



## Why Palestine is a feminist issue: a reckoning with Western feminism in a time of genocide

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CONVERSATIONS



## Why Palestine is a feminist issue: a reckoning with Western feminism in a time of genocide

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### Introduction

#### Nicola Pratt

At the time of writing, Israel has waged a relentless and barbaric war on the Gaza Strip for more than 400 days. No one can say that they did not know. As Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, an adviser to South Africa's legal team, stated during South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice in January 2024, this is "the first genocide in history where its victims are broadcasting their own destruction in the desperate so far vain hope that the world might do something" (*National Desk* 2024). United Nations (UN) officials have described conditions in the Gaza Strip as "apocalyptic" (Nichols 2024). The human toll is staggering: at least 43,000 people have been killed, with over 100,000 injured. Thousands more remain trapped beneath the rubble of destroyed homes or places of shelter. Around 90 percent of Palestinians have been displaced, many multiple times. Most live in insanitary, makeshift camps without access to electricity, running water, or toilets. Volunteer doctors returning from Gaza have reported experiences unlike any other, even after working in numerous global conflict zones (see for example Begum 2024). Most hospitals are barely functioning, subjected to repeated attacks by the Israeli military. Education has been interrupted for hundreds of thousands of students for a second consecutive academic year. The level of destruction is immense, with around half of

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the population no longer having homes to return to. Palestinians face starvation and the systematic destruction of almost all means of life (see for example Msuya 2024). While the scale of Israel's ongoing violence is unprecedented, it must be understood as part of Israel's broader settler-colonial project and the inherent logics of erasure (Wolfe 2006) that underpin it.

We were motivated to put together this Conversations section because of the striking silence among many Western feminists, including leading academics in the field, in the face of their respective governments' support for Israel's genocidal violence over the past year.<sup>1</sup> This silence is especially troubling when contrasted with feminism's historical commitment to justice and human rights. In some cases, Western feminists have even echoed Israel's atrocity propaganda by amplifying allegations of Hamas rapes, while ignoring the well-documented Israeli sexual violence and torture against Palestinian women and men, not to mention the reproductive violence or "reprocide" that is part of Israel's genocidal strategy. This complicity is not new. Feminist scholars and activists from the Global South and feminists of color have long documented how Western feminism has been entangled with colonialism and imperialism. The interventions presented here originated from roundtable discussions that we organized during the annual conferences of the British International Studies Association (BISA) and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) in the summer of 2024. These discussions aimed to demonstrate why Palestine is a feminist issue and to challenge the complicity of mainstream feminist frameworks in systems of oppression.

The collection of contributions here aims to confront the silences and complicities within feminism, urging scholars and activists to reassess the global impacts of colonial violence and reaffirm their commitment to justice and human dignity. By bringing together Palestinian feminist scholars and feminists from across the Middle East, we seek to inspire accountability and solidarity within the feminist movement. Bearing witness to the genocide in Gaza and the broader Palestinian struggle requires feminists, particularly in the West, to speak out, take action, and challenge the systems that perpetuate oppression and dispossession. Genuine solidarity demands rejecting colonial narratives that prioritize certain lives over others and addressing the racialized biases embedded within feminist frameworks. By centering Palestinian voices and experiences, feminism can move toward a truly inclusive movement that upholds the dignity and rights of all people.

## **Coloniality-toxified feminism: the Nakba's lingering shadow**

***Afaf Jabiri***

### ***Introduction***

In late December 2023, I began undergoing tests for breast cancer. At that time, I did not know whether I had cancer or, if I did, how severe it might

be. Thinking about my own life during a genocide felt selfish when all around me was the death and destruction of my people. However, one idea sustained me: I am one of those lucky Palestinians who, perhaps by mere “moral luck” (to use Bernard Williams’s (1981) term) came to exist in the first place.

Reflecting on my existence as a stroke of moral luck, an accident, I realize that there were many occasions that could have led to my non-existence. One occasion, which I give here as an example, was in 1949, during the Zionist militant organization Haganah’s ten-month siege, blockade, and heavy bombardment of my hometown, Iraq al-Manshiyya, just 32 kilometers from Gaza. The room in which my mother and her cousin Halima were sleeping was targeted by an airstrike. Halima was hit directly and cut into pieces; my mother, only a few meters away, survived. If she had not, I would never have been born.

This personal history reflects a broader reality: the losses that we mourn are not only those who were martyred, but also the countless lives never lived, those who were never lucky enough to be born. This brings us to a crucial question: how do we reckon with the loss of potential and future? Given that settler colonialism threatens both potential and future, and that feminism must confront the pressing issues of our time in order to shape a better future, Palestine becomes not only a feminist issue but a defining issue for feminism.

### ***Gendering without context: the dangers of depoliticization***

Feminism’s complicity with the settler-colonial Zionist project in Palestine predates the current genocide. In my latest book, *Palestinian Refugee Women from Syria to Jordan: Decolonizing the Geopolitics of Displacement* (Jabiri 2024), I highlight how Palestinian refugee women from Syria remain invisible in feminist literature on gender and Syrian refugees. Most of the literature that I reviewed overlooks their specific experiences, with some offering only brief mentions of Palestinians, either as a footnote or in one or two sentences. Even in avowedly decolonial feminist works (see for example McLaren 2017), Palestine is erased, particularly in the chapter on refugee women, where its absence is glaring. This reveals that decolonial feminist discourse still fails to move beyond a colonial mindset regarding Palestine, remaining far from decolonization.

