or even pass more strict laws in order to halt the growing trend towards liberalization, following the example of countries like Morocco and Egypt. The newspaper discusses discrimination against women in the existing laws and accuses the Islamist movement of prioritizing customary law because of its patriarchal nature. In an editorial published March 23, 1998, the editors of *Women's Voice* attack the Islamic movement saying:

Nothing invokes the rage and criticism of others (women) who wish to live in a respectful manner more than the fact that those (the Islamists) who are furious and reject this desire view themselves as having the right to confiscate the aspirations of others for freedom and to live a better life in accordance with their (women's) own wishes. For it is in the interest of the "master" to keep the "slaves" as such under his order, and any change in these roles harms his interests. Therefore, he will work hard to maintain the status quo. This is the source of the critique and accusations against the women's movement under the veil of religion, values and tradition. (*Women's Voice*, March 23, 1998, p. 1)

A third theme addressed by the newspaper's editorials focuses on women's roles in society and their obligation to take the lead in changing their status. The editorials function as a mobilizing tool encouraging women to come out and raise their voice against their oppression. They assert that rights will not be awarded without a fight and that culture does not change without struggle. Until women become aware of their deprived situation and become seriously engaged in the struggle for equality, the miserable situation in which women live will last. The newspaper does not stop short on criticizing other women's organizations for not being seriously involved in collective action such as demonstrations, rallies, and other gatherings in defense of women's rights. Some editorials criticize women's lack of interest in an active struggle for their rights: "What is currently happening on the women's stage and the lack of women's participation in the struggle has weakened their demand for rights" (*Women's Voice*, no. 97, May 4, 2000, p. 1). The editorials seek mobilization and challenge other women's organizations

concerning their contribution to the struggle for equality. GUPW that claims to represent the women's movement is directly addressed in one editorial.¹⁵ Palestinian women are asked "to punish those who tend to take the responsibility of representing the women and making decisions in their name, but limit themselves to caring for their own positions only" (*Women's Voice*, no. 97, May 4, 2000, p. 1). This self-criticism mirrors the differences between the tactics and strategies of different women's organizations and the struggle between them on representation (Jamal 2001a).

A fourth theme that is seriously and deeply addressed in the editorials' discourse is the state's responsibility toward its citizens and the gaps between the expectations of the women's movement and Palestinian reality. To this end, the editorials utilize the concept of citizenship, understood not only as a collection of rights and duties to which every Palestinian is entitled and obligated, but also as equal participation in shaping the community in which one lives (Bryan Turner 1990). This understanding reflects the critique of a classical liberal view of citizenship as a "ruling class strategy" (Michael Mann 1992). The incorporation and full participation of women in shaping the future of their community becomes the central criteria of its value (Yasmeen Nuhogly Soysal 1994). The lack of incorporation of women in social life is presented as a central demand when the issue of Palestinian citizenship is discussed (Jad, Johnson & Giacaman 2000). Thus the editorial of issue no. 91 asks:

Is citizenship and its related rights going to be treated from the standpoint of full equality for all citizens, men and women? Are the roles that both sides implement in the public and private spheres going to be considered? Is the special case of women, and in particular their contribution on both levels, especially regarding social reproduction, going to be considered? (*Women's Voice*, no. 91, February 10, 2000, p. 1)

Not waiting for an answer, the editorial proceeds, saying:

For the sake of a just and equal concept of equality, the one sided patriarchal criteria should not be adopted. One of the common criteria of full citizenship is the relationship between citizenship rights, which include social security and health insurance and the labor market. It is clear that almost 90 percent of Palestinian women are not connected to the official labor market, and therefore the duty of paying taxes does not include them. Any connection between citizenship and the labor market eliminates the women's claim for basic rights ... a progressive conception of citizenship focuses on the individual, man or woman, and looks at them and not on the family, tribe or other collectivities, which limit the freedom of the individual to practice his/her basic rights as the foundation of society. (*Women's Voice*, no. 91, February 10, 2000, p. 1)

This formulation of the debate over the concept of citizenship takes a very firm individualistic position against attempts by religious and nationalist organizations to influence legislation in this regard. Citing two drafts of the Palestinian basic law introduced in 1995 and 1997, which failed to meet the expectations of the women's movement, the editorial rejects traditional communitarian positions, claiming that such legislation would harm the autonomy of the individual and his/her freedom. The editorial criticizes the patriarchal discourse of the proposals, which transforms women into hostages in the hands of their men, unable to grant citizenship to their children or

non-Palestinian husbands. The debate surrounding citizenship demonstrates the editorial's attempts to emphasize its loyalty to a liberal worldview without undermining the importance of the community. It criticizes the hegemony of the public good promoted by traditional segments of the political and social elite and the disrespect of individual rights. At the same time, the newspaper does not foster the absolute autonomy of the individual as a basic value.

