

Entering and Remaking Spaces

Young Palestinian Feminists in Jerusalem



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On January 10, 2016, I conducted a lively one-hour group interview in a bookshop and café in Jerusalem with five Palestinian women activists in Lajnat al-Shabat, or the Young Women's Committee of the Jerusalem District, which is affiliated with the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees and is widely known for its energy and creative activities in Jerusalem despite its recent establishment. The women ranged from twenty-four to twenty-seven years of age, and all but one were single. Four of the five women worked in day jobs not connected to their activism, and one was unemployed. The core group comprises eight women and thirty to thirty-five "regulars" attend events and trainings.

I had met most of the women on January 7 at an evening sit-in held in a tent outside the East Jerusalem office of the Red Cross. Earlier that month two young male Palestinian activists had sought refuge in the Red Cross office, violating an Israeli restraining order based on the 1945 British Mandate Defence (Emergency) Regulations that barred them from Jerusalem, where they live. Israeli forces arrested the men at the Red Cross on January 6 (Hasson 2016). The January 7 sit-in was organized by members of the Young Women's Committee, who invited family and friends of the young men to share their accounts, stories, and jokes during the event.

In the January 10 interview I asked the women about their priorities, their primary challenges, their ideological orientations, their views on men's involvement and gender issues, and the impact of class differences on their work. Participants included Shahd Yaseen and her sister Yasmine Yaseen, both from Silwan; Ilham Shaheen from the Old City; Naheel Bazbazat from Wadi Joz; and 'Ahd Abu Khdair from the village of Shu'fat. Ruba 'Odeh could not attend the meeting but offered her

from a job. One activist summarized, “Our problem is how the occupation wants to vacate Al Quds by displacing us. Not as directly as they did in 1948, but through many indirect ways.”

The women had not been born when the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees, which is affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was established in the early 1980s. Palestinian life was fundamentally transformed but not necessarily improved by the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the mid-1990s. The young women felt that “there were differences between the situation now and the necessities of the founding generation—the older comrades. . . . We thought we should try to face the new conditions in a new way.” They decided that it was important nevertheless to receive theoretical and intellectual training from the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees in order to be effective in their “goals, messages, and what we as a group wanted to work for in the end.” In most months since the committee was established, they have held three-day “practice” events to reflect on their work and goals and further their own development. They aim to “build something targeting all the young women of Jerusalem,” reaching “the maximum number of girls.” Their vision is “to establish a young feminist movement in Al Quds that challenges all forms of discrimination against girls and women, whether from Palestinian society or the Israeli occupation. This is a progressive leftist vision.” The women are particularly committed to encouraging other activists to “add value to yourself and to the community as a female. To show everyone that girls are doing a great job.”

They insist on operating independently of existing parties, institutions, and nongovernmental organizations, and they “refuse any funds” from the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees: “We raise money, ask for donations in kind of space and food, and do not pay most speakers. We do all the work.” When they sponsor “a tour, trip, journey, or other activity,” they make it free for participants or else charge a symbolic amount to cover costs. They hold film showings in donated theater space, charging small fees to fund other activities such as renting a bus for girls and women to attend an event in another city. They believe that this kind of activism builds goodwill, trust, and connections with community members and institutions.

Other aspiring activists with their own ideas, often in their teens and early twenties, contact the Young Women’s Committee for advice and coordination as they plan their events in Jerusalem: “These are young women who may not be able to show up to public events we sponsor, such as activists at the Beit Hanina campus of Al Quds University.” As one of the women explained: “Many girls who approach us have conservative families who do not allow them to stay out late. So they can’t be with us at the Red Cross sit-in, for example, because they would be back home very late. All their activities must be during the daytime and within the university boundaries, so we help them in that.” The committee has been approached by



young women and girls in Jerusalem for assistance in organizing events around issues as varied as the imprisonment of young men, early marriage, first-aid training, and learning dabke dancing. The committee maintains a policy of not taking ownership of such activities. Committee members also work to build relationships with and offer guidance to young women with leadership skills whom they meet or know in any capacity.

Danger and “Closed Traditions”

The women described the distinctive challenges of activism in Jerusalem produced by both Israeli settler-colonial policies and Palestinian gendered restrictions. Palestinian political activity in Jerusalem is “sensitive” and may lead to loss of jobs, residency, or prison. When the Young Women’s Committee sponsored a Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) lecture, they could not widely advertise it because “it is forbidden by law and could be dangerous. . . . There is always special danger, always an unsafe feeling.” They distinguished this from the situation in Ramallah, where the Young Women’s Committee with whom they coordinate widely advertises their events. “But here it is not like that! I have to individually tell whoever I know, and then she tells whoever she knows.” This limits their goal of having any activity “succeed and reach the biggest number of people.” Another explained that the Israeli occupation “doesn’t want people to think, work, talk, open their minds or say *no*. They want people to drown in their societal problems.” They listed multiple Palestinian civic and service organizations in Jerusalem that have been closed by the Israeli government and noted that it is illegal for the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees to have an office in the city.