For far too long, the term “feminism” has been thrown around loosely, allowing anyone to claim the label without truly committing to its principles. Despite efforts to categorize feminism into different types such as liberal, Western, white, or postcolonial, the reality is that feminism has become a mixed bag, like a salad bowl, but there must remain certain key ingredients in order that it can still be considered a salad, which are equality and justice. If these key principles are no longer present or are not applied equally to all, then it can no longer be considered feminism.

Witnessing feminists' hesitation to take a clear position, their confusion over how to deal with the ongoing genocide, or their deafening silence or even complicity (as highlighted by Maryam Aldossari in her contribution below), demonstrates that feminism remains inherently and in a complex way entangled with colonial legacies and new forms of imperialism.

In specific historical moments, the connection between different oppressive forces becomes unmistakable, which offers an opportunity for feminists to assert their analyses of intersectionality beyond classrooms and academic literature. The unconditional support of Western states and their allies for the genocidal war on Palestinians, which coincides with the rise of far-right movements in Europe and other parts of the world, makes it imperative for feminists to recognize and act on the interconnectedness of these oppressive systems.

However, this is not yet the case. On June 22, 2024, feminist movements from all around France took to the streets to protest against the rise of far-right political parties. Yet, nowhere in these demonstrations did we see a Palestinian flag or a call to end the genocide. The protest was prompted by the fear of losing women's gains and rights. When these rights are seen as distinct from what is happening in other parts of the world, feminists are not only co-opted by neoliberal politics but also repeat the same mistakes of early feminist generations in the West, which prioritized the concerns of white women, leading to exclusionary politics and complicity with colonialism.

Such a selectivity and prioritization of issues, which can be seen clearly in some subject choices for feminists during a genocide, as bell hooks argues, clearly speak to the question of how the subject can be made visible yet erased at the same time by what she calls "oppressive talk" (hooks 1990, 151), where there is discourse about the subject, but it contains hidden gaps.

One clear example of how oppressive narratives operate, particularly during a genocide, is the statement by *Feminist Dissent*, published on April 16, 2024 (Feminist Dissent 2024). On the one hand, the statement begins with the strongest possible condemnation of the events of October 7, 2023 and addresses the use of Israeli women's bodies as weapons of war. On the other hand, it acknowledges settler colonialism in Palestine in an abstract, theoretical manner without explicitly addressing how it impacts Palestinian women's lives. More dangerously, it chooses to focus on issues related to religion and culture when discussing Palestinian women. To reinforce its point about allegations of widespread sexual violence during October 7 – claims that, at the time of the statement, had been debunked by several reports, with no survivors coming forward to confirm them – the statement decontextualizes and depoliticizes the emergence of Hamas. It also validates sexual allegations against settler Jewish-Israeli women at the expense of women who are exposed to the structural violence of settler colonialism, and who

had been killed in large numbers by settler-colonial military forces by the time the statement was written.

By drawing a comparison between colonizer and colonized women, the statement implies that the real danger lies with fundamentalism rather than settler colonialism, apartheid, and occupation. However, though mentioning fundamentalism, it chooses to only name Islamic fundamentalism, not Zionist fundamentalism – the ideology that is directly connected to settler colonialism and hence more dangerous in the context of Palestine, as it has been used to justify the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, the supremacy of Jews over Palestinians, and the continuous dispossession of Palestinian lands and lives for the last 76 years.

The statement cites statistics from a 2019 report about women killed in so-called honor killings in Gaza but fails to reference a more recent UN report from January 2024 that states that “two mothers are killed every hour in Gaza” (UN Women 2024a). This selectivity and the type of rhetoric used in the *Feminist Dissent* statement, given here as an example, highlight a critical question within feminism: what determines the choices that we make in presenting issues and priorities, and whose voices are represented when we do so? When does gender matter first, and when is gender only one category of many, not necessarily the first that should be addressed?

### ***The Nakba of 1948 and the unsettled practice of feminism***

In my aforementioned book (Jabiri 2024), I examine the Nakba of 1948 as a critical juncture in history. Framing the Nakba in this way moves beyond seeing it as merely an expression or experience of Palestinians; instead, it is a watershed moment, pivotal in its profound and ongoing impact on global politics. The Nakba was not merely a historic event but one that shaped the post-World War II world – a world that declared the end of war and the dawn of the human rights era, yet left Palestine outside its parameters. Placed under a settler-colonial project, Palestine became the link between old and new forms of colonialism.

The critical question here is: where does feminism stand in this context? The current genocide in Gaza underscores the enduring legacy of Western racism and colonialism through the ongoing Nakba. The hesitation or reluctance of many feminists to take a decisive stance from the outset of this genocidal war – some only speaking out when Palestinian losses triggered a humanitarian response – is not merely a momentary uncertainty. This silence, complicity, and selective attention to certain issues among feminists are deeply rooted in an acceptance of the post-World War II world order and an entanglement with capitalism and neoliberal politics, both within and beyond academia.

While feminists have made theoretical strides in challenging colonialism, nationalism, white supremacy, and racism, the responses to the genocide

in Gaza expose a troubling gap between theory and action. If Palestine represents the continuation of Western colonialism through the settler-colonial project, this disjunction in feminist praxis underscores the dangers of a feminism that accepts and shields this continuity from critique. This form of feminism, lacking a clear label but present across various strands, can be described as *coloniality-toxified feminism*.