The newspaper also criticizes the decision-making culture that deprives women from taking part in determining the character of Palestinian society. It portrays a clear relationship between citizenship, democracy, and development in order to attract the support of a broader spectrum of readers. Its editor establishes a connection between tribalism, patriarchalism, citizenship, and underdevelopment. Hence it draws the state into this formula in order to criticize the role played by the PA *vis-à-vis* women. The legal discourse used makes clear that issues related to women are not to be limited to social matters of poverty, children, education, and development. State law determines citizenship. Women should be partners in determining the discourse of the law that will shape their lives in the future. Any attempt to build upon the traditional cultural values in order to shape citizenship means directly contributing to a secondary role for women, which translates into economic submission and poverty. Accordingly, the law is not a mere matter of order, but its formulations constitute social practice and women ought to be part of shaping the law and determining its interpretation.

This exact line of thought was the focus of an editorial that appeared in issue no. 89 in January 2000. In this editorial, the newspaper brings to the fore a normative position, drawing a connection between development and formal institutionalization and the creation of modern state organs capable of organizing a modern welfare system. The editorial argues that women in Palestinian society do not suffer only as a result of the salient traditional and patriarchal Arab culture, but for two other central reasons related to the role of state institutions in society. The first is the lack of rule of law, which I address later. The second is the lack of modern welfare institutions. According to the editorial, one of the main problems that Palestinian women face is:

The lack of supporting official and unofficial welfare institutions that women could turn to when in need of some help in facing the changing social and economic reality in the age of globalization and information. Women do not need mercy and compassion, which are provided by charity organizations. The latter go back to the feudal age and the hegemony of the tribe and the clan. They are not satisfactory in the 21st century. In our times there are external factors that influence the economic and social policies of society, and the first to pay the price are women and children. (*Women's Voice*, no. 89, January 2000, p. 1)

The editorial proceeds by saying:

The development of women and achieving their rights could not succeed without building executive and legislative state institutions and organizations of civil society that seek to empower society in all its segments and classes where all of them actively participate in planning and implementing policies. The sought development should be social and not only economic which should be supported by transparent legislation that ensures the welfare of society. (*Women's Voice*, no. 89, January 2000, p. 1)

Another central theme addressed by the newspaper is the widespread phenomenon of violence. Women's battery by their spouses, murder of women, and other forms of both physical and psychological violence are addressed in many editorials. Violence is a widespread phenomenon in Palestinian society (Naderah Kevorkian-Shalhoub 1997). Muhammad Haj-Yahia (2000) found that 91, 52, 37.6, and 45 percent of the Palestinian women reported that they had been abused and battered at least once by one or more acts of psychological abuse, physical violence, sexual abuse, and economic abuse, respectively, during the 12 months preceding his study that was based on the results of the first Palestinian National Survey on Violence Against Women conducted in early 1994. The second Palestinian National Survey on Violence Against Women, conducted in summer 1995 and including 1334 women, revealed that 87.2, 54, 40, and 44 percent of the Palestinian women had experienced one or more acts of psychological abuse, physical violence, sexual abuse, and economic abuse, respectively, at least once by their husbands during the 12 months preceding the survey (Haj-Yahia 2000). The pervasiveness of the phenomenon explains the women's movement attention on violence as one of the most dangerous ills Palestinians must face. *Women's Voice* traces the sources of violence to traditional social norms, archaic patriarchal values, and economic exploitation. Whereas these former sources manifest themselves primarily in the private sphere, economic causes are evident in the public sphere. Both phenomena are interrelated and feed each other. In this regard, the newspaper has dedicated several editorials to the killings of women. In many cases, women were accused of having disgraced the "family honor" and were thus murdered by their own relatives for this very reason.