Thus many young women and their families in Jerusalem are “scared” of activist involvement. While some Jerusalemites can easily attend the Red Cross sit-in in solidarity, others “prefer to stay away for their safety.” As one of the activists explained, “danger is associated with activity that has a national or social dimension. We do not have the freedom that you can find in the West Bank. Because everyone and everything we do is targeted here, including the Red Cross activities. We might be arrested. We might be unable to continue our employment. There are many restrictions for Palestinians in Jerusalem.” But young women are also limited by “closed traditions.” Jerusalem, they insisted, “is a conservative society,” although social practices and cultural views vary among neighborhoods. Both factors make mobilization difficult:

Beyond all the stress produced by the occupation, Jerusalem is a city with a lot of villages. There are many differences even in these areas, small internal cultures like in the Old City, Beit Hanina, Jabel al-Mukaber, and Ras al-‘Amoud. These create challenges: How do we reach the young women in each place? How do we support them through our work? How can we reinforce [their] abilities and leadership qualities from a feminist perspective?

When I noted that this crisis-to-crisis situation is often the case in Palestine and limits the ability to step back and assess the larger situation, an activist responded: “The problem is that the stress never stops. It comes at us again and again.” When the Red Cross situation emerged the week before, “it changed every schedule in our lives. We had to think always of finding availability so that any of us could attend the sit-in.” Another activist stressed, “We never know when a crisis is over.”

When and How They Enter

My questions about gender politics and interactions with young men activists produced a spirited discussion. The women noted a number of problems with men, including leftists. Some young men lecture them about having a women-only group: “You are limiting yourselves. How should we work with girls?” When the Young Women’s Committee is approached to coordinate a political activity with men, its members must consider several dilemmas:

Who dominates whom? Who will control the discussion? That is our problem. Who shows their muscles in front of whom during the discussion [implying that some men do this]? They look down on us as women. To include and work with men on this project, we need truly conscious progressive young men without any pretenses. Not for men to pretend that they are progressive in a meeting in order to show us that males are the best. These dynamics occur in most of our activities, and as a result we gave up on involving men in many of them. But still, the idea of inserting them is there.

Another activist insisted that while no activities sponsored by the Young Women’s Committee are limited to girls and women, “when you work on something, you rarely see young men helping to make it a union youth movement! This is a kind of faraway goal.” She continued:

Practically speaking, the female element is the most persecuted in our society. Our society considers women who are independent in their opinions and thinking, and financially independent, too much to deal with. Many young men take this position. I have been through this, as have other leftist women. Many will say those leftist women have too much freedom. We are regularly told, “You young women from the union have no men, no one can control you.” Only people who are very progressive and conscious can match with us in our work.

A third activist argued:

I won’t deal with the young man who dismisses me just because I am strong or independent or whatever. Second, it is not his role to persecute or control me. I will not wait for him to change because he grew up in a society that encourages this behavior. We have other examples to emulate. What man can put down [name of an older woman

The daughters were restricted in a house! We entered the tent full of men and were the only women! We took X from the union, a strong lady. No one could ask her, "Why are you here?" We looked in the house and found women and girls inside, not even able to look through the window. If I can't look through the window into a tent with men in it with nothing improper going on, this means you have trapped me!

The other women agreed but noted the significance of violating the all-male tent space and the challenge this posed to the family patriarch. After the activist women entered the tent, the girls and women in the house were emboldened to follow them: "All of them came in after us! Hiding behind us! The same thing occurred when we attended the funeral of the Abu Jamal family in Jabel al-Mukaber. One of the girls who criticized us initially messaged us later that her father had ordered them not to enter the tent because he doesn't want the shame." One of the women highlighted that their work is in regular "struggle with the community. It sometimes means that they might hate us! We did it smartly in this case. It was difficult for the men to say anything when the elders and highly respected women in the community entered, we entered with them, and the other girls and women in the family followed us."

The Status of Familial and Financial Freedom

When I observed that the women seemed more educated and middle-class than the average woman in Jerusalem, they agreed and expressed concern about their ability to reach girls and women in villages and conservative households. Practically speaking, "when we can't understand the exact problems they face, how can we find a solution for it? That's why, yes, there is class tension. There are also people who wonder about us because none of us wears a headscarf." Other women disagreed that this was "class tension" per se, arguing that the barriers between women were not about "poverty and richness," at least in Jerusalem, but about "style" and "education" in the family. Relative mobility and options afforded to girls and women depend on family culture. This, in turn, produces a sort of status ranking among girls and women, with the least restricted perceived as having the highest status. As an activist summarized: "What we face here is the degree to which a young girl will face a patriarchal system in her family. We sense this more. We come and go. We have the space to do so. But there are many people who cannot do that at all, even if they attend college or university." Some girls and women are even restricted from attending "a neighbor's wedding party."

This status ranking is also produced by the kind of education women acquire. There are women who are expected to marry after attending two-year colleges and others who are allowed to complete a BA before marriage.

A third component of status ranking among girls and women, and a source of tangible resentment, is between women who gain "financial independence" and those who do not. The activists often feel friction from "young women who cannot be

like us. Not because she is poor or her father is poor. He could be richer than mine and all of our fathers. But because we work. We have our salary. Our fathers are not saying, you have your money today or you do not. So these girls and women will consider us to be higher than them.” The women are at times envied because they have “space to come and go and speak! We came from families that support us in this. We live in a circle that is not found in other places. But this is also a challenge in our work.” While they do not face pressure to marry to the same degree as most young women, they were unanimous that the focus on marriage is “part of the schizophrenia we all face and hear about. If a girl doesn’t want to do something good in her life, or doesn’t want to learn or be a hairdresser or something, the average answer in our lives is marriage.”

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Reference

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