Coloniality-toxified feminism reflects an unsettled practice that exists across various feminist frameworks. It is characterized by a tension with decolonial feminist principles, as this type of feminism inadvertently not only reproduces colonial power dynamics but also enables the oppressor to uphold power over the oppressed. The reluctance to confront settler colonialism's anti-Palestinian rhetoric, neutrality, or silence in the face of genocide – especially when contrasted with feminist approaches to other forms of oppression – underscores how deeply entrenched colonial attitudes remain among many feminists, the degree to which they are complicit in the ongoing genocide, and how profoundly they are contributing to the silencing of Palestinian voices.

The failure of decolonial and post-colonial feminist frameworks to adequately address Palestine stems from a deeper issue: feminisms have accepted a global order that is built on the dispossession of Palestinians. The ethos of human rights, equality, and democracy, as celebrated in many Western feminist movements, has been constructed on the exclusion and erasure of Palestinian lives.

What is urgently needed is a *de-toxified feminism* – one that not only challenges coloniality but also refuses to normalize or justify its violent legacies; one that confronts the ongoing settler colonialism in Palestine and no longer remains silent or complicit. A truly decolonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist feminism is needed – one that resists the forces of neoliberalism and colonial legacies, standing firmly against all forms of oppression, including the colonial genocidal violence against Palestinians that we are witnessing today.

## **From sympathy to feminist solidarity with Palestinian women facing genocide**

***Ashjan Ajour***

### ***Introduction***

In this contribution, I argue that Palestinian women need feminist solidarity, not merely sympathy. Previously, I have written about my family, who, like many others, are enduring the Israeli bombardment and forced displacement as a continuation of a longer historical dispossession of Palestinians since 1948 (Ajour 2023). I have described the suffering caused by the genocidal violence, blockade, destruction of hospitals, and lack of medical supplies, which have in effect turned Gaza into a concentration camp.

My family's experiences – the destruction of their home, multiple displacements, the constant threat to their lives under bombardment – are the reasons why I seek something deeper than sympathy from feminist Western allies. In another article (Ajour 2024), I have described my frustration with people simply offering sympathy. Words of sympathy, while compassionate, fail to have any impact on the structural forces perpetuating our suffering. Real solidarity requires actively opposing systems that enable violence against Palestinians. It must question political agendas, resist colonial narratives, and prioritize justice over geopolitical interests.

Western feminists need to understand the historical context of Palestinian oppression to engage in meaningful solidarity, particularly when considering the events since October 7, 2023. This historical context is Israel's decades-long settler-colonial project, which includes the oppression of Palestinians and their ethnic cleansing. A failure to contextualize the genocide in Gaza against this historical backdrop of Palestinian oppression leads to dehumanizing Palestinians, stripping their suffering from its roots, without recognizing the ongoing dispossession and resistance to it.

The roots of the current violence lie in the Nakba of 1948, a mass displacement that uprooted over 750,000 Palestinians. This colonial violence is inherently gendered, targeting women as the social and cultural anchors within Palestinian society. For Palestinian women, Israel's colonization involves a cycle of displacement and violence that profoundly affects every dimension of life, including gender roles and family structures. The 17-year blockade of Gaza, cutting off access to food, water, and medical care, is an illustration of colonial repression that falls heaviest on Palestinian women.

In reflecting on the politics of feminist solidarity in response to the genocide and suffering in Gaza, it is necessary to address the challenges that Palestinian women face, both from Israeli violence and from the limitations of feminist solidarity in the West. Palestinian women ask why their appeal for global support is largely met by indifference. How then can Western feminist solidarity address their suffering?

### *The importance of moving beyond sympathy*

Feminist solidarity can operate as a powerful form of resistance against the colonial violence faced by Palestinian women. While statements of support or condemnation are important, they often lack depth and intersectional analysis, failing to challenge the power structures that continue to oppress Palestinians. Real solidarity requires taking a clear stance against the systems that perpetuate Palestinian suffering, which may involve challenging Western media narratives that often frame the Israeli colonial state as the victim. In some cases, the empathy and compassion expressed for Israeli women is not extended to Palestinian women who face an intensive level of genocidal violence.



Solidarity must be informed by a real understanding of the Palestinian struggle and accompanied by tangible efforts to change practices and policies that sustain colonial violence. Expressions of sympathy alone without actions do little to improve the conditions on the ground for Palestinian women and fail to recognize the agency of Palestinian women who have a long history of resisting this violence. Palestinian women need more than mere statements of sympathy, they need feminists to take a clear political stance and actions that address the colonial framework sustaining their suffering. The path toward feminist solidarity involves tangible actions, such as forming alliances with Palestinian anti-colonial feminist activists to ensure that their voices are heard and their experiences acknowledged in discussions of international feminism, allowing Palestinian women to speak directly to their experiences and the change that they need.

### ***The gendered nature of colonial violence and intersectional feminism***

Effective feminist solidarity must recognize that Palestinian women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by the intersecting forces of colonialism, nationalism, and racism. This intersectionality reveals multiple forms of oppression that overlap and compound each other, creating a distinctive gendered oppression. For Palestinian women, this plays out not only as the physical dangers of war and mass death due to bombardment but also as gender-specific harms, such as the deprivation of maternal care, the shortage of feminine hygiene products, the unsafe conditions of shelters, and the increased burdens of caregiving. Hospitals in Gaza have been targeted and destroyed by Israeli attacks, creating terrifying environments for women who need medical assistance especially when giving birth or dealing with chronic illnesses. This is a clear example of reproductive violence or "reprocide," which not only endangers women but also prevents the birth of future generations, as elaborated by Hala Shoman in her contribution below.