This phenomenon is critically addressed in several editorials, one of which is in issue no. 102. This editorial calls on all public institutions to participate in stopping the wave of killing in Palestinian society in which women pay the heaviest price.

The murderous crimes that recently shook our society ring the bell of danger and urge us to move and reactivate the role of the judicial and educational institutions to rectify the social and security chaos ... There is no doubt that women are the ones who pay the heaviest price because they are the weak side as "popular" culture describes them ... the violent cases expose the rapid accumulation of the "culture of violence" in our society ... In order to avoid a situation in which crime becomes habitual in our society there is no alternative but to revitalize the law and separate the judicial and security institutions from narrow social interests and quarrels in order to ensure that their decisions are objective and in the spirit of the law. (*Women's Voice*, no. 102, July 13, 2000, p. 1)

The editorial criticizes the chaos in all PA institutions. It addresses in particular the judicial and security apparatuses, responsible for law and order. The editorial hints at the relationship between the killing of women and the dominant juridical theory based on narrow social interests and relations. It makes clear that it does not comprehend the clemency the judiciary and the police show towards criminals when their victims are women. In many rape cases, the perpetrators are not even brought to court. In some cases, the victim's family prefers not go to court, fearing public degradation. In other cases, tribe leaders intervene and apply customary law according to which the male assailant is obliged to marry the raped woman.¹⁶ This pattern of behavior is heavily criticized by the newspaper since it leads to victimizing the woman twice, physically and mentally. In many cases, violence within the family is usually considered to be a private

affair, and in many cases, the woman prefers to remain silent than face the physical and mental torture to be endured if she reveals her story (Fawaz Turki 1994).

This same line of thinking characterizes editorials that address violations committed against women that result from their exploitation by men in the labor market. The editorial of issue no. 84 (November 7, 1999, p. 1) tells us about 14 young women that were burned to death in a small factory in Hebron. According to the police investigation and newspaper reports, the factory operated without a license and employed too many women in one small room with no emergency exits or water supply in case of fire. The editorial holds the owner of the firm as directly responsible for the tragic deaths. Nonetheless, it calls upon the chamber of commerce, building contractors' union, municipalities, trade unions, and PA institutions to take responsibility for the tragedy. The editorial generalizes the responsibility over the tragic occasion as a reflection of its common view that Palestinian public order lacks any respect for the law or for human lives, especially when one speaks of women.

The order of discourse reflected in the editorials that we have analyzed so far mirrors the newspaper's integrative worldview that strives to demonstrate the interrelatedness between the different problems that women face. According to the newspaper, these problems should be treated as an interconnected whole and addressed by a comprehensive strategy for development.

Conclusions

Women's Voice challenges the existing Palestinian media regime. It raises issues that do not receive attention in other newspapers or media outlets. It has been playing the role of a "whistleblower" that seeks to draw attention to the dangers that surround Palestinian society and their causes. The spirit of the newspaper is that of a critical voice that aims to improve the living conditions of Palestinian women. For that purpose, it criticizes the dominant systems of knowledge, the patriarchal social identity, and the hegemony of traditional normative codes. It presents instead a universal humanitarian discourse with a moderate liberal touch that reflects a moderate feminist ideological orientation. The liberal values of freedom, equality, social justice, and well-being constitute the main underpinning of the editorial line.

The newspaper expresses its views on subjects that are of concern to women as well as to men. It exposes its readers to the difficulties Palestinian women face everyday. It insists that these problems should not be the concern of women only. They are social problems relevant to all members of society. In this framework comes the clear emphasis of the newspaper on social affairs. The newspaper calls upon Palestinian men, in a prominently displayed title that appears in every edition, to join the women's struggle for equality; "If we struggle together for liberation, we shall work together to build the country."

The newspaper mirrors the feminist claim that the social is political by devoting most of its space to social issues. It accentuates social issues as part of its effort to universalize feminist struggle for equal citizenship and to overcome patriarchal structures. The newspaper exposes its reader to tragic incidents in which women are victims of the dominant, normative, and valuational system in society. It also explains the negative implications of the common misuse of divine texts by religious leaders that interpret these texts in ways that legitimate depriving women some of their basic rights.