Israeli genocidal violence – from killing women and children to restricted movement and limited access to healthcare and resources – renders Gaza unlivable and creates conditions of gendered suffering unique to women who are overwhelmingly the primary caregivers burdened by these circumstances. By failing to recognize this context, sympathy alone risks further dehumanizing women through making it appear as if our suffering is inevitable rather than the result of structural colonial violence perpetrated by imperial Western power that supports Israel. Recognizing this intersectionality, then, is crucial to creating feminist solidarity.

### ***Challenging geopolitical agendas and selective compassion***

Western feminism is often hesitant to confront the realities of Palestine due to geopolitical tensions and political alliances or the fear of being accused of antisemitism. This reluctance to take a clear stance over Palestine reflects a

selective compassion that compromises the core principles of feminisms. True feminist solidarity cannot waver based on geopolitical considerations, particularly when the suffering of women in Gaza is so clearly rooted in systematic oppression.

There is clearly a double standard at play that undermines the moral foundation of feminist principles when Western feminist movements readily condemn the violence against Israeli women on October 7 but remain silent on the violence inflicted by Israel on Palestinian women every day since (and before). As a feminist movement that claims to address all forms of injustice, Western feminism cannot afford to ignore or minimize the suffering of Palestinian women. This selective empathy dehumanizes Palestinian women and implicitly aligns with colonial narratives that dismiss their suffering as secondary or inevitable. This inconsistency not only reflects a failure to uphold feminist ideals of inclusivity and justice but also perpetuates stereotypes that contribute to the marginalization of Palestinian voices in the global conversation.

### ***Beyond sympathy: a feminist solidarity movement grounded in global justice***

Effective solidarity involves rejecting the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-semitism, a common and dangerous misconception that suppresses critical discussion about Israeli violence perpetrated against Palestinians. Feminist solidarity with Palestinian women requires feminist movements to ground their efforts in principles of justice. This means acknowledging that the fight for gender equality cannot be divorced from the broader fight against colonialism. Western feminism must commit to dismantling structures of power that enable the oppression of women globally rather than allowing geopolitical interests to dictate which women deserve solidarity and which do not. Feminist movements have the potential to be powerful agents of change, but only if they are willing to embrace global justice and avoid selective solidarity. By standing with Palestinian women and recognizing their suffering as part of a broader historical and political struggle, Western feminists can make a significant step toward a more effective feminism that honors women's resistance and agency everywhere.

In conclusion, solidarity with Palestinian women amid the ongoing genocide in Gaza requires a comprehensive and action-oriented approach that respects their agency and dignity. Western feminists must critically assess their movement and ensure that solidarity goes beyond gestures of sympathy. By rooting their solidarity efforts in an understanding of colonial history, intersectionality, and a commitment to global justice, feminists in the West can contribute to the fight for Palestinian liberation. This is a call for action, accountability, and commitment to feminist standards – a global

movement for justice honoring the agency and humanity of not only Palestinian women but all women.

## **Reproicide in Gaza: testimonies of the assault on Palestinian reproductive health during Israel's genocide**

***Hala Shoman***

### ***Introduction***

This contribution analyses Israeli reproductive violence in Gaza within the period of the ongoing genocide starting from October 7, 2023. It draws on the concept of reproductive genocide, or “reproicide,” to describe Israel’s violent tactics and strategies against women’s and men’s reproductive health within a settler-colonial context, especially a genocide. The term “reproicide” was first coined by Loretta Ross (2017) and defined as the deliberate strategy of targeting population reproduction. Some of the examples mentioned are the forced sterilization of Indigenous populations, Black people, and prisoners. Reproductive violence is a common technique used by colonizing powers against colonized communities. European settlers in North America weaponized reproductive health violence as a colonial strategy for land acquisition, expansion, and ethnic cleansing. In Bangladesh, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, reproductive violence was weaponized as part of a genocidal strategy, utilizing rape and forced impregnation to displace and assert control over the oppressed population. The incidents of reproductive violence unfolding in Gaza are not new; they are a continuation and exacerbation of the longstanding policies of Israeli settler colonialists in their demographic battle against Palestinians. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) elaborates how Israeli biopolitical and geopolitical restrictions affect reproductive health and inflict severe violence on birthing women residing in East Jerusalem. Similarly, in the West Bank, Palestinian reproductive health is endangered through Israeli-imposed curfews and checkpoints (Ladadwa and Nasr 2022; Wick 2010). Meanwhile, Palestinians in 1948 areas<sup>2</sup> are subject to multiple measures and strategies to control, violate, and surveil reproductive health in light of the Israeli state’s concern to maintain Jewish demographic supremacy and its perception that the higher birth rates of the Palestinian population constitute a “demographic time bomb” (Kanaaneh 2002). This genocidal strategy underlines the need for an intersectional feminist approach that is attentive to the ways in which colonialism produces gendered oppression, as argued by Ashjan Ajour in her contribution above.

This contribution is based on autoethnographic accounts and first-hand testimonies from Gaza. As an activist and a Palestinian from Gaza, who lived in Gaza until a few days before the genocide began, and only left in

order to finish writing up my PhD thesis, I am known and trusted by the community, and many reached out to me asking me to share their experiences widely and alert the world to the violence that they are facing. My network provided unique access to stories showcasing the lived impact of reprocide on Palestinians' lives. Here there is space to highlight only the main findings from people's testimonies.