As my analysis of the discursive structure of the newspaper has shown, it breaks the dichotomy of the private–public and calls for a normative change. It seeks to constitute new social identities and relations. Here it breaks away from dominant journalistic discourse, presenting a feminist worldview. The feminist discourse of the bi-weekly projects a civic-republican view that balances between national commitment and liberal rights (David Held 1987). In order to overcome discursive barriers, it frames women’s rights within a universal discourse of human rights, which is the normative foundation for the Palestinian right of self-determination. This framing facilitates the newspaper’s attempt to penetrate the public sphere without being accused of radicalism. That is why the newspaper introduced itself from the start as a general publication, emphasizing that its worldview represents a comprehensive social movement that happens to be composed of women. It does not concentrate on constructing feminist identity in abstraction from social and national identity, bypassing obstacles that face radical feminist movements.

This paper did not aim to examine the effectiveness of the newspaper’s discourse. Nevertheless, based on the analysis provided above, there is no doubt that the women’s movement has been determined to have a say on the process of state building. Since this process has been disrupted by the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada, the women’s movement joined forces with other social movements to fight occupation. Pacifying the area and resuming the Palestinian process of state building will bring the women’s struggle for equality back to center stage. Since the normative discourse of *Women’s Voice* clashes with the dominant social culture accepted by most Palestinians, and since the power of the Islamic movement has been on the rise recently, the influence or even the mere existence of this newspaper may become in the future a nostalgic phenomenon.

NOTES

1. WATC was originally established in 1992.
2. This point was confirmed by Lubna Al-Asqar, the current editor of the newspaper, in an interview conducted on the phone on December 27, 2003.
3. Some changes have been taking place, especially in electronic media where some women journalists have seized central positions in Arab Satellite TV networks, such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, and Abu-Dhabi. Nevertheless, an examination of the journalists and commentators in the three Palestinian dailies—*Al-Quds*, *Al-Ayyam*, and *Al-Hiat Al-Jadida*—demonstrate clearly that the vast majority are men.
4. Personal interview with Na’eem Tubasi, head of the Palestinian Journalists Union, December 28, 2003.
5. According to public opinion polls taken in the late 1990s, most Palestinians thought the Palestinian media to be manipulated by the PA and not independent. All daily newspapers reflected the accepted belief that the struggle for women’s rights should be secondary to the rights of the Palestinian nation and should come only after independence is achieved (public opinion polls nos. 29 and 33, August 1998 and October 1999, respectively; Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, 1988, 1999).
6. Look at the three dailies in the period between March and April 1998. The activities of the MP are covered but the number of reports is rather limited when compared with other issues taking place at the same time, especially the attack led by the Islamist movement.

7. Interview with Amal Jouma'ah, editor and presenter of a Palestinian women's affairs television program, September 16, 2001.
8. Interview with women activists.
9. These are proper names in Arabic that have no translation.
10. See the Work Plan, National Strategy Project for Palestinian Women, prepared by the General Union of Palestinian Women, 2000 (a circulated document).
11. The current editor of the newspaper confirmed that the public takes the newspaper more seriously, something that is encouraging them to expand the number of pages and the number of editions published (personal interview, December 27, 2003).
12. The division between the different subject matters is not always clear. There is much overlapping between the subject such as between social and health issues. Therefore, sometimes I made arbitrary divisions in order to make the picture clearer.
13. See issue no. 78, August 12, 1999 and issue no. 92, February 24, 2000.
14. "Shame" is a concept prominent in Arab culture that imposes specific norms of behavior on Arab women. Arab women are also perceived as a source of shame, disgrace, or dishonor.
15. The GUPW acted outside of Palestine under the auspices of the PLO until 1994. When its leaders returned to the homeland, they claimed to be the union that encompasses all women's organizations in Palestine. These claims have raised the tension with other organizations that were established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and tended to keep themselves outside the union, for they did not want to identify themselves with the PA as the GUPW did.
16. See a critique of such social habits and norms in the novels and stories of the Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifa, especially in *Lam Nauod Jawariya Lakum (We Are Not Your Slaves Anymore)* and *Al-Mirath (The Inheritance)*.

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