### ***Preventing the birth of future generations***

Since October 7, Israel has murdered at least 50,000 Palestinians in Gaza (including those whose bodies remain buried under the rubble), 17,000 of whom are children. On June 24, 2024, Save the Children reported that 21,000 children were missing; their fate is still unclear but could include being kidnapped by the Israeli occupation forces, remaining undetected beneath the rubble, being buried in unmarked graves, or being separated from their parents during the continuous forced displacement (Save the Children 2024b). This number is expected to be significantly higher, as mentioned by Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusuf (2024) in an article published in the *Lancet* in July 2024, which estimated that at least 186,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza in direct and indirect ways.

According to Mohammed Saqr, media spokesperson for the Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Younis, "[a]s medical teams, with the scarcity of medical supplies in emergency departments, we are now focusing on saving children and women to preserve the Palestinian lineage in Gaza" (Sio 2024). Palestinians perceive the direct attacks on women and children – and also on men – as evidence of a clear intention to annihilate them and eradicate whole Palestinian lineages. Indeed, since October 7, the Israeli genocide has wiped out more than 900 Palestinian families in Gaza from the civil registry (Hussein, Haddad, and Antonopoulos 2024). Many more thousands have only one or two surviving family members.

Another element of the reprocide is clear with the intentional targeting of embryos – "extrauterine children"; over 4,000 of them were murdered in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza's largest fertility center, Albasma IVF Centre (Mahdawi 2024). In the same bombardment, some 1,000 specimens of sperm and unfertilized eggs were destroyed. Hence, Palestinian lives and expected lives are both targeted by the Israeli machine as part of the intentional reprocide.

More than 177,000 women are experiencing life-threatening health risks, such as non-communicable diseases, hunger, and malnutrition during pregnancy (UN Women 2024b), which threaten their unborn babies. According to the UN, about 50,000 women in Gaza were pregnant at the beginning of the genocide. Every day, about 183 women give birth and at least 15 percent of them face complications (WHO 2023). Moreover, the ongoing genocide has created a challenging atmosphere for pregnant women to protect their

unborn children. The miscarriage rate jumped by 300 percent to unprecedented levels in the first few months (Axelson and Venkatraman 2024). Many women have been forced to have cesarean sections without anesthetic, sterilization, or post-partum painkillers or antibiotics (Islamic Relief 2024; *TRT World* 2023). All of those factors affect – and will continue to affect – reproductive health massively in the long term.

### ***Risks to reproductive health as a result of environmental and hygienic violations***

Reproicide is further exacerbated by deliberate environmental deprivation. Israel's strict blockade and restrictions on clean water, sanitary products, and hygiene facilities have increased women's and girls' infections, directly impacting their reproductive health. Women and girls are lacking period and post-partum products, affecting their health and dignity. They are forced to improvise, replacing period pads with pieces of tent fabric and cloth, and using them most of the day or washing and reusing them (Saleh 2024). All of this has resulted in urinary tract infections (UTIs) becoming prevalent. Moreover, thousands are staying in unsanitary shelters or tents with difficulties in accessing water, also endangering their general health and reproductive health.

### ***Risks to reproductive and maternal health as a result of the destruction of healthcare infrastructure***

Israeli forces have systematically targeted civilian infrastructure. Stephen Graham (2005) calls this "switching cities off," meaning, in this context, an intentional strategy to make Gaza uninhabitable. It can be understood as a strategy of "bomb now, die later," which relies on causing mass destruction of infrastructure and forced displacement of people, depriving them of their basic needs. The resulting conditions lead to illnesses and death from disease and deprivation rather than direct bombing.

Israeli attacks on healthcare infrastructure, including hospitals, maternity wards, and emergency rooms, restrict women's access to essential healthcare and affect their reproductive health. With approximately 84 percent of healthcare facilities damaged or destroyed, the remaining facilities are barely operational, are lacking medications, medical staff, ambulances, electricity, and water, and are struggling to provide even basic emergency care (UN Women 2024b). These conditions have led to the spread of infectious diseases that pose extreme risks to pregnant and lactating women. Moreover, the World Health Organization has reported unprecedented levels of starvation in Gaza (Gritten 2024; WHO 2023). Children, babies, and infants are especially vulnerable to this forced starvation. At least 34 people, most of them children, have died or are now on the brink of death due to intentional starvation (Save the Children 2024a).

### ***Sexual violence as a tool of reprocide***

Many reports coming from Israeli detention centers reveal the use of sexual violence against Palestinian detainees, including women, men, and children, by Israeli soldiers. Those violations include rape and other forms of sexual assault, such as stripping detainees to shame them and denying women their reproductive dignity. Rape, sexual abuse, and assaults not only result in immediate and direct harm and trauma but also have long-term effects on reproductive and mental health.

### ***Conclusion***

Palestinian voices from Gaza highlight the significance of reprocide within the ongoing Israeli genocide, which aims at erasing the Palestinian people by targeting their reproductive capacity. Many international efforts and actions are needed to expose this form of violence, which adopts reproductive control as a tool of annihilation. Reproicide in Gaza demands a reevaluation of global approaches to genocide, reproductive rights, and the rights of colonized populations. Importantly, the question of reprocide urgently highlights the need for feminist solidarity rather than merely sympathy, as discussed by Ashjan Ajour in her contribution above.

## **Imperial feminism and selective outrage**

***Maryam Aldossari***

### ***Introduction***

As many of the contributors to this Conversations section highlight, the current crisis in Gaza reveals the limitations and biases within many Western feminist frameworks, which frequently align with imperialist and colonialist agendas. For over 75 years, Palestinians have faced violence, displacement, and systemic erasure under Israeli occupation, yet feminist responses have often been selective, overlooking the experiences of Palestinian women, men, and children. This selective support reveals a brand of feminism that, while vocal on certain issues of violence, remains silent – or even complicit – in others, particularly when the perpetrators are Western-aligned powers.

Since October 7, 2023, the Western media has consistently depicted Israel as a “civilized democracy” surrounded by “backward” Arab nations, perpetuating a racialized narrative that dehumanizes Palestinians. This framing shapes discussions of violence in Gaza, often justifying Israel’s actions as those of a developed state “defending itself” against a supposedly “uncivilized” adversary. Such biased portrayals parallel the silence of some feminist organizations and scholars, who are ordinarily outspoken on violence against women but have remained notably quiet about the atrocities faced

by Palestinian women and children. This silence reflects what Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (1984) describe as “imperial feminism” – feminism that prioritizes Euro-American perspectives while excluding the voices and experiences of Black and Third World women.

Imperial feminism has a long history of engaging selectively with issues that align with Western political goals, often marginalizing the perspectives of women from the Global South. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) critiques this model of feminism for its failure to account for the impact of colonial histories and geopolitical allegiances on the lives of non-Western women. For example, during the United States (US) invasion of Afghanistan, Western feminists widely supported campaigns framed around “saving” Afghan women from the Taliban’s oppressive regime. However, as Ann Russo (2006) notes, this support often disregarded the historical role of Western powers in destabilizing the region, as well as the complex socio-political realities faced by Afghan women. Western intervention in Afghanistan resembled past imperialist “rescue” missions, where Western colonialism was justified under the rhetoric of “liberating” women from oppressive societies (Ahmed 1992; Russo 2006).

### *The weaponization of sexual violence narratives*

Western feminist scholars have consistently condemned sexual violence in numerous conflicts (Baaz and Stern 2018; MacKenzie 2010). However, there is minimal engagement with the well-documented instances of sexual violence committed by Israeli forces against Palestinian detainees. Alongside various UN bodies, human rights organizations have, for years, released substantial documentation on violence against Palestinian women and children, long predating the events of October 7 (see for example B’Tselem 2017; Public Committee Against Torture in Israel 2007, 2021; Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling 2010). Drawing on evidence such as legal proceedings, formal complaints, lawyer documentation, and detainee testimonies, these reports collectively reveal a pattern of systematic sexual violence, torture, and other severe abuses inflicted on Palestinians in Israeli detention facilities. Recent UN reports further underscore the scale and persistence of these abuses. In February 2024, UN special rapporteurs presented findings of sexual assault against Palestinian women and girls in detention, including incidents of rape and other degrading treatment (UN OHCHR 2024a). Similarly, an October 2024 report from the UN Commission of Inquiry described the widespread occurrence of sexual and gender-based violence against thousands of Palestinian detainees, both adults and children, and classified these abuses as war crimes (UN OHCHR 2024b).

Despite extensive documentation of abuses, many Western feminist scholars and organizations focus on condemning wartime sexual violence in other contexts while largely neglecting the well-documented and systematic sexual

violence inflicted on Palestinian detainees by Israeli occupation forces. This selective focus exposes a racialized bias within imperial feminism, whereby the suffering of non-Western women receives attention primarily when it aligns with Western political agendas (Russo 2006). This approach reflects a failure of relational solidarity, which demands understanding the specific contexts of oppression rather than applying a generalized, universal narrative. Instead of engaging meaningfully with the unique struggles of Palestinian women, Western feminist movements often perpetuate a framing that portrays these women as victims of their own society, a perspective that denies their agency and dehumanizes Palestinian men, casting them as perpetual aggressors.

As Leila Ahmed (1992) observes, such narratives are deeply rooted in colonial ideologies, where colonial powers portrayed Muslim women as passive victims in need of Western intervention, effectively obscuring the colonial structures that perpetuated their oppression. This failure to acknowledge and engage with local struggles represents an imperialist form of feminism that prioritizes Western values over genuine solidarity, reducing complex issues to fit within Western frameworks. Moreover, the framework of “humanitarian warfare” allows Israel to maintain the image of a progressive democracy, obscuring the racialized and sexual violence intrinsic to its settler-colonial project. This construction positions Israel as a “moral” actor, engaging in warfare as a defense against “terrorist” threats, and thereby conceals the sexualized violence embedded in its occupation practices (Medien 2021). This narrative reinforces the imperial feminist logic that locates such violence within “illiberal” societies while masking systematic abuses within a liberal, rights-oriented environment, thus facilitating Western feminist complicity in these oppressive structures. As Felix Anderl (2022) argues, true solidarity requires transcending this imperialist approach to instead build relationships rooted in mutual respect and specificity rather than a monolithic “global” sisterhood.

### ***Toward a decolonial feminist framework***

To effectively address these biases, Western feminists must adopt a decolonial feminist framework that centers the voices and lived experiences of those enduring occupation. Such a framework actively challenges dominant narratives, fostering an inclusive movement that seeks to dismantle rather than reinforce hierarchical structures of power. A decolonial approach rejects the imperialist tendency to view Palestinian women solely as victims in need of rescue, affirming instead their agency and resilience in the face of colonial violence. This approach is exemplified by Hala Shoman’s use of personal testimonies and autoethnography in her contribution above, which centers the lived experiences of Palestinian women while drawing attention to the reproductive violence that they endure under occupation.



Her work provides a practical model of feminist solidarity rooted in justice and solidarity, supporting those who face systemic violence and erasure, in opposition to colonial powers.

For Western feminists, embracing a decolonial feminist framework requires interrogating their own positionality and confronting the biases that have long shaped their perspectives. The ongoing genocide in Gaza and the broader struggle of Palestinians under occupation serve as an urgent call to action for feminist scholars everywhere. True solidarity demands a rejection of imperialist narratives that prioritize certain lives over others and a commitment to confronting the racialized biases embedded within feminist frameworks. By centering the experiences of Palestinian women and men within feminist discourse, we can begin to dismantle the structures of imperial feminism and work toward a movement that upholds the dignity, humanity, and rights of all people.

## **Palestinian liberation is a feminist issue: lessons about majority-world feminism from the Palestinian women's struggle**

***Sara Ababneh***

### ***Introduction***

Since the 1950s, majority-world feminists have emphasized the inseparable connection between national liberation and women's liberation (Roy 2016; Sadiqi 2016). Palestinian feminist thought has been an important part of this wider anti-colonial liberationist feminist framework (see for example Alqaisiya 2024; Curry 2021; Kuttab 2012; Saba 2023; Stagni 2024; Tucker 2000). Yet, as several contributors to this collection argue, there has been a troubling feminist silence regarding the Zionist settler-colonial project in Palestine and, more recently, the Israeli genocide in Gaza. This failure to recognize the feminist significance of Palestine represents a crisis in feminist thought. It stems from the inability of some feminists to incorporate the insights of majority-world anti-colonial feminists into their feminist common sense, resulting in what Afaf Jabiri terms "coloniality-toxified feminism" in her contribution above (see also Razack 2024). While Maryam Aldossari calls for a decolonial feminist framework in her contribution above, I draw attention to the work and writings of Palestinian revolutionary and women's rights organizer May al-Sayegh (1940–2023). Like many other feminists in the Global South of her time, al-Sayegh was not merely "decolonial" but explicitly anti-colonial, arguing that national liberation must be at the center of the feminist struggle. Despite her important contributions to feminist thought and the question of Palestine, al-Sayegh's work remains neglected, and her voice deserves greater recognition.

Al-Sayegh was born in Gaza in 1940 to a Palestinian Christian Arab nationalist family.<sup>3</sup> Her early memories revolved around following her mother, a founding member of the women's group *Usbat al Taharur al Watani*,<sup>4</sup> to demonstrations and refugee camps.<sup>5</sup> Al-Sayegh believed that Palestine as a whole must be liberated and was an inseparable part of the Arab world. Initially, she joined the Arab Baath party, going to its meetings while she was studying Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Cairo. However, after the defeat of 1967 al-Sayegh, like so many other Palestinians, concluded that the liberation of Palestine would not be achieved through Arab armies but only through Palestinian popular armed resistance. It was then that she started looking for political groups that shared her vision. By that time, she had been forced to move to Jordan where she was invited to join *Fateh* (Al-Sayegh 2016, 1). Shortly afterwards she joined the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) under the leadership of Issam Abd al-Hadi. Al-Sayegh was elected head of the cultural committee due to her activism in Palestinian refugee camps (Al-Sayegh 2016, 3).

### *Praxis*

Al-Sayegh's praxis and intellectual work focused on national and women's liberation, both in Palestinian communities and in international women's organizations. Her leftist ideology consistently informed her own praxis. For al-Sayegh, as for other anti-colonial feminists, theory and praxis were inseparable. Recognizing that most Palestinian women could not afford to pay the ten Jordanian dinar fee to join the GUPW, al-Sayegh told those interested in joining that the fee was ten pennies, resulting in a significant increase in applications (Al-Sayegh 2016, 3).

Al-Sayegh consistently drew on leftist ideology and global revolutionary praxis. In one instance, al-Sayegh heard of a woman who was beaten by her husband every time she came to a GUPW meeting. Al-Sayegh called the husband of this woman and told him that in Vietnam when a husband prevents his wife from joining the Vietnamese Revolution, the other women beat him up on the street. That was enough to keep this man from ever laying a hand on his wife again.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, al-Sayegh and the GUPW established reading circles in which women would read about the Algerian and Vietnamese Revolutions and learn from the strategies used there (Al-Sayegh 2016, 4).

### *Women in the revolution*

While engaged in the wider struggle to liberate Palestine, al-Sayegh was also active in fighting for gender equality within the liberation movement. A major struggle between the GUPW and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership concerned the role of women in the revolution. Al-Sayegh believed that for the leadership "women were a complimentary [*sic*] part of

the struggle, not a primary one" (Al-Sayegh 2016, 5). Together with other GUPW members, she fought for the inclusion of women in Fateh's decision-making committees (Al-Sayegh 2016, 6). Believing in the necessity of popular armed resistance, al-Sayegh was instrumental in pushing Fateh to allow women to have military training, and to be armed. Her refusal to compromise and her outspoken nature often caused conflict with the Fateh leadership. This included her later criticisms of Fateh's move to Tunisia in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war and her stance against the Oslo Peace Accord.

### *International solidarity*

In the early 1970s, al-Sayegh was also active in international leftist circles. The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), established in Paris in 1945 as an anti-fascist women's organization, was one of the fora in which al-Sayegh fought to build international feminist support for Palestine. She challenged the fact that Palestine and other smaller nations had only observer status at the WIDF meetings in Berlin and, together with the Cuban delegates, worked to change the bylaws of the WIDF for it to reflect real international solidarity with colonized nations.<sup>7</sup> Together with other Third World activists, the Palestinian women's representatives were able to radically reshape women's solidarity and create a new form of international women's activism. This activism was based on non-alignment, socialism, anti-colonialism, and progressive feminist thought, distinct from current liberal forms of international feminism.

### *The indivisibility of national and women's liberation*

In addition to her praxis, al-Sayegh also produced important feminist writings underlining the connection between national and women's liberation. According to al-Sayegh, "[t]he liberation of Palestinian women is fundamentally connected to the struggle of oppressed classes and stopping discrimination of all sorts, be it based on religion, ethnicity or sex" (Al-Sayegh 1975, 5).<sup>8</sup> Al-Sayegh's booklet entitled *The Arab and Palestinian Woman*, written c. 1975,<sup>9</sup> is an important text of national liberationist and feminist leftist thought. Al-Sayegh organizes the booklet according to two themes: (1) Arab liberation and (2) the struggle for the liberation of Palestine. She argues that national liberation has to be coupled with liberation from imperialism:

Arab resistance should not stop at liberating occupied Arab land. Resistance should go beyond national independence to also target imperial interest, stopping the partition of the Arab world, divisions based on sectarian, national and tribal lines and fighting discrimination against women and the exploitation of humans by humans. (Al-Sayegh 1975, 6)

According to al-Sayegh and other Third World feminists, central to any liberation struggle is the struggle of women and all of those who are socially oppressed. However, likewise, central to the struggle for women's liberation is the struggle for national liberation. This text provides an important contribution to feminist writings on liberation struggles and the dilemma of what comes first: national or women's liberation? Centrally, al-Sayegh argues for the importance – and possibility – of coupling the liberation of “the nation” with the liberation of women. Moreover, through their praxis, al-Sayegh and her comrades showed that national liberation can be an engine for women's liberation. Together with other women thinkers and activists of the Palestinian women's movement, such as Jihan al-Hilou and Khadija al-Habashneh, al-Sayegh challenged the dichotomy of national versus women's liberation through active women's organizing. More importantly, these writings hold valuable lessons about liberationist anti-colonial feminist thought.

Al-Sayegh's writings address the necessity of politicizing the struggle for women's liberation, seeing it as an outcome of structural change and not of the change of traditions and culture. For al-Sayegh, liberation must be total: not only national liberation – that is, the liberation of Palestine and the Arab world – but also transformation to bring about equality between all humankind and social justice. Liberation thus entails more than political freedom from occupation. Al-Sayegh maintains that only by fighting all forms of oppression, including capitalist and feudal oppression, can true liberation materialize. The revolution is necessary not only in Palestine but throughout the entire Arab world and by extension the rest of the world. For al-Sayegh, social justice and women's liberation are at the heart of national liberation:

We are putting the question [of the liberation of women]<sup>10</sup> in its true context, the context of achieving general equality in rights between all peoples, in all countries for progress, democracy, social justice and national liberation ... The struggle to end humans oppressing other humans, be it for reasons of religion, sex or color, is a connected type of struggle. The liberation of women is connected to this struggle and the struggles against imperialism, racism and Zionism ... In addition, the liberation of women cannot be separated from the liberation of oppressed people and ending oppression in all its forms. (Al-Sayegh 1975, 6)

It is this holistic approach to women's struggle that makes al-Sayegh's work as essential today as it was in 1975. She and her comrades worked to establish a feminism that is grounded in the experiences and praxis of women from the majority world. They did so in their own communities, in their daily struggle against Zionism, and globally in international women's organizations. Their feminism was at its core an anti-colonial feminism that saw women's liberation as an essential part of the international struggle for independence from all forms of oppressive structures (including colonialism,

patriarchy, racism, and capitalism). Academic feminism that is distant from liberation struggles around the globe has failed to grasp one of the main elements of feminist thought: liberation. We need to go back to grounded theory that emerges from anti-colonial praxis to revive the anti-colonial feminist spirit. Once we follow this definition, there is no question that Palestine is a feminist issue.

## Notes

1. For some exceptions, see Kynsilehto (2024) and Repo (2024).
2. Between 1947 and 1949, Zionist forces captured more than 78 percent of historic Palestine, ethnically cleansing and destroying about 530 villages and cities, and killing some 15,000 Palestinians in a series of mass atrocities, including more than 70 massacres. At least 750,000 Palestinians, from a population of 1.9 million in historical Palestine, were forcibly displaced beyond the borders of the newly established Israeli state. Those Palestinians who stayed in the 1948 areas after the Israeli settler-colonial occupation were later given Israeli citizenship.
3. May al-Sayegh, interview with Sara Ababneh, Oraib Ajlan, and Baida' Ababneh, Amman, February 14, 2018.
4. Usbat al Taharur al Watani split from the Communist Party of Palestine after the latter recognized the partition of Palestine in 1947.
5. May al-Sayegh, interview with Sara Ababneh, Oraib Ajlan, and Baida' Ababneh, Amman, February 14, 2018.
6. May al-Sayegh, interview with Sara Ababneh, Amman, January 16, 2018.
7. May al-Sayegh, interview with Sara Ababneh, Amman, January 16, 2018.
8. Quotes from al-Sayegh (1975) are translated by Sara Ababneh.
9. A previous translation of this text exists. While the name of the translator is not mentioned, the translation notes that the text was translated in 1981. In a private conversation between al-Sayegh and Khadija al-Habashneh on January 23, 2018, al-Habashneh maintained that the booklet was written after the 1975 UN World Conference on Women. In the subsequent discussion, both women agreed that this was the most likely date for the publication.
10. Instead of using the singular "woman," which al-Sayegh uses in Arabic, I have translated *al-mar'a* as "women," in the plural.